

John Mills

J. Arthur Rank Film Star*
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Mills' pocket in this picture.

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and boil

H1

* Soon to be seen in
"The History of Mr. Polly."

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Short Story

TRANSIT CAMP

AS Bob Young turns into the transit camp he is whistling and slapping his rolled-up paper against his thigh. It is evening. A blue mist swathes the willow trees and already tiny beads of moisture are forming on the fern-like tips of the macrocarpa leaves. Twenty fingers of smoke, from 20 dozer stoves, point straight upwards into the motionless air, and from 20 identical kitchens comes the clatter of dishes and the hot tantalizing smell of food.

It is very cold and thin strips of yellow show beneath the drawn blinds, the closed doors. Only from the communal lavatories the light streams forth unshuttered, staining the gravel paths with great squares of gold.

At number 4, Murphy's cat rises up from the milk-box and gives a short mew of greeting, arching his back to Bob's caressing hand. At number 10, Mrs. Howard has put her tea-towels out to bleach on the privet hedge. Very white, very ghostly they look, glimmering there in the dusk. Going to be a stinger to-night, Bob tells himself and leaves the path for a moment to rustle his feet in the stiffening grass. At number 17, he can hear old man Watson shouting at his kids. Bob grins . . . one over the eight again! At number 19, still whistling, he swings in through the gap in the hedge. He is home.

But at number 19 to-day has been a bad day. At the sound of that gay, care-free whistling, Evelyn Young turns her flushed, angry face towards the door. Tears prick and sting against her eyelids. It's all very well for him. . . . How would he like to be stuck here all day, with no room to swing a cat, with Peter's cough, cough, cough, and the baby forever crawling towards that wretched dozer stove? She watches, sullen, while he hangs up his hat, pinches Peter's cheek, rumples the baby's hair, then sinks with a long contented sigh into the big chair. "How's things, Ev?" he says, opening the paper, sinking deeper.

But Evelyn does not trust herself to speak. She snatches the baby from the floor, whisks her into her chair. Ties the feeder, angrily ties the feeder, not seeing the tender white nape, the tiny ears, the charming point of flaxen hair. Bang, bang, goes the baby's spoon, cough, cough, goes Peter, playing jeeps on the littered floor. And, men, shrieks the angry voice in Evelyn Young, men, men, it's all very well for men.

Automatically she picks up a spoon, fills it with cereal, thrusts it into the little red mouth, scoops off the surplus with the pointed upper-lip. And when,



Written for "The Listener" by
ELIZABETH SPENCER

at last, the little mouth stays shut, absently she coaxes: "Open wide . . . down the hatch . . . what a clever girl!" Now the milk in the plastic cup! But with one generous sweep of a chubby pink arm it is over. It drips to a thick white pool on the rug. It's his fault, shrills the voice, sitting there doing nothing. Why can't he help me? Why can't he give me a hand? "Mum, mum, mum," chants the baby. "Mummy spilt the milk," chants Peter.

It is past eight o'clock. The children are in bed. In the narrow, unlined rooms of an army hut, in cot and crib they lie, among the crowded suit-cases and half-empty crates which are the symbols of hope in every transit camp. Their button noses, peeping above the blankets, grow pinker as the chill blue mist leaves the willow trees and drifts silently through the open windows.

Out in the small living-room it is quiet now. The napkins swing on a string line above the glowing stove, Bob lies sprawled full-length on the chesterfield, a "Reader's Digest" face downwards on his chest. He snores, a gentle fluted snore, not worth waking him for. Evelyn is darning, weaving her thoughts in and out, in and out, across the bright blue darning-egg.

Her raging inner voice is still, lulled by the brief peace of evening. Only deep down inside her, anger has left a residue of resentment. Why, she wonders, must women's days be filled with an endless monotony of tasks, mechanical, fruitless, needing no brain, no special capacity? Why must sheer dog-weariness turn a loving mother into an impatient-shrew? Was it always so? Did her great-great-grandmother, kneading her bread, trimming her candles, sometimes hate her womanhood and raise

(continued on next page)

N.Z. LISTENER, AUGUST 5, 1949

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