

Men (1914)
by Sumner Locke



About the Story ...

The Story:

A woman struggles with the question of her son's enlistment.

This story unfolds over a relatively short period of time, between the time when an unnamed woman walks home from the local store in the rural town of Go-long Go-longer Plains, where she has seen an imperative enlistment notice from the British war office, to the end of the day, when the arrival of her son's eager friend forces her to decide her path.

Locke's focus is heavily on the woman's interiority: abandoned by a feckless husband and dependent on her own hard manual labour, she shrinks into herself in fear of losing her only son, her

main comfort. Her decision to encourage her son to enlist is finally triggered by her reading of the Bible (a relatively unusual aspect for Locke's work), but here Locke places as much emphasis on Mary as on Mary's son — even, the story suggests, on Mary as a sole parent, like the unnamed protagonist, with no one who can share the burden of her sacrifice. In keeping with the narrative's interiority, it is also strongly symbolist, with terms such as the 'Great War Lords' and even the name of the town itself pushing the woman's experience into heightened terms.

The Great War Lords were still calling, calling for men. Britain's new army was promised to be in readiness by the spring, and like a great monster hungry for prey before the time of feast, the army was sapping up the strength of the nation, dragging the men from home and office like the machine that dredges a pool until there is but the sludge and the slime left.

Men, men. We want more men! was the cry of the mother country; and the simple country wives heard it and slept little for they knew that the district they toiled in must retain the services of the male section or go under, and they and their little children must suffer hardly. Men, men. We want one hundred thousand more men. The Great War Lord had no touch of sentiment in him whatever. He was saving an Empire, the greatest empire ever known, and the atoms of domesticity that went to make that great empire were so much to him, that practically he wrecked them only to take their foundations to rebuild a bigger and a grander edifice, that of the great British Throne.

Men. Men. We want five hundred thousand more men! The cry seemed to come from the skies, as every mother with her boy in office or in field read it aloud off the notice board in the little post-office or somewhere just as prominent. Little old women who had lived through two wars before, opened small black bulletry eyes and told many a story of her mother's boy who went out to the Crimea or to the Mutiny, and came home honoured by a stump leg or a lost right arm.

The younger generation of mothers had never gained through such experiences, and therefore they understood little and could only question why? and wherefore? and what for? and mentally they hugged their boys: and their souls crowded down and felt afraid to stir, and the shudder that shook the foundations of those little women was such as only their kind could ever know.

*"Men. Men. We want more men.
Sign to-day. Your King and
country need you."*

Some it inspired to motherly pride, because it was something to their greatness, and the greatness of their having given birth to a man who was needed by his King and country. The simplest took it individually; almost personally, and in great measure, rather flattering, because her boy was strong and tall, and she thought, necessary, in the work that had to be done. Others queried. John was needed at home. The crops were ripening to yellow and gold; they must be brought in or they would get spoiled by sun or rain or rust. ... John was more than ever necessary because his father had broken his leg last season and couldn't be relied on in quite the same way. Then, again, it was Tom or Harry. Tom was on a contract to clear a fifteen acre lot. He was fighting the prickly pear and derelict tree stumps, and good cash was coming in regularly to help pay off the mortgage left when his father had swamped everything in a venturesome land deal which hadn't been dealt out fairly enough to show any profit. Tom, therefore, was part of the domestic machinery that kept a certain number of small wheels going sufficiently well enough to keep the concern just moving over a heavy piece of life's road. The King and country needed him, but his mother felt that her small fry of children, all under twelve years of age, needed him more than the King, and the fifteen-acre lot more than the so-called country in the very far-away, abstract.

Thus it was when the call for men, men, more men, came to "Go-long-go-longer plains." A woman, bereft of every happiness but that of having her boy with her, had read the words posted up in the local store. They turned her cold, and the dull ran into her blood. She suffered again some of the tortures that had come into her life previously. Again she saw her man with the lie on his lips and in his eyes, as he packed a bag for the main city and went away to settle shares with an investment company. He had taken thirteen years to invest that money and it had never shown any profit to the woman left behind; and only the isolated, starry nights looked down on her with any assurance afterwards. The skies over "Go-long-go-longer-plains" had eyes of a million friends to her, and they alone had whispered to her that a son would be born who would stay in the years, and help her through the disappointment. Then later there were the other things ... drought-stricken cattle and waterless creeks, starvation for her boy and the fight alone again. But the stars with their brilliant message had helped her there too, for some relative in the distance away, had come just in time to relieve the situation with a legacy which brought her back from the chilly, creeping death that she had lived in for weeks. And now it was the call. The Great War Lord who hadn't as much as the grace of politeness in him to put it in a more grateful way. "Sign to-day." It was almost a command. The picture in the illustrated gazette of the Great War Lord just sent the quiver further down that little woman's body. The set brows, firm mouth, chin and general bearing ... it was to her the same dominating instinct that she knew so well once in a local doctor who had insisted on operating with dreadful knife-like instruments, on a poor young soul, to save her life. The doctor had saved her just long enough for the ones who loved her to get her sweet body washed and dressed for her last long resting place ... the little woman in the store, reading the call to arms and looking at the picture of the Great War Lord, shivered as she had done once before, when she had helped lay out the sweet poor soul who had been experimented on. Gradually she walked on her way home. The small allotment of land lay glistening in the mid day sun. Men were working it. It pleased her to look upon labour that she knew she could afford to pay for now. Her boy Peter had been laid up with a bad knee from a fall in the worked out shaft

up "Broad-Hills" way. It was about the only time that Peter had taken from the work since he had started it at fifteen years of age. He was now nineteen years old, and as responsible and good to rely on as his father had not been.

Now as the little woman went on her way through the home paddocks she felt a glow of satisfaction run through her veins. Things were growing to affluence. The land looked good and thriving. Water there was in the creeks and no sign of any devastating drought; and her boy ... sufficiently able ... able ... strong enough for anything ... strong enough to fight the battle of the elements ... to stand a season's bad results and work it out in his own mind and remedy the future one. Oh, her boy was strong ...

She wished that she hadn't paid that visit to the store. It was only about once a month that she had real cause to do so. If she hadn't been there to-day she wouldn't have seen that notice. It glared at her out of the trees that lined the little track to her front parlour. It was written in sun-flacks on the windows of her house. It burned into her brain, it scorched her heart ... "Sign to-day." More than ever she wished that she had not been up to the store. There was quite sufficient flour and bacon in the dairy to last another few weeks. This frightful knowledge about the war and the severe looking War Lord asserting such a duty to the men of the district was a punishment for her harbouring goods in her larder when perhaps there were people in the world who hadn't enough for a meal. Yes it was rather absurd of her to have hurried that order.

"Men, men. We want men!!! Join to-day. Your King and your country need you." What King? What country?

But then ... she grew feverish at the thought of it ... somebody else from the place would have been into the store and have read the notice and carried it ... carried it ... oh, dear God ... right to her boy.



She would never speak of it of course. His mother and his own piece of native land wanted him ... needed him a thousand times more than that commanding broad-chested figure that took up a whole page of the "Illustrated Gazette," to show his superior, iron power. Of course, she wanted him more than his King and his country did. God had taught her that long ago, when her man had deserted and the trouble had brought her right down to the dregs of her own life. Peter was in bed reading something. She had taught him to read herself and provided his books. It was the first time in his life he had ever really been confined into one room for any length of time. How glad she was of that. He could not go into the township and read that notice. "Sign to-day." Of course he should not sign to-day – or to-morrow, or the next day. Nor should he know ought about it, unless ...

Peter had a great chum called "Ready" Brown. The name had started with the keen desire of the youth to always be at a place, before anyone else. "Ready" was as keen as a sheep-dog and as preliminary as a storm out of season; and when there was anything new about he was always known as the first man to get there. "Ready" they had christened him, and "ready" he generally was before anyone else. The woman halted on the kitchen step.

Like fire it ran through her veins. If "Ready" should be there before her ... with the news ... England at war with Germany. ...

*Men, men, five hundred
thousand men wanted to make a
new army to stand in readiness.
... Sign to-day.*

She knew how Peter would take it. He was devoid of any such thing as fear. He would walk fifty miles if need be to put his name to the list of men offering to join the new army. He wouldn't mind wearing his

feet to the bone if he thought it was in reason, or in good cause. Besides there was that in her son that told her he would not be behind his chum "Ready," even if "Ready" were to try and persuade him his duty was with his mother and her farm.

The cold scare of everything coursed through her and she almost heard "Ready's" voice as she tried to wipe her boots on the sand of the ploughed fields without disturbing the quiet of the house. Was he there before her ... telling Peter ...? No! it was her own heart beating and hurting her with its solid bumping.

Relieved, she walked into the kitchen, took off her cape and hat and hung them behind the door. Peter was calling and asking if the work was going on all right? If there was anything down in the town-ship about the pony races of Jimbaroo? If she had seen Carter about those heifers? What price had he offered?

She answered as well as she could, with her heart jumping about till it nearly choked her.

Peter decided then to go on with his book, and she stole up and shut the door quietly, and presently she knew that he was asleep ... the feverishness of his wound only allowed him a certain time of rest during the night.

All day long the woman worked mechanically. She had to invent things in her mind to say to "Ready" or any other friends that might call and ask to see Peter. Mentally she told small, white lies, in preparation for the trouble of putting them off wanting to go to Peter's room. Towards the afternoon she had become adept at the art of lying with easy frankness, though so far it was all pretence, because no one had called, up to three o'clock.



Peter was still sleeping. She felt certain that if no one called today that she could keep him in ignorance tomorrow; and further than that, because "Ready" Brown had work to do twelve miles along the railway

and he would not be bothering to come down to see his friend during that period. If she could manage to arrange it to-day the rest of time would be all right. Besides, the dreadful notice had said "Sign to-day." To-day ... Not to-morrow. And perhaps by that time it would be pulled down and all names collected in. If she could only keep Peter in ignorance to-day.

She got to lip-toeing about and looking with big, open, frightened eyes across the fields. The home paddocks were surfaced with the sunshine. Would the day never end ... ? She stole about, and when the feelings got too much for her she locked the kitchen door and took to the old rocking chair. The chair was easy and gently swayed her mood. Here she had sat during nights of terror, before Peter had been born, wondering whether all would be well now that she was deserted and left to fight her fight alone. Here she had rocked him when he had been a sickly, small child, ever on the verge of a declining anaemia. Here she had loved to think herself a mother ... even as the blessed dear mother who gave birth to the God of Love, in a very poor, mean stable. The rocking chair swayed her moods always ... it comforted her now. Presently she grew afraid again, and reached for her Bible. It was on the top of the cupboard where she kept pickles and home-made jams. She tried to comfort herself by reading at random, anywhere and everywhere. She found herself reading of the "Birth of Christ." The Inspired Woman who had brought the Son of God into the world ... with such wonderful love and purity in her soul. She wanted to feel she had done something like that when she had given birth to Peter. It was the great all in a woman's life ... and the greatness of her soul; had she given him that too, as that Divine Mother had done?

Almost with nervous fingers she turned about the Bible and sought to find other passages of comfort.

*But only one thing remained. Had she given him any greatness from her suffering?
Had she made him straight and good and upright for his salvation alone?*



Had she given him anything to benefit the rest of his fellow kind? An icy cold wind seemed to be breaking through the kitchen. It burst over her body and she found herself reading of the story of the Cross ... of

the Divine Mother kneeling at the foot of her dear Son, kneeling and suffering as no woman had suffered, or has suffered since, in having given him of the greatest thing. The unselfishness that made him give up his life to save other men.

With shaking body she closed the book to think it all out. Mary the Mother of God was with her, interpreting, explaining, making it all clear.

Something warm was stealing all upon her. She saw the Cross again, and upwards her eyes traced the form there. The lifeless form of Christ, who had given all because he had gained all from his mother, the Inspired of God. Yes, she was looking through the dying light of the day and seeing the Cross, and the face ... it was that of her boy Peter, and she herself was kneeling ... kneeling at his feet.

As the daylight died she woke to reason and found herself kneeling on the washed boards of her own kitchen. Somebody was hammering on the door. It sounded like "Ready" Brown. It was "Ready," because he was shouting out, and by his tone he meant that things were of great importance, "Peter! Peter ...!" the voice was that of great meaning.

With a swift movement of her body the woman threw open the door, then hurried as well as she could for her boy's room.

Before "Ready" Brown could get to the bed she had put up her hand and spoken.

"Peter ... my son ... get up quickly. Your king and your country need you — sick or weak you must try, try Peter! It is the only way: and you must hurry ... it's nigh on closing time for the store, and you're to sign on to-day."



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