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THE UNKNOWN SOLDIER

BY JAMES TRUSLOW ADAMS

As it happens, within a span of not many months I have stood beside the graves of three Unknown Soldiers: one buried on the green slope of Arlington at Washington, one who rests beneath the stone flags of Westminster Abbey, and one buried in the middle of the swirling street traffic of the Place de l'Étoile in Paris. Italy also has her *milite ignoto*, and doubtless others lie in other lands whose troops took part in the Great War. Even making all allowance for the laws of imitation and the herd spirit which govern so much of our life to-day, this widespread honoring of the unknown dead is a phenomenon worth considering.

Man has always delighted to honor the great and those who have performed conspicuous service according to the ideas of their age and place. But now for the first time whole nations, and those the most enlightened, have come to honor the man of whom we know nothing, the Unknown Soldier. As a matter of unfortunate fact, the particular body may be that of one who fought the draft to the last ditch and was a slacker in service. That, however, is of course wholly irrelevant; for it is not really the Unknown Soldier who thus receives the almost religious adoration of his people, but the Common Man, for that is what he is intended to typify — the ordinary man who, willingly or unwillingly, served his country and, either because of the lack of a fortuitously happy combination of circumstances, or perhaps because of the lack of inherent ability, failed

to make a known and notable record.

Of course, it may be claimed that what mankind is worshiping at this tomb is in reality 'the soul of the nation' or 'the totality of suffering and struggle and failure and death and victory.' But even if this is true, which I doubt, so far as the generality of the long line of worshipers is concerned, — ordinary folk who are not given to rising to abstruse reflections on patriotism, life, and death, — nevertheless the choice of the symbol remains unaltered. Heretofore throughout all history it has been the great leader who has symbolized a cause or a movement or an aspiration. *La Patrie* in France used to be worshiped in the pure and girlish figure of the Maid of Orleans. For that 'totality' of ideas and emotions and hopes for which Christianity has stood, it was Christ who was worshiped, not some 'Unknown Christian.' No, sublimate the idealism of that tomb as one will, the fact still remains that mankind has taken the unknown man, the common man, to symbolize to-day whatever lofty emotions may be aroused by that silent body; and the more lofty the idealists proclaim them, the more striking is the contrast between them and their symbol. In the century that has elapsed between the placing of the corpse of Napoleon beneath the dome of the Invalides and the burying of the unknown *poilu* beneath the Triumphal Arch, there has occurred the most mighty revolution in man's thought that he has ever known.

It has come, this honoring of the symbolic unknown dead, to be a cult. The first thing that a distinguished foreigner must do on visiting the countries of these canonized Unknown is to go and place a wreath on the

tomb, though the visitor himself may never have had anything to do with the war, already ten years past; nor need his visit have the remotest connection with anything military. It is about this unknown common man that the real religion of the present day is crystallizing. No one cares a rap whether the distinguished visitor honor the God of the country he is visiting by attending worship in any of its churches, but he *must* worship, wreath in hand and with bowed head and silent prayer, its Unknown Soldier, its common man.

In literature also the common man has become the hero. Rarely now does the serious drama depict a protagonist who by any stretch of the imagination can be considered a great character. We are more apt to find ourselves watching the insane rage of a ship's stoker or the marital complications of an utterly uninteresting and inconspicuous commuter in a New Jersey suburb. The men and women sung in our poetry mostly deserve just such epitaphs as they get in *Spoon River Anthology*. In fiction we have abandoned *Vanity Fair* to mingle with the drab and narrow inhabitants of *Main Street*.

This admiration for the undistinguished is a comparatively recent development. Of course the common man has for long been coming into his own — and some of ours — economically and politically, though perhaps he has not in reality got so far politically as he flatters himself that he has, save to muddy the waters. He has been steadily forcing himself on the world, but perhaps his most astounding achievement has been to force himself into the leading place in our arts and, at least our publicly avowed, admirations.

It is a mistake to think that the Fathers of this Republic had any great regard for the common man as such. The tradition in that respect which his flatterers have tried to foist on the rest of us will not hold water. Here and there, indeed, were leaders ahead of their time, like Thomas Hooker, Roger Williams, or Thomas Jefferson, who believed in the common man and told him so. But for the most part the leaders in the 'great migrations' and the Revolutionary period, although they may have told him so, did not believe in him. In the colonizing days John Cotton and John Winthrop had about as much faith in democracy and the ability of the common people to govern themselves as had George the Third or Louis the Fourteenth later. Cotton Mather, at the beginning of the eighteenth century, in a fit of spleen spoke of his plebeian fellow townsmen as 'insignificant lice.' Alexander Hamilton's testy remark is well known: 'The People — your People, Sir, is a great beast.' Washington, so Jefferson reports, although believing that the people should exercise as much power as they were capable of using wisely, did not have nearly as much faith in their ability and honesty as Jefferson himself did. As for the opinions held of the common man by most of the lesser Federalist leaders who ran America for nearly the whole of the first two decades after the Revolution, they are almost unprintable.

Then along in the 1840's came Bancroft and others who began to write the heroic legend of the country's past, and the common man began his enchanted ascent in public estimation. In Lincoln it was thought that the common man had at last blazed forth in a trail of glory, people forgetting, of course, that

although Lincoln was born in poverty he was not a common, but a most uncommon, man. If he had not been, he would have probably remained in obscurity with the rest of the herd of poverty-stricken pioneers and rail-splitters who *were* common men and who never emerged. As for his alleged remark that 'God must have loved the common people, He made so many of them,' I frankly doubt if he ever said it, at any rate with serious intent. It is too silly. One might just as well say that God must have loved fleas or cockroaches or the yellow-fever mosquito, He made so many of them.

But little by little the common man has got where he is and now receives the homage of poets and novelists, and his bones rest at Arlington and in the Abbey and under the Arc de Triomphe. The trades-unions key their work down to the capacities or inclinations of the lowest of his type in ability. Our public schools and, to an alarming extent, our colleges are standardized on the mental level of his progeny, so that a college degree has ceased to have the slightest cultural meaning. The mystic letters A. B. have come to have less significance as 'Bachelor of Arts' than as 'Able-bodied Seaman.' If a man desires to be president of these United States he must make himself in public as near the common man as he can — indulge in the theatricalism of Roosevelt, be photographed wearing a Shriner's turban like Harding, or with a pitchfork or in chaps like Coolidge, however remote such antics may be from his nature. The cultivated gentleman, no matter how strong his character, how great his ability, how profound his knowledge of the complex problems of the modern State, is no longer a possible leader

'common man' merely the ordinary man who has never in his life done anything distinguished, who is incapable of high emotion, who has never raised himself, mentally or spiritually, above the herd, who has never conferred any benefit on the race, or who at death, except for the sorrow of those near who loved him, leaves no more behind him for the rest of us than a pet dog. I know plenty of common men among the rich and heralded, whose possessions and chance position have nothing to do with their qualities. But, on the other hand, I doubt if there are many great or even talented men among the people who do not somehow make themselves known or felt in time by their services or achievements. I doubt if there are many unknown hands buried in Stoke Poges or other 'country churchyards'

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> Or waked to ecstasy the living lyre.

At any rate, leaving aside that dubious and unanswerable question, we come to the main point of my inquiry. Is it a symptom of health or disease to worship the sailor rather than the captain, the private rather than the leader, the common rather than the great man? Or have we suffered a transvaluation of values and is the common man now the great man rather than the sort we used to call great? If this is so, is it not evidence of that intellectual and spiritual leveling down that has been feared by so many who have, not unsympathetically, studied the possibilities of political and social democracy? Is the unknown X. Y. who worked hard to earn a scanty living, who was good to his wife and dozen children, back in Lincoln's time and country, but who never 'got any-

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where' beyond exercising the homely virtues, really going to be a better hero to hold before a boy's imagination than Lincoln himself? Is the career of an ordinary sailor more of an incentive to ambition and the hope of doing glorious deeds than that of Nelson? Or perhaps we should ask, as the navy has not yet gone in for 'Unknown Sailors,' is some private at Valley Forge to be worshiped rather than Washington? In literature are we going to obtain the same mental and spiritual illumination by watching crises in the third-rate emotional life of petty people, who live on Main Street because they belong there, that we do by watching the struggle between circumstance and really great character? In drama the confronting of great character by great crises does give us that 'purge of the emotions' which was claimed for it in ancient Greece. Is not the purge the theatre gives us now of a very different sort?

If instead of the great man we worship the little one, if instead of occupying our thoughts with the rare and the fine and the great we devote all our time and admiration to the petty, the commonplace, and the plain common, are we not likely ourselves to become more and more like the objects we worship? Why spend laborious nights in study to train our minds, why attempt to mould our characters to something higher than the mob, why strive for high thought and action, why dream of high endeavor, why strive to fit ourselves to lead, if, after all, we are still no better than the led, and the world's leaders and benefactors are really outranked by Sal the sandwich slinger and Bill the stoker? And if they are not really outranked, if the leaders are really more worthy of admiration

and imitation than the led, if the great and the noble are really finer than the common man, then why all this hypocritical pother? Is it that the common people now in truth have the power, that man always worships what controls him, and that the qualities of Demos are those which from now on must more and more command the world's homage? If that is so, then Democracy has indeed failed and the upward progress of civilization has come to an end, and in worshiping the Unknown Soldier we are worshiping at the grave of a far greater dead, the corpse of man's aspiration for something finer and higher and nobler than himself, the corpse of man's aspiring soul.