

# WORLD WAR I AND AMERICA

1917 ★ WWIAMERICA.ORG ★ 2017

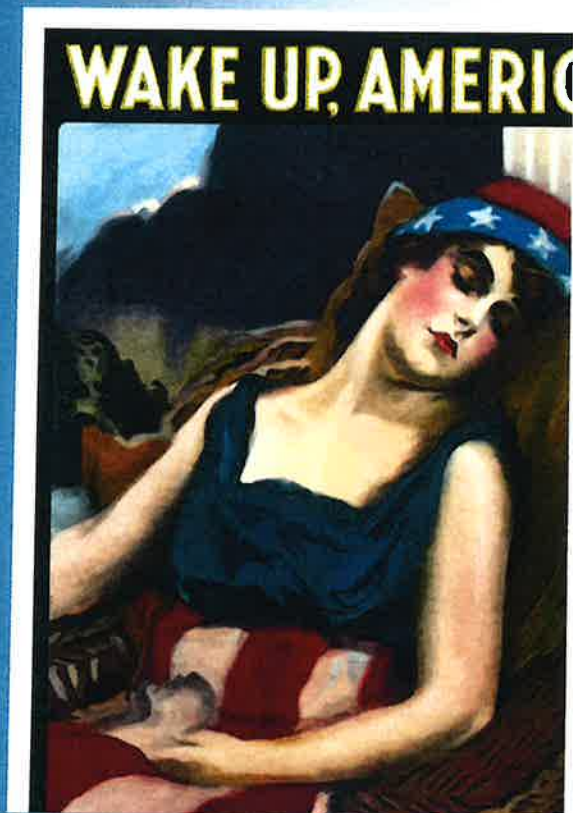
## PROGRAM READINGS

**When It Was Over, Over There:**

**The Great War Told By Americans Who Lived It**

Sunday, March 4 at 2:00 p.m.

Leominster Public Library



Professor Teresa Fava Thomas, Ph.D. of the History Department, Fitchburg State University, will provide overview and lead discussion of select readings from *World War I and America, Told by the Americans Who Lived It*, edited by A. Scott Berg. The program will focus on two topics within the literature: The Experience of War and At Home/Coming Home: The Toll of War.

Copies of the readings will be available for patrons at the library; a link to the PDF can be found on the library's website at [www.leominsterlibrary.org](http://www.leominsterlibrary.org)

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## *Introduction*

### II. THE EXPERIENCE OF WAR

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WAR TRANSFORMS whomever it touches. Soldiers and civilians, women and men, adults and children—no one is immune. Even descendants may find their own lives altered by the ripples of their ancestors' wartime experiences, sometimes after the passage of multiple generations. The Americans who experienced combat in World War I were changed permanently. Memories, some traumatic and others joyful or even transcendent, imparted to them perspectives that their friends and relatives struggled to comprehend. Veterans in turn often failed to understand how war had also impacted the millions of Americans who never saw the front lines. Frictions among these competing viewpoints would permanently remold American society.

There is no such thing as a "typical" war experience. This holds true even for World War I on the Western Front, which is often portrayed solely as an unending stalemate fought in a vast network of indistinguishable shell-blasted and mud-choked trenches. In reality, each participant entered the conflict with unique outlooks and preconceptions, and each endured or enjoyed experiences specific to themselves. Some knew the crash of artillery from the giving or receiving end; others soared in aircraft above the mud and shellfire and prayed that they would not plummet in flames to the earth, or labored in the claustrophobic confines of rattletrap tanks. Many struggled to survive the squalid trenches, but not a few, including many Americans in 1918, marched and fought without ever entering what British soldiers called the "troglodyte world." The vast majority of those who served were never wounded, and most of those who did receive injuries were not sent to a hospital. Many thousands of Americans did suffer severe wounds, however, or cared for those who did as doctors, nurses, orderlies, and stretcher-bearers.

If each participant's experience was unique, the consequences were equally varied. Historians, assuming that all

soldiers reacted to war in more or less the same way, used to construct war narratives around themes of naiveté and disillusionment. Careful studies of diaries, memoirs, questionnaires, and oral histories have since demonstrated the essential fallacy of this construct. If many veterans were traumatized by their experiences and rejected in consequence the political and religious ideologies on which they had been raised, many also felt uplifted by their war experiences and believed that they confirmed their prewar beliefs. In most cases these perspectives emerged regardless of combat's intensity; some who barely saw the front felt disillusioned while others who endured long periods in the front lines considered themselves uplifted. The vast majority of veterans, however, fell into neither category. For them, war was a mixture of good and bad that left a legacy of ambivalence.

The four excerpts presented here reveal a mere fraction of what it meant to be an American soldier in World War I. Readers will encounter varying measures of thrill and terror, purpose and bafflement. What these testimonials share in common is their honesty. Although the accounts by Hall and Williams were edited by their authors for publication and the others were not, all four are authentic and—unlike the hundreds of “memoirs” published for propaganda purposes—unremittingly stark. While they only provide glimpses of, for example, the long periods of boredom or leisure that intervened between battles, or the comradeship that only veterans understand, they do open windows into the minds of men experiencing for the first time the full measure of war in all its fury and hate.

Edward G. Lengel  
*Professor and Director of The Papers of George Washington,  
University of Virginia*

BATTLE OF LOOS: FRANCE, OCTOBER 1915

*James Norman Hall: Damaged Trenches*

On September 25, 1915, the French attacked in Champagne and the Artois while the British launched their largest offensive to date at Loos. All three offensives failed to break through the German defenses. By early November the French had lost 192,000 men killed, wounded, or missing, the British 50,000, and the Germans 135,000. Among those who survived was a pretender of sorts: James Norman Hall, a 1910 graduate of Grinnell College from Colfax, Iowa. He had worked in Boston as an agent for the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children before vacationing in Britain in the summer of 1914. Swept away by the "spirit of adventure," Hall claimed to be Canadian so that he could enlist in the British army that August. Trained as a machine gunner, he served with the 9th Royal Fusiliers at Loos before being discharged in December 1915, when his true nationality was revealed. He returned to the United States, published his memoir, *Kitchener's Mob: The Adventures of an American in the British Army*, and then went back to France, where he would fly in the Lafayette Escadrille.

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Death comes swiftly in war. One's life hangs by a thread. The most trivial circumstance saves or destroys. Mac came into the half-ruined dugout where the off-duty machine gunners were making tea over a fire of splintered logs.

"Jamie," he said, "take my place at sentry for a few minutes, will you? I've lost my water-bottle. It's 'ere in the dugout somew'ere. I'll be only a minute."

I went out to the gun position a few yards away, and immediately afterward the Germans began a bombardment of our line. One's ear becomes exact in distinguishing the size of shells by the sound which they make in traveling through the air; and it is possible to judge the direction and the probable place of their fall. Two of us stood by the machine gun. We heard at the same time the sound which we knew meant danger, possibly death. It was the awful whistling roar of a high explosive. We dropped to the floor of the trench at once. The explosion blackened our faces with lyddite and half-blinded us.

The dugout which I had left less than a moment ago was a mass of wreckage. Seven of our comrades were inside.

One of them crawled out, pulling himself along with one arm. The other arm was terribly crushed and one leg was hanging by a tendon and a few shreds of flesh.

“My God, boys! Look wot they did to me!”

He kept saying it over and over while we cut the cords from our bandoliers, tied them about his leg and arm and twisted them up to stop the flow of blood. He was a fine, healthy lad. A moment before he had been telling us what he was going to do when we went home on furlough. Now his face was the color of ashes, his voice grew weaker and weaker, and he died while we were working over him.

High explosive shells were bursting all along the line. Great masses of earth and chalk were blown in on top of men seeking protection where there was none. The ground rocked like so much pasteboard. I heard frantic cries for “Picks and shovels!” “Stretcher-bearers! Stretcher-bearers this way, for God’s sake!” The voices sounded as weak and futile as the squeaking of rats in a thunderstorm.

When the bombardment began, all off-duty men were ordered into the deepest of the shell-proof dugouts, where they were really quite safe. But those English lads were not cowards. Orders or no orders, they came out to the rescue of their comrades. They worked without a thought of their own danger. I felt actually happy, for I was witnessing splendid heroic things. It was an experience which gave one a new and unshakable faith in his fellows.

The sergeant and I rushed into the ruins of our machine-gun dugout. The roof still held in one place. There we found Mac, his head split in two as though it had been done with an axe. Gardner’s head was blown completely off, and his body was so terribly mangled that we did not know until later who he was. Preston was lying on his back with a great jagged, blood-stained hole through his tunic. Bert Powel was so badly hurt that we exhausted our supply of field dressings in bandaging him. We found little Charlie Harrison lying close to the side of the wall, gazing at his crushed foot with a look of incredulity and horror pitiful to see. One of the men gave him first aid with all the deftness and tenderness of a woman.

The rest of us dug hurriedly into a great heap of earth at the other end of the shelter. We quickly uncovered Walter, a lad who had kept us laughing at his drollery on many a rainy night. The earth had been heaped loosely on him and he was still conscious.

“Good old boys,” he said weakly; “I was about done for.”

In our haste we dislodged another heap of earth which completely buried him again, and it seemed a lifetime before we were able to remove it. I have never seen a finer display of pure grit than Walter’s.

“Easy now!” he said. “Can’t feel anything below me waist. I think I’m ’urt down there.”

We worked as swiftly and as carefully as we could. We knew that he was badly wounded, for the earth was soaked with blood; but when we saw, we turned away sick with horror. Fortunately, he lost consciousness while we were trying to disentangle him from the fallen timbers, and he died on the way to the field dressing-station. Of the seven lads in the dug-out, three were killed outright, three died within half an hour, and one escaped with a crushed foot which had to be amputated at the field hospital.

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The worst of it was that we could not get away from the sight of the mangled bodies of our comrades. Arms and legs stuck out of the wreckage, and on every side we saw distorted human faces, the faces of men we had known, with whom we had lived and shared hardships and dangers for months past. Those who have never lived through experiences of this sort cannot possibly know the horror of them. It is not in the heat of battle that men lose their reason. Battle frenzy is, perhaps, a temporary madness. The real danger comes when the strain is relaxed. Men look about them and see the bodies of their comrades torn to pieces as though they had been hacked and butchered by fiends. One thinks of the human body as inviolate, a beautiful and sacred thing. The sight of it dismembered or disemboweled, trampled in the bottom of a trench, smeared with blood and filth, is so revolting as to be hardly endurable.

And yet, we had to endure it. We could not escape it. Whichever way we looked, there were the dead. Worse even

than the sight of dead men were the groans and entreaties of those lying wounded in the trenches waiting to be taken back to the dressing-stations.

"I'm shot through the stomach, matey! Can't you get me back to the ambulance? Ain't they *some* way you can get me back out o' this?"

"Stick it, old lad! You won't 'ave long to wite. They'll be some of the Red Cross along 'ere in a jiffy now."

"Give me a lift, boys, can't you? Look at my leg! Do you think it'll 'ave to come off? Maybe they could save it if I could get to 'ospital in time! Won't some of you give me a lift? I can 'obble along with a little 'elp."

"Don't you fret, sonny! You're a-go'n' to ride back in a stretcher presently. Keep yer courage up a little w'ile longer."

Some of the men, in their suffering, forgot every one but themselves, and it was not strange that they should. Others, with more iron in their natures, endured fearful agony in silence. During memorable half-hours, filled with danger and death, many of my gross misjudgments of character were made clear to me. Men whom no one had credited with heroic qualities revealed them. Others failed rather pitifully to live up to one's expectations. It seemed to me that there was strength or weakness in men, quite apart from their real selves, for which they were in no way responsible; but doubtless it had always been there, waiting to be called forth at just such crucial times.

During the afternoon I heard for the first time the hysterical cry of a man whose nerve had given way. He picked up an arm and threw it far out in front of the trenches, shouting as he did so in a way that made one's blood run cold. Then he sat down and started crying and moaning. He was taken back to the rear, one of the saddest of casualties in a war of inconceivable horrors. I heard of many instances of nervous breakdown, but I witnessed surprisingly few of them. Men were often badly shaken and trembled from head to foot. Usually they pulled themselves together under the taunts of their less susceptible comrades.

From *Kitchener's Mob* (1916)



“SOME SCARRED SLOPE”: FRANCE, WINTER 1916

*Alan Seeger:*  
*I Have a Rendezvous with Death*

Seeger probably wrote this poem in early 1916, in anticipation of renewed fighting later that year. That Fourth of July, during the first week of the Anglo-French offensive along the Somme River, Seeger's regiment of the Foreign Legion attacked the village of Belloy-en-Santerre. Struck several times by machine-gun fire, Seeger reportedly cheered on his comrades in their successful advance before he died. His *Poems* were published posthumously in December 1916, and his *Letters and Diaries* appeared in May 1917; some reviewers compared him to the Romantic English poet Rupert Brooke, who had died from blood poisoning in 1915 while serving with the Royal Navy in the Aegean. American supporters of the Allies lauded Seeger as a hero; his brother, Charles, a prominent musicologist (and future father of the folksinger Pete Seeger), became an outspoken opponent of intervention.

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I have a rendezvous with Death  
At some disputed barricade,  
When Spring comes back with rustling shade  
And apple-blossoms fill the air—  
I have a rendezvous with Death  
When Spring brings back blue days and fair.

It may be he shall take my hand  
And lead me into his dark land  
And close my eyes and quench my breath—  
It may be I shall pass him still.  
I have a rendezvous with Death  
On some scarred slope of battered hill,  
When Spring comes round again this year  
And the first meadow-flowers appear.

God knows 'twere better to be deep  
Pillowed in silk and scented down,  
Where Love throbs out in blissful sleep,

Pulse nigh to pulse, and breath to breath,  
Where hushed awakenings are dear . . .  
But I've a rendezvous with Death  
At midnight in some flaming town,  
When Spring trips north again this year,  
And I to my pledged word am true,  
I shall not fail that rendezvous.

“TO GO AGAIN”: WINTER 1917

*Robert Frost: Not to Keep*

Robert Frost had moved in 1912 to Beaconsfield, Buckinghamshire, England, where he befriended the essayist, biographer, and critic Edward Thomas. With Frost's encouragement, Thomas began to write poetry, and the two men drew so close that they spoke of raising their families next to each other in America. Frost returned to New England in 1915, and Thomas became an artillery officer in the British army. His letters to Frost inspired this poem, which was published a few months before Thomas was killed in action on April 9, 1917, in the battle of Arras.

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They sent him back to her. The letter came  
Saying . . . and she could have him. And before  
She could be sure there was no hidden ill  
Under the formal writing, he was in her sight—  
Living.—They gave him back to her alive—  
How else? They are not known to send the dead—  
And not disfigured visibly. His face?—  
His hands? She had to look—to ask  
“What was it, dear?” And she had given all  
And still she had all—*they* had—they the lucky!  
Wasn't she glad now? Everything seemed won,  
And all the rest for them permissible ease.  
She had to ask “What was it, dear?”

“Enough,  
Yet not enough. A bullet through and through,  
High in the breast. Nothing but what good care  
And medicine and rest—and you a week,  
Can cure me of to go again.” The same  
Grim giving to do over for them both.  
She dared no more than ask him with her eyes  
How was it with him for a second trial.  
And with his eyes he asked her not to ask.  
They had given him back to her, but not to keep.

*The Yale Review*, January 1917

“THE HELLISH THING”:  
FRANCE, SEPTEMBER 1918

*Ashby Williams:*  
*from Experiences of the Great War*

The American Expeditionary Forces began its greatest battle of the war on September 26, 1918, attacking along a front extending from the Argonne Forest to the Meuse River. Lasting until the Armistice, the battle claimed the lives of 26,000 American soldiers and wounded another 95,000. A lawyer from Roanoke, Virginia, Major Ashby Williams commanded the First Battalion, 320th Infantry Regiment, 80th Division at St. Mihiel and in the Meuse-Argonne. While advancing to their jumping-off position on the night of September 25, Williams and his men came under artillery fire.

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A HORRIBLE EXPERIENCE

AFTER THE MEN had had their coffee—I remember I drank a good swig of it, too—I gave directions that the men should get in shape to move out of the woods. Then followed one of the most horrible experiences of my whole life in the war, and one which I hope never to have to go through again. The Boche began to shell the woods. When the first one came over I was sitting under the canvas that had been still spread over the cart shafts. It fell on the up side of the woods. As I came out another one fell closer. I was glad it was dark because I was afraid my knees were shaking. I was afraid of my voice, too, and I remember I spoke in a loud voice so it would not tremble, and gave orders that Commanders should take their units to the dugouts which were less than a hundred yards away until the shelling was over, as I did not think it necessary to sacrifice any lives under the circumstances. Notwithstanding my precautions, some of the shells fell among the cooks and others who remained about the kitchens, killing some of them and wounding others.

In about twenty minutes I ordered the companies to fall in on the road by our area preparatory to marching out of the

woods. They got into a column of squads in perfect order, and we had proceeded perhaps a hundred yards along the road in the woods when we came on to one of the companies of the Second Battalion which we were to follow that night. We were held there perhaps forty-five minutes while the Second Battalion ahead of us got in shape to move out. One cannot imagine the horrible suspense and experience of that wait. The Boche began to shell the woods again. There was no turning back now, no passing around the companies ahead of us, we could only wait and trust to the Grace of God.

We could hear the explosion as the shell left the muzzle of the Boche gun, then the noise of the shell as it came toward us, faint at first, then louder and louder until the shell struck and shook the earth with its explosion. One can only feel, one cannot describe the horror that fills the heart and mind during this short interval of time. You know he is aiming the gun at you and wants to kill you. In your mind you see him swab out the hot barrel, you see him thrust in the deadly shell and place the bundle of explosives in the breach; you see the gunner throw all his weight against the trigger; you hear the explosion like the single bark of a great dog in the distance, and you hear the deadly missile singing as it comes towards you, faintly at first, then distinctly, then louder and louder until it seems so loud that everything else has died, and then the earth shakes and the eardrums ring, and dirt and iron reverberate through the woods and fall about you.

This is what you hear, but no man can tell what surges through the heart and mind as you lie with your face upon the ground listening to the growing sound of the hellish thing as it comes towards you. You do not think, sorrow only fills the heart, and you only hope and pray. And when the doubly-damned thing hits the ground, you take a breath and feel relieved, and think how good God has been to you again. And God was good to us that night—to those of us who escaped unhurt. And for the ones who were killed, poor fellows, some blown to fragments that could not be recognized, and the men who were hurt, we said a prayer in our hearts.

Such was my experience and the experience of my men that night in the Bois de Borrus, but their conduct was fine. I think, indeed, their conduct was the more splendid because they

knew they were not free to shift for themselves and find shelter, but must obey orders, and obey they did in the spirit of fine soldiers to the last man. After that experience I knew that men like these would never turn back, and they never did.

From *Experiences of the Great War* (1919)

THE "HARLEM HELLFIGHTERS" ATTACK:  
FRANCE, SEPTEMBER 1918

*Horace Pippin:*  
*from "Autobiography, First World War"*

A manual laborer with a love of drawing and little formal education, Horace Pippin had lived a hardscrabble life in upstate New York and New Jersey before enlisting in the 369th Infantry Regiment in 1917. During the Meuse-Argonne offensive, the "Harlem Hellfighters" were attached to the French 161st Division, and they fought in Champagne, apart from the main American army. On September 30, 1918, Pippin was shot in the shoulder, permanently disabling his right arm. After the war he learned to guide his wounded limb with his left hand and eventually became a widely exhibited painter. Pippin's unpublished manuscript from the 1920s includes this narrative of the fighting around Séchault.

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AT ONE O clock the artillery were in thir Position and Began to fire. The GERMENS air plaines were after us good and strong the end of this Day we got 14 machine guns 500 prisners and a town. Then we hel the line for the artillery to move up. Prisners were comeing throu our line. Goeine Back and every one were happy. That they were out of it. For they knew that, they would see home a gan some time. We onley hell the line that night. The machine guns were thick they keepeed spiteeing Bullets a cross our line on till the artillery came up, then that morneing. I got in, with Co I. I had notheing to eait for 3 Days. The GERMENS line were strong. And shells dropeing every where. Yet we were advancing sloley. I were in shell holes that were smokeing, and they were hot, the machine guns were in trees as well as in Bushess and in Housess and any thing they could get a machine gun in. They had it there. Wimens as well as men, ueseing a machine gun we were facing a nother hill. The snipers were thick all so, I seen a machine gun nest I got him. My Budy and I were after a nother one. Both of us were in the same shell hole. I were lookeing for a nother hole that would put me in [       ] of him. After I seen

one. I said to my comrad, you go one way, and Ill go the other, and one of us can get him. For we could not see him, from where we were at. For he were Back of a Rock. Now it were to get him in sight and to do that we hat to take a chance of one to get it. Both of us left the shell hole, at the same time, I got near the shell hole that I had pecked out. When he let me have it. I went Down in the shell hole. He cliped my neck and got me throu my shoulder and right arm. Yet I had notheing to eait yet and I onley had a little water in my canteen. I Began to plug up my wounds when my Budy came to me and did what he could for me. Then he tole me that he got the Germen and the gun. I were leyeing on my Back. I thought I could get up But I could not do so. I shook hands with him and I never seen him cents. Now the shells were comeing close to me. Piceses of shell would come in near me some times. Then the Germen sniper kepted after me all Day. His Bullets would clep the shell hole that hell me this were 8 o clock in the morning. Some time that after noon some French swipers came By. They look for Germen that is left Back so he seen me layeing there. When he did so. He stoped to say sometheing to me. But he never got it out for just then a Bullet past throu his head. And he sank on me. I seen him comeing on But I could not move. I were just that weeke. So I hat to take him. I were glad to get his water and all so Bread. I took my left hand and I got some coffee. After some hird time geteing it from him, after that I felt good and I trided to get up a gan. But I were to week to do so. Night were comeing on. And it Began to Rain. Then I tried to get the Blanked from my Dead comrad. That I could not do. And I could not get him of off me. The Rain came more and more ontill I were in water yet I were groweing weeker and weeker all the time and I went to sleep. I cant say how long I slep. But two Boyes came and I woke up. They took the French men of off me and then took me out of the shell hole for some Distens where there were more wonded ones. I were left there the Rest of the night. Every time I would get in a sleep I would Be woken up By the French troops goeing to the line. On tell near morning four French took me in to a Dugout and then to a nother on till they found a Dr. Then he did somtheing, I do not no aney more that night. When I woke up, it were Day. Then I were caryed out



of the Dugout I seen then that it were full of shot up men like my self some wirst then I. I layed out there for some time in the Rain waiteing for my tirn to be taken Down to the Road to the amblance. Over the hell came some Germen prisners with a French officer and they took me to the Road. It were all they could do, were to stand up under me goeing Down the hell. They had me over thir heads. And I thought that I would Roal of. A shell or two came close to us. But they made the Road. I seen the artillery were Hobe to Hobe and all at work. I were shoved in the amblance with 5 others made 6 in all and shells foloed us ontell we got to the feel Hospital. When I got there it were all I could do, to tell them ho I were. So I pointed to my shirt I had Riten down like this IOII27 Horace Pippin Co. K. 369. Inf, I new no more. On tell I were taken to the table to see what were Rong with me. They gave me some dop and that did put me a way for good. I cant say how long I were in it. After I came out of it I were not there long. They took me to a nother Hospital Bace 1 in leeon.

RETURNING HOME:  
GERMANY AND THE ATLANTIC, MARCH-APRIL 1919

*Vernon E. Kniptash:*  
*Diary, March 30-April 1, and April 18-19, 1919*

An architectural draftsman from Indianapolis, Vernon Kniptash served as a radio operator in the 150th Field Artillery Regiment, 42nd (Rainbow) Division, and had seen action in Champagne and the Meuse-Argonne. The spring of 1919 found him on occupation duty at Bad Neuenahr in the Rhineland, waiting to go home.

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*Mar. 30, 1919* Sunday and baked 'em all day. Got restless after dinner, and Skinner and I walked around town. Had the blues pretty bad. Monotony gets me going. Played solitaire this evening. Such is Sunday in the A. of O.

*Mar. 31, 1919* We got 'em. Had 'em all day. Can't shake 'em. Damn Blues.

*April 1, 1919* Had a parade this morning. Gen. Gatley pinned a ribbon on our standard, and then we Passed in Review before him. Col. Bob then made a speech. He talked to us once before at St. Nazaire in 1917. Made a fairly good speech this time. Told us what a Hell of a good regiment we were, etc., etc. He's trying pretty hard to get back on speaking terms with the boys. Not much of a job after a month under that Heth. He's a welcomed visitor, believe me. He said during his speech that the Regiment had taken part in eleven different battles; two of them were major operations, and nine were minor. It's quite a record, and one that few Regiments can boast.—There's an indescribable restlessness springing up among the American soldiers and the German people now. When we first came here they treated us like Kings, and we couldn't understand it. We were too glad to leave the cave man life and get back to civilization to try to dope out their friendliness. I savvy it now. It's their damn propaganda again. They had hopes that Wilson would make things easy for them at the peace table, and treated us accordingly. Now that Wilson is sitting on them

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as hard as the rest they are getting ugly. They are poor losers in the first place, and then to lose their final bet is too much for them. They're forgetting who came out on the short end of this war, and are trying to order us around. See where they killed an American soldier in Coblenz. They better watch their step and not carry things too far. I've lost patience with them, and I venture to say I'm not the only one. Damn Dutch square-heads. I loathe every last one of them. Everything they do is underhanded and sneaking. Dirtiest fighters in the world, and they have lost none of their habits since they've gotten back into civil life. Lord, how I hate this race. I don't want any Kaiser lover in the States to get sassy with me. Might lose my temper and get mad. Germany will never be the same again, I'm afraid. Too many Americans have seen her the way she really is. Sure be glad when we leave here. Am sick of it all.



## *Introduction*

### VII. AT HOME/COMING HOME: THE TOLL OF WAR

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**A**MERICAN soldiers returned home victorious, and communities across the nation welcomed them back with parades, speeches, and eventually, monuments. Proud of having served their country, returning servicemen flocked to join the American Legion, founded by World War I veterans in 1919. Legion halls soon became more than places where veterans could relax with former comrades-in-arms, as the organization emerged as a strong lobbyist on behalf of veterans' causes.

The nation had been ill-prepared for war, and was even less ready for peace. Nearly 200,000 wounded men returned, a number that grew when veterans with shell shock and gas-related tuberculosis flooded hospital wards in the 1920s. Scrambling to cure these patients, the Veteran's Bureau (the predecessor of today's Veterans Administration) built a new federally-managed veterans' hospital system. Doctors treating veterans confronted new and often confusing medical conditions. Psychologists such as Norman Fenton, who had served at a hospital for "war neurosis" cases in France, compiled lengthy descriptions of men's symptoms, often in their own words, to gain a better understanding the long-term impact of combat on veterans' mental health.

Even healthy veterans found the return home rocky during the post-war recession of 1919. Many veterans had hoped to use military service as a stepping stone into a better life. The army had promised as much by touting the physical and education benefits of military service. Millions of soldiers had contributed to army-sponsored savings accounts, hoping to accumulate start-up funds for a home or business. Scarce jobs forced many veterans to use that money to survive. With few government benefits available to them, veterans began to complain vociferously about the mismanaged homecoming.

Not everyone was sympathetic to veterans' financial and medical difficulties, questioning whether their predicament

was truly a result of the war or just the consequence of poor individual decisions. The response was generally the latter whenever black veterans applied for the minimal health services or occupational training programs available. Both white and black veterans, however, confronted a government bureaucracy primarily concerned with limiting the drain on public funds.

Responding to veterans' rising frustration, the Legion took the lead in pressing forward a claim for adjusted compensation. The adjusted compensation campaign targeted industrialists' war profits, arguing that it was unjust for the war to make civilians rich and soldiers poor. In 1924, all veterans received an adjusted compensation bond (also known as "the bonus") redeemable in 1945. The exact amount an individual received depended on how long a man had served. For many the bonus was close to \$1,200. Veterans ultimately received the bonus in 1936, nine years early, after the Depression triggered several mass demonstrations in Washington D.C. known as the Bonus Marches.

Financial security was not the answer to every difficulty veterans encountered after coming home. Talking about what they had experienced was hard. "Before I reached home," one soldier recalled in his memoir, "I decided that I must clear my mind of all the terrible experiences of the past two years, as much as possible." It would be unjust, this soldier felt, "to make my family and friends sad and uncomfortable by inflicting upon them the horrors in which they had no part." Ernest Hemingway captured the difficulties of readjusting to civilian life in his 1925 short story, "Soldiers' Home." Individual families might have wanted veterans to put the war behind them, but collectively Americans demonstrated a strong desire to publically honor veterans' patriotism. Throughout the 1920s, towns and cities dedicated thousands of statues, memorial halls, athletic stadiums, and parks to the wartime generation.

To memorialize the more than 4,400 American "unknown dead"—men who were buried in unidentified graves in military cemeteries or at sea, or whose remains were never found—the United States interred one unidentified soldier in the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier located in Arlington Cemetery, Virginia. President Warren Harding presided over the solemn

ceremony, and reassured veterans that the nation acknowledged their generation's sacrifice. After the Unknown Soldier was laid to rest, the nation collectively observed two minutes of silence to honor the fallen warrior and pray for a peaceful future. Some writers mocked the ceremony as an empty gesture filled with piety that protected listeners from confronting the reality of war. Flowery, patriotic speeches would only seduce the next generation of naïve young men into believing that war was a glorious adventure.

Veterans lined up on both sides of this cultural debate over how to remember the Great War. Was it a just and noble cause? Was it a rich man's war, poor man's fight? Were the nation's interests really served best by fighting? American society ponders these timeless questions each time veterans return home from war.

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ARLINGTON, NOVEMBER 1921

*Warren G. Harding: Address at the  
Burial of an Unknown American Soldier*

Warren G. Harding's election resoundingly repudiated Woodrow Wilson's idealistic vision of the League of Nations. The United States and Germany signed a separate peace treaty in August 1921, officially concluding the state of war that had lasted four years. In his final minutes in office, Wilson had authorized the exhumation of an unidentified American soldier from a cemetery in France and his entombment in a new marble sarcophagus at the National Cemetery, where he would represent all of the soldiers whose remains could not be identified. On November 11, 1921, the third anniversary of the Armistice, a great procession accompanied the casket of the Unknown Soldier from the Capitol to Arlington. The physically disabled Wilson rode with Edith in the parade only as far as the White House before returning to their new home nearby, while the rest of the cortege proceeded to the vast graveyard across the Potomac. Thousands gathered to hear the President's speech, Marshal Foch and Medal of Honor winners among them; and hundreds of thousands more heard his message, as it was carried on telephone lines to public-address speakers in cities around the country. With these remarks, the curtain descended on the World War.

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MR. SECRETARY OF WAR AND LADIES AND GENTLEMEN: We are met to-day to pay the impersonal tribute. The name of him whose body lies before us took flight with his imperishable soul. We know not whence he came, but only that his death marks him with the everlasting glory of an American dying for his country.

He might have come from any one of millions of American homes. Some mother gave him in her love and tenderness, and with him her most cherished hopes. Hundreds of mothers are wondering to-day, finding a touch of solace in the possibility that the Nation bows in grief over the body of one she bore to live and die, if need be, for the Republic. If we give rein to fancy, a score of sympathetic chords are touched, for in this body there once glowed the soul of an American, with the



aspirations and ambitions of a citizen who cherished life and its opportunities. He may have been a native or an adopted son; that matters little, because they glorified the same loyalty, they sacrificed alike.

We do not know his station in life, because from every station came the patriotic response of the five millions. I recall the days of creating armies, and the departing of caravels which braved the murderous seas to reach the battle lines for maintained nationality and preserved civilization. The service flag marked mansion and cottage alike, and riches were common to all homes in the consciousness of service to country.

We do not know the eminence of his birth, but we do know the glory of his death. He died for his country, and greater devotion hath no man than this. He died unquestioning, uncomplaining, with faith in his heart and hope on his lips, that his country should triumph and its civilization survive. As a typical soldier of this representative democracy, he fought and died, believing in the indisputable justice of his country's cause. Conscious of the world's upheaval, appraising the magnitude of a war the like of which had never horrified humanity before, perhaps he believed his to be a service destined to change the tide of human affairs.

In the death gloom of gas, the bursting of shells and rain of bullets, men face more intimately the great God over all, their souls are aflame, and consciousness expands and hearts are searched. With the din of battle, the glow of conflict, and the supreme trial of courage, come involuntarily the hurried appraisal of life and the contemplation of death's great mystery. On the threshold of eternity, many a soldier, I can well believe, wondered how his ebbing blood would color the stream of human life, flowing on after his sacrifice. His patriotism was none less if he craved more than triumph of country; rather, it was greater if he hoped for a victory for all human kind. Indeed, I revere that citizen whose confidence in the righteousness of his country inspired belief that its triumph is the victory of humanity.

This American soldier went forth to battle with no hatred for any people in the world, but hating war and hating the purpose of every war for conquest. He cherished our national rights, and abhorred the threat of armed domination; and in

the maelstrom of destruction and suffering and death he fired his shot for liberation of the captive conscience of the world. In advancing toward his objective was somewhere a thought of a world awakened; and we are here to testify undying gratitude and reverence for that thought of a wider freedom.

On such an occasion as this, amid such a scene, our thoughts alternate between defenders living and defenders dead. A grateful Republic will be worthy of them both. Our part is to atone for the losses of heroic dead by making a better Republic for the living.

Sleeping in these hallowed grounds are thousands of Americans who have given their blood for the baptism of freedom and its maintenance, armed exponents of the Nation's conscience. It is better and nobler for their deeds. Burial here is rather more than a sign of the Government's favor, it is a suggestion of a tomb in the heart of the Nation, sorrowing for its noble dead.

To-day's ceremonies proclaim that the hero unknown is not unhonored. We gather him to the Nation's breast, within the shadow of the Capitol, of the towering shaft that honors Washington, the great father, and of the exquisite monument to Lincoln, the martyred savior. Here the inspirations of yesterday and the conscience of to-day forever unite to make the Republic worthy of his death for flag and country.

Ours are lofty resolutions to-day, as with tribute to the dead we consecrate ourselves to a better order for the living. With all my heart, I wish we might say to the defenders who survive, to mothers who sorrow, to widows and children who mourn, that no such sacrifice shall be asked again.

It was my fortune recently to see a demonstration of modern warfare. It is no longer a conflict in chivalry, no more a test of militant manhood. It is only cruel, deliberate, scientific destruction. There was no contending enemy, only the theoretical defense of a hypothetic objective. But the attack was made with all the relentless methods of modern destruction. There was the rain of ruin from the aircraft, the thunder of artillery, followed by the unspeakable devastation wrought by bursting shells; there were mortars belching their bombs of desolation; machine guns concentrating their leaden storms; there was the infantry, advancing, firing, and falling—like men with souls

sacrificing for the decision. The flying missiles were revealed by illuminating tracers, so that we could note their flight and appraise their deadliness. The air was streaked with tiny flames marking the flight of massed destruction; while the effectiveness of the theoretical defense was impressed by the simulation of dead and wounded among those going forward, undaunted and unheeding. As this panorama of unutterable destruction visualized the horrors of modern conflict, there grew on me the sense of the failure of a civilization which can leave its problems to such cruel arbitrament. Surely no one in authority, with human attributes and a full appraisal of the patriotic loyalty of his countrymen, could ask the manhood of kingdom, empire, or republic to make such sacrifice until all reason had failed, until appeal to justice through understanding had been denied, until every effort of love and consideration for fellow men had been exhausted, until freedom itself and inviolate honor had been brutally threatened.

I speak not as a pacifist fearing war, but as one who loves justice and hates war. I speak as one who believes the highest function of government is to give its citizens the security of peace, the opportunity to achieve, and the pursuit of happiness.

The loftiest tribute we can bestow to-day—the heroically earned tribute—fashioned in deliberate conviction, out of unclouded thought, neither shadowed by remorse nor made vain by fancies, is the commitment of this Republic to an advancement never made before. If American achievement is a cherished pride at home, if our unselfishness among nations is all we wish it to be, and ours is a helpful example in the world, then let us give of our influence and strength, yea, of our aspirations and convictions, to put mankind on a little higher plane, exulting and exalting, with war's distressing and depressing tragedies barred from the stage of righteous civilization.

There have been a thousand defenses justly and patriotically made; a thousand offenses which reason and righteousness ought to have stayed. Let us beseech all men to join us in seeking the rule under which reason and righteousness shall prevail.

Standing to-day on hallowed ground, conscious that all America has halted to share in the tribute of heart and mind and soul to this fellow American, and knowing that the world

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is noting this expression of the Republic's mindfulness, it is fitting to say that his sacrifice, and that of the millions dead, shall not be in vain. There must be, there shall be, the commanding voice of a conscious civilization against armed warfare.

As we return this poor clay to its mother soil, garlanded by love and covered with the decorations that only nations can bestow, I can sense the prayers of our people, of all peoples, that this Armistice Day shall mark the beginning of a new and lasting era of peace on earth, good will among men. Let me join in that prayer.

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.

## *Ernest Hemingway: "Soldier's Home"*

Nowhere were the changes in American life seen more vividly than in its fiction, not in just the substance but also in the style; and nobody epitomized that literary readjustment—with his stark staccato sentences—more than Ernest Hemingway. Severely wounded in 1918 while serving as a Red Cross volunteer in Italy, he returned home in early 1919. That summer he visited Michigan's Upper Peninsula, which, coupled with his remembrances of war, would inspire several of the works included in *In Our Time* (1925), his first collection of short stories. A job with the *Toronto Star* allowed him to return to Europe in 1921 and become part of the expatriate literary world in Paris. Over the next decade, the war permeated his writing, most especially his novel *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), which his experiences in Italy inspired.

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KREBS WENT to the war from a Methodist college in Kansas. There is a picture which shows him among his fraternity brothers, all of them wearing exactly the same height and style collar. He enlisted in the Marines in 1917 and did not return to the United States until the second division returned from the Rhine in the summer of 1919.

There is a picture which shows him on the Rhine with two German girls and another corporal. Krebs and the corporal look too big for their uniforms. The German girls are not beautiful. The Rhine does not show in the picture.

By the time Krebs returned to his home town in Oklahoma the greeting of heroes was over. He came back much too late. The men from the town who had been drafted had all been welcomed elaborately on their return. There had been a great deal of hysteria. Now the reaction had set in. People seemed to think it was rather ridiculous for Krebs to be getting back so late, years after the war was over.

At first Krebs, who had been at Belleau Wood, Soissons, the Champagne, St. Mihiel and in the Argonne did not want to talk about the war at all. Later he felt the need to talk but no one wanted to hear about it. His town had heard too many atrocity stories to be thrilled by actualities. Krebs found that to

be listened to at all he had to lie, and after he had done this twice he, too, had a reaction against the war and against talking about it. A distaste for everything that had happened to him in the war set in because of the lies he had told. All of the times that had been able to make him feel cool and clear inside himself when he thought of them; the times so long back when he had done the one thing, the only thing for a man to do, easily and naturally, when he might have done something else, now lost their cool, valuable quality and then were lost themselves.

His lies were quite unimportant lies and consisted in attributing to himself things other men had seen, done or heard of, and stating as facts certain apocryphal incidents familiar to all soldiers. Even his lies were not sensational at the pool room. His acquaintances, who had heard detailed accounts of German women found chained to machine guns in the Argonne forest and who could not comprehend, or were barred by their patriotism from interest in, any German machine gunners who were not chained, were not thrilled by his stories.

Krebs acquired the nausea in regard to experience that is the result of untruth or exaggeration, and when he occasionally met another man who had really been a soldier and they talked a few minutes in the dressing room at a dance he fell into the easy pose of the old soldier among other soldiers: that he had been badly, sickeningly frightened all the time. In this way he lost everything.

During this time, it was late summer, he was sleeping late in bed, getting up to walk down town to the library to get a book, eating lunch at home, reading on the front porch until he became bored and then walking down through the town to spend the hottest hours of the day in the cool dark of the pool room. He loved to play pool.

In the evening he practiced on his clarinet, strolled down town, read and went to bed. He was still a hero to his two young sisters. His mother would have given him breakfast in bed if he had wanted it. She often came in when he was in bed and asked him to tell her about the war, but her attention always wandered. His father was non-committal.

Before Krebs went away to the war he had never been allowed to drive the family motor car. His father was in the real estate business and always wanted the car to be at his command

when he required it to take clients out into the country to show them a piece of farm property. The car always stood outside the First National Bank building where his father had an office on the second floor. Now, after the war, it was still the same car.

Nothing was changed in the town except that the young girls had grown up. But they lived in such a complicated world of already defined alliances and shifting feuds that Krebs did not feel the energy or the courage to break into it. He liked to look at them, though. There were so many good-looking young girls. Most of them had their hair cut short. When he went away only little girls wore their hair like that or girls that were fast. They all wore sweaters and shirt waists with round Dutch collars. It was a pattern. He liked to look at them from the front porch as they walked on the other side of the street. He liked to watch them walking under the shade of the trees. He liked the round Dutch collars above their sweaters. He liked their silk stockings and flat shoes. He liked their bobbed hair and the way they walked.

When he was in town their appeal to him was not very strong. He did not like them when he saw them in the Greek's ice cream parlor. He did not want them themselves really. They were too complicated. There was something else. Vaguely he wanted a girl but he did not want to have to work to get her. He would have liked to have a girl but he did not want to have to spend a long time getting her. He did not want to get into the intrigue and the politics. He did not want to have to do any courting. He did not want to tell any more lies. It wasn't worth it.

He did not want any consequences. He did not want any consequences ever again. He wanted to live along without consequences. Besides he did not really need a girl. The army had taught him that. It was all right to pose as though you had to have a girl. Nearly everybody did that. But it wasn't true. You did not need a girl. That was the funny thing. First a fellow boasted how girls mean nothing to him, that he never thought of them, that they could not touch him. Then a fellow boasted that he could not get along without girls, that he had to have them all the time, that he could not go to sleep without them.

That was all a lie. It was all a lie both ways. You did not need a girl unless you thought about them. He learned that in the

army. Then sooner or later you always got one. When you were really ripe for a girl you always got one. You did not have to think about it. Sooner or later it would come. He had learned that in the army.

Now he would have liked a girl if she had come to him and not wanted to talk. But here at home it was all too complicated. He knew he could never get through it all again. It was not worth the trouble. That was the thing about French girls and German girls. There was not all this talking. You couldn't talk much and you did not need to talk. It was simple and you were friends. He thought about France and then he began to think about Germany. On the whole he had liked Germany better. He did not want to leave Germany. He did not want to come home. Still, he had come home. He sat on the front porch.

He liked the girls that were walking along the other side of the street. He liked the look of them much better than the French girls or the German girls. But the world they were in was not the world he was in. He would like to have one of them. But it was not worth it. They were such a nice pattern. He liked the pattern. It was exciting. But he would not go through all the talking. He did not want one badly enough. He liked to look at them all, though. It was not worth it. Not now when things were getting good again.

He sat there on the porch reading a book on the war. It was a history and he was reading about all the engagements he had been in. It was the most interesting reading he had ever done. He wished there were more maps. He looked forward with a good feeling to reading all the really good histories when they would come out with good detail maps. Now he was really learning about the war. He had been a good soldier. That made a difference.

One morning after he had been home about a month his mother came into his bedroom and sat on the bed. She smoothed her apron.

"I had a talk with your father last night, Harold," she said, "and he is willing for you to take the car out in the evenings."

"Yeah?" said Krebs, who was not fully awake. "Take the car out? Yeah?"

"Yes. Your father has felt for some time that you should be



able to take the car out in the evenings whenever you wished but we only talked it over last night.”

“I’ll bet you made him,” Krebs said.

“No. It was your father’s suggestion that we talk the matter over.”

“Yeah. I’ll bet you made him,” Krebs sat up in bed.

“Will you come down to breakfast, Harold?” his mother said.

“As soon as I get my clothes on,” Krebs said.

His mother went out of the room and he could hear her frying something downstairs while he washed, shaved and dressed to go down into the dining-room for breakfast. While he was eating breakfast his sister brought in the mail.

“Well, Hare,” she said. “You old sleepyhead. What do you ever get up for?”

Krebs looked at her. He liked her. She was his best sister.

“Have you got the paper?” he asked.

She handed him the Kansas City *Star* and he shucked off its brown wrapper and opened it to the sporting page. He folded the *Star* open and propped it against the water pitcher with his cereal dish to steady it, so he could read while he ate.

“Harold,” his mother stood in the kitchen doorway, “Harold, please don’t muss up the paper. Your father can’t read his *Star* if it’s been mussed.”

“I won’t muss it,” Krebs said.

His sister sat down at the table and watched him while he read.

“We’re playing indoor over at school this afternoon,” she said. “I’m going to pitch.”

“Good,” said Krebs. “How’s the old wing?”

“I can pitch better than lots of the boys. I tell them all you taught me. The other girls aren’t much good.”

“Yeah?” said Krebs.

“I tell them all you’re my beau. Aren’t you my beau, Hare?”

“You bet.”

“Couldn’t your brother really be your beau just because he’s your brother?”

“I don’t know.”

“Sure you know. Couldn’t you be my beau, Hare, if I was old enough and if you wanted to?”

“Sure. You’re my girl now.”

“Am I really your girl?”

“Sure.”

“Do you love me?”

“Uh, huh.”

“Will you love me always?”

“Sure.”

“Will you come over and watch me play indoor?”

“Maybe.”

“Aw, Hare, you don’t love me. If you loved me, you’d want to come over and watch me play indoor.”

Krebs’s mother came into the dining-room from the kitchen. She carried a plate with two fried eggs and some crisp bacon on it and a plate of buckwheat cakes.

“You run along, Helen,” she said. “I want to talk to Harold.”

She put the eggs and bacon down in front of him and brought in a jug of maple syrup for the buckwheat cakes. Then she sat down across the table from Krebs.

“I wish you’d put down the paper a minute, Harold,” she said.

Krebs took down the paper and folded it.

“Have you decided what you are going to do yet, Harold?” his mother said, taking off her glasses.

“No,” said Krebs.

“Don’t you think it’s about time?” His mother did not say this in a mean way. She seemed worried.

“I hadn’t thought about it,” Krebs said.

“God has some work for everyone to do,” his mother said.

“There can be no idle hands in His Kingdom.”

“I’m not in His Kingdom,” Krebs said.

“We are all of us in His Kingdom.”

Krebs felt embarrassed and resentful as always.

“I’ve worried about you so much, Harold,” his mother went on. “I know the temptations you must have been exposed to. I know how weak men are. I know what your own dear grandfather, my own father, told us about the Civil War and I have prayed for you. I pray for you all day long, Harold.”

Krebs looked at the bacon fat hardening on his plate.

“Your father is worried, too,” his mother went on. “He thinks you have lost your ambition, that you haven’t got a

definite aim in life. Charley Simmons, who is just your age, has a good job and is going to be married. The boys are all settling down; they're all determined to get somewhere; you can see that boys like Charley Simmons are on their way to being really a credit to the community."

Krebs said nothing.

"Don't look that way, Harold," his mother said. "You know we love you and I want to tell you for your own good how matters stand. Your father does not want to hamper your freedom. He thinks you should be allowed to drive the car. If you want to take some of the nice girls out riding with you, we are only too pleased. We want you to enjoy yourself. But you are going to have to settle down to work, Harold. Your father doesn't care what you start in at. All work is honorable as he says. But you've got to make a start at something. He asked me to speak to you this morning and then you can stop in and see him at his office."

"Is that all?" Krebs said.

"Yes. Don't you love your mother, dear boy?"

"No," Krebs said.

His mother looked at him across the table. Her eyes were shiny. She started crying.

"I don't love anybody," Krebs said.

It wasn't any good. He couldn't tell her, he couldn't make her see it. It was silly to have said it. He had only hurt her. He went over and took hold of her arm. She was crying with her head in her hands.

"I didn't mean it," he said. "I was just angry at something. I didn't mean I didn't love you."

His mother went on crying. Krebs put his arm on her shoulder.

"Can't you believe me, mother?"

His mother shook her head.

"Please, please, mother. Please believe me."

"All right," his mother said chokily. She looked up at him. "I believe you, Harold."

Krebs kissed her hair. She put her face up to him.

"I'm your mother," she said. "I held you next to my heart when you were a tiny baby."

Krebs felt sick and vaguely nauseated.

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“I know, Mummy,” he said. “I’ll try and be a good boy for you.”

“Would you kneel and pray with me, Harold?” his mother asked.

They knelt down beside the dining-room table and Krebs’s mother prayed.

“Now, you pray, Harold,” she said.

“I can’t,” Krebs said.

“Try, Harold.”

“I can’t.”

“Do you want me to pray for you?”

“Yes.”

So his mother prayed for him and then they stood up and Krebs kissed his mother and went out of the house. He had tried so to keep his life from being complicated. Still, none of it had touched him. He had felt sorry for his mother and she had made him lie. He would go to Kansas City and get a job and she would feel all right about it. There would be one more scene maybe before he got away. He would not go down to his father’s office. He would miss that one. He wanted his life to go smoothly. It had just gotten going that way. Well, that was all over now, anyway. He would go over to the schoolyard and watch Helen play indoor baseball.

From *In Our Time* (1925)