Characters

Howard Richardson (M)	-	Father
Gladys Richardson (F)	-	Mother
Colin Richardson (M)	-	Eldest son
Polly Richardson (F)	-	Daughter
Billy Richardson (M)	-	Youngest son
Sergeant Mitchell (M)	-	Recruiter

Act 1
Scene 1 – Dining Room

(Set in Richardson's family dining room with front door (left). There is a staircase leading off (right) and a door to the kitchen (far right). A fireplace (left). A prominent window with curtains is between the staircase and the door to the kitchen. The front door is left. Five dining room chairs, two easy chairs. In the centre of the room is a long wooden planked dining table. Welsh dresser stands alongside back wall. There is a small table on which stands a gramophone. It is early evening as the curtain rises. Howard Richardson is seated in an easy chair reading the paper, and smoking his pipe; his eldest son Colin is seated at the table. He is reading the accounts. Mrs Gladys Richardson is seated knitting socks. Daughter Polly and youngest son, Billy, are also present. Polly and Billy are in animated spirits having just arrived back from a show at the local theatre.)

Howard: How about another cup of tea, dear?

Gladys: How is it I knew you were going to say that.

Howard: There's still some left in the pot...might need a top up. Polly … put the kettle on!

(Standing joke, Polly is not amused).

Polly: That's Dad's answer to everything - a cuppa tea. He says if the Germans drank tea they would be decent people.

Billy: I think they need more than that.

Gladys: **(Gladys goes to the kitchen)** Theatre was packed. Polly put the Ivor Novello record on … let's hear it again … All together now …

(Polly puts the record on and they sing first two lines of 'Keep The Home Fires Burning'. Gladys exits to kitchen. Chorus : Keep the Home Fires Burning, while your hearts are yearning.)

Colin: **(Colin rises immediately and irritatingly turns gramophone off)** For goodness sake give it a rest! We've heard it a thousand times already.

Billy: You should have come to the play Colin. It showed you what the Boche are really like. Nasty beggars! The Boche do unspeakable things to the French women, they even bashed a child's brains out against the bedpost after they shot the men. Mind you, when the British Tommies arrived they soon scarpered.

Colin: Don't be stupid. It's fiction, it was a play … It's make believe.

Billy: Well, the audience liked it … they cheered.

Colin: Oh … God! … It's pretence.

Gladys: **(speaking from kitchen doorway).** You may smirk, but where there's smoke there's fire. If they were that innocent they wouldn't have started this war.

Howard: Did you enjoy the show my girl?

Polly: I thought the nurse was beautiful. She was brave. I think I might volunteer to join the Voluntary Aid Detachment and train to be a nurse.

Colin: For God's sake! She's an actress. I doubt if she knows one end of a bandage from the other.

Gladys: **(re-enters lounge with tea & cups).** You don't believe everything you read Colin, you take it with a pinch of salt, but you can't dismiss all of it. There's got to be some truth in it otherwise they wouldn't be allowed to perform the play or print the newspapers.

Colin: They only let us see what they think is good for the public. The censors wouldn't show a British Tommy misbehaving, would they?

Polly: That's because they don't really misbehave. Well … they may have a beer or two. But they wouldn't do what the Hun does.

Colin: When was the last time you were down town on a Friday or Saturday night? They get drunk and if they can't get a woman, they fight. And if they do that over here, how do you think they behave in France or Belgium!

Howard: That's enough Colin. I don't think your brother and sister need to hear this.

Gladys: I trust you don't go down town on a weekend night, my girl.

Polly: No Mum.

Gladys: I'm pleased to hear it.

Colin: I'm not passing judgement. It is just that most of them are away from home for the first time in their life. They're young, probably never had a girlfriend. They get carried away on a tide of booze. And they're fit and trained to kill. So they're going to let off steam.

Gladys: Well, I think the officers should stop them.

Colin: Don't be silly mum. They don't drink in the same pubs. Besides, they want them to be aggressive.

Billy: How come you know all this? You're not in the military.

Colin: It's because I work with men. It's not dissimilar. It's hard physical work down the pit and it's dangerous; they have to look after each other; stick up for one another: same as in the Army.

Gladys: But it's the job of the management to take control.

Colin: As the Union Rep it's my job to look out for the men; the management look after themselves; all the owners care about is profit.

Gladys: I feel an argument coming. He's warming up for a fight. It's getting late.
Billy, off you go, upstairs.

Billy: Mum!

Howard: You heard what your mother said – go on. Polly, you need your sleep if you're going to be looking after the injured.

Polly: Night Dad, night Mum.

Billy: **(begrudgingly)** Night Dad, night Mum.

(Exit Billy & Polly upstarts)

Gladys: **(to Colin)** Why do you always have to spoil things? We had a nice evening at the theatre watching a play that made us feel good about ourselves and sang along to, 'Keep the Home Fires Burning'. It reminded us what we're fighting for is right. There's nothing wrong with a bit of British Bulldog spirit. You always have to be contrary. We've all got to be seen to be doing our bit, haven't we?

Colin: You can't say the miners are not doing their bit. If we didn't dig for coal the railways wouldn't run, and the troops and ammunition wouldn't get to where it should. We're just as vital as them at the Front, only people tend to forget that.

Howard: We know you're doing a necessary job. The problem is that some people think because you're not in uniform you've got it easy or you're heading for the funk hole.

Gladys: I can see the storms of disagreement welling up again. I'm going to bed.

(Gladys exits upstairs, ignored by the men)

Colin: Do you think people work down the pit because they're in a funk? Five people were killed down our pit last year.

Howard: I know, I know! But you lose the sympathy of the public when some of you want to take unpatriotic action.

Colin: You mean like the planned strike in the Welsh coalfields.

Howard: Yes, but we're not in Wales.

Colin: But we're all miners. What affects them, affects us.

Howard: The mine owners have offered them a war bonus. What more do they want?

Colin: They don't want something that will cease at the end of a war. They want a decent living wage. That means a permanent improvement in wages and working conditions.

Howard: We are at war, son. This is not the time to haggle over an extra bit of money. There are men over there dying in their hundreds. How can you take such a stance?

Colin: **(becoming agitated)** You really don't understand, do you Dad. You speak from your side of the manager's desk. The fault lies with the capitalists not with the workers. The profits from the coalmines are double that of pre-war production. The blokes

running the munitions factories are making money hand over fist, and the Government want to punish the strikers and the coal owners want to maximise their profits … and at whose expense. Ours, the workers!

Howard: You're sounding more and more like that Bolshevik, a supporter of that new Independent Labour Party. What do they call him - That Cur Hardy.

Colin: You mean Kier Hardy.

Howard: Yes, that's him. You know he supports the Conscientious objectors. He wants a general strike in order to stop production and hence the war. If that happens, then where would we be? No production equals no manufacturing, no profit equals no money, equals no work: hence we lose the war. We can't sit back and let the rest of Europe fight our battles.

Colin: I'm not suggesting that, Dad. I'm just saying that there are different ways of supporting the war effort and that it's unjust for people to make record profits. And while they do that, stint on those that actually do the graft. The miners just want a proper living wage. It's unfair, Dad. It's become accepted as a "legitimate" means of robbery. They're robbing the poor to pay the already rich!

Howard: That's the way of the world son, that's how business works. Profit equals goods, equals work, equals success.

Colin: I don't dispute the need for some profit. It just makes my blood boil when it's gained under the guise of patriotism.

Howard: Your country comes first Colin.

Colin: But at whose expense?

Howard: An enemy bullet doesn't distinguish between upper, middle or lower class soldiers … or sailors for that matter.

Colin: You're missing the point again, Dad. I have every respect for the officer class. Although I think they could drop the social barriers a bit when they're not in uniform.

Howard: What do you mean?

Colin: Have you seen the young officers when they come out of the local barracks. The mufti is like a uniform: bowler hat, rolled umbrella, pin striped suits. I'm informed they're not allowed to smoke in public or be seen carrying a parcel. Ridiculous!

Howard: I have a hat, carry an umbrella and wear a suit!

Colin: I know you do, Dad, but you've earned it. You've worked long and hard to get to the position of councillor, man in-charge of the tribunal: a respected man of the community. You started at the bottom. Half of those red-arsed young officers are just out of school. They don't know what responsibility is.

Howard: Maybe not, but I'm sure they'll soon find out.

(Blackout)

Scene 2 - Front room

(Following evening. Wall lights on. Howard is at the table reading a newspaper, Gladys is knitting. Billy enters and hangs up his cap and coat.)

Gladys: **(to Billy)** Where did you go to yesterday evening?

Howard: **(not looking up from his newspaper)** I expect he went to see the soldiers marching through town. I shouldn't be in a hurry to get into uniform son. It says here **(tapping newspaper)** the casualty list is getting longer and longer by the hour. Lord Kitchener is asking for more men. It's a bloody war of attrition … Despite what the papers say; we all knew it was never going to be over by Christmas.

Billy: How are we going to win this war, Dad?

Howard: We'll have to find another way of breaking the stalemate. We need new weapons. The Germans have them.

Gladys: What have they got that we haven't got?

Howard: Gas.

Gladys: Gas!

Howard: Yes, gas, and it's poisonous. They started to use it at the battle of Ypres. They fire canisters of chlorine. I was talking to a soldier the other day. He told me it burns your throat, your lungs and makes you vomit, and your eyes stream: renders a soldier useless. **(Pause)** We're working on producing it now.

Gladys: So how do they combat it?

Billy: Somebody said they piss in their handkerchiefs.

Gladys: **(shocked)** Billy, please!

Howard: It's true. The Canadians discovered the method. They cover their mouth and nose with their soaked handkerchief, it works – more or less. The Army has now begun to issue proper gas masks. I'm told the only problem is they're difficult to see out of; they muffle the voice and they make a man sweat something terrible.

Gladys: They could always dive into the bottom of the trench.

Howard: That is the worst thing to do. Gas is heavier than air and it settles down in the trench. So anyone asleep or any poor Tommy on a stretcher would cop it first.

Gladys: **(shaking her head in disbelief)** What will they think of next!

Howard: **(still from behind his newspaper)** Recruiting more men. According to the paper they're enlisting 125,000 volunteers each month. The British Army is now over 2 million strong and growing.

Gladys: Seems a lot until you look at the casualty figures. I hear they've bombing us now. They started on London in April.

Billy: They can't be that successful. Those big Zeppelins are easy targets.

Howard: Yes, but now they're using aeroplanes.

Billy: Doesn't affect us though, does it? Nobody's bombed us.

Howard: Oh yes it does. If the bosses hear there's a bomber in the vicinity they turn off the electricity supply and close the factory.

Gladys: Is that's why you were home early the other day?

Howard: Yes, only trouble is the owner is intending to dock the workers a proportion of their pay.

Billy: That's not fair Dad; it's not their fault.

Howard: I wouldn't like to be one to inform them! It must cause some ill feeling.

(Colin enters. Home from the pub)

Gladys: Don't tell Colin that. It'll give him something else to gripe about.

Colin: **(hangs his coat up, and takes rolled up newspaper out of his pocket)**
I heard that! Another blow to the workers is it; something else for them to worry about?

Gladys: So what else have you got to whinge about?

Colin: This won't affect you Mum but I doubt if Dad will be that pleased. According to the Paper here the Government's accusing the workers of drinking too much.

Billy: **(mockingly)** As if you would!

Colin: They say it's having a bad effect on war production with blokes turning up late for work. And soldiers and sailor are misbehaving because they get treated to free drinks in the pub, so they're returning to barracks leg-less.

Billy: Oh, yes … free beer!

Gladys: Not for you my lad. You're still too young.

Colin: **(jokingly)** Next time I catch you in a pub I'll have to turf you out!

Billy: Yeah, after you've downed another couple of pints.

Gladys: You haven't been taking your brother to the pub?

Colin: No Mum. He was already in there**. (laughs)**

Billy: Shut up!

Gladys: If I catch you, I'll …

Howard: **(looking up momentarily)** Leave it dear. He's nearly old enough and besides I'd rather he was in there with his brother then with some of those loud-mouthed squaddies.

Gladys: The Government can't do much about the excessive drinking.

Colin: Oh, yes they can.

Gladys: How?

Howard: They've cut the licensing hours. Pubs will now be closed in the morning and after lunch for two or three hours before opening again in the evening. Oh, and they're closing on Sundays.

Gladys: I bet some of the wives and girlfriends will be pleased. There's many men who can't hold their liquor and there's many a bruised female to prove it.

Howard: I don't take it out on you when I've had a beer or two.

Gladys: No, I'll give you that Howard. You don't. But there's too many that would rather spend their money on booze instead of the wife and kids.

Howard: You will be pleased to know that you will be in good company, so to speak. It says here **(indicating the paper)** that the King and Queen have signed the pledge, and henceforth will not be imbibing for the duration.

Gladys: I'm pleased to hear it. I knew they would set a good example.

Colin: Trouble is you can't prove it – can you! **(rises to go upstairs)** We'll never know what goes on behind those 'chintz curtains' in Buck House. I bet the odd cork will be popped without them telling.

(Colin exits upstairs)

Billy: Can't see the locals paying much attention to that rule.

Howard: They'll have to, the doors will be shut.

(Polly enters clad in an overcoat carrying a bag).

Gladys: Hello Dear. How is the first aid training going?

Polly: Very well. I've passed the basic tests.

Gladys: Have you signed the papers yet?

Polly: Yes. I'm now officially a trainee with a Voluntary Aid Detachment.

Gladys: So, how did you like your training with the soldiers? Do you want a wash before you tell us all about it?

Polly: No. I had a wash at the hospital before I left.

Billy: I should hope you have. We never know what you might have caught.

Polly: I'm not dealing with diseased people. The boys have been wounded and now they're here convalescing.

(Polly takes off her coat and reveals her uniform).

Gladys: Oh, look at her, Dad. **(Howard finally puts down his newspaper)** She's got a uniform at last. You look like a nurse. You look so smart dear … give us a twirl, dear.

Polly: **(She proudly does a twirl)** I'm not a real nurse. I'm just an assistant; I'm in training to be a nurse. We do the more boring work. Clean the floors and help feed those who are missing an arm or two. I hope to be a nurse one day.

Howard: Good for you my girl.

Polly: One chap asked me to write a letter to his wife.

Billy: **(sarcastically)** Really! Did he have an arm missing?

Polly: No, Billy. He didn't know how to write and his reading wasn't very good.

Gladys: So what did you say, I mean write?

Polly: Well, I wrote a short letter and read it back to him. And then he told me that I couldn't send it.

Gladys: That was a bit ungrateful.

Polly: No it wasn't. The problem was I started the letter by saying, 'My Dearest Darling Rhianne'.

Howard: So!

Polly: He said that she wouldn't believe the letter came from him, because that's not how he speaks to her. He calls her Chuck **(said with northern accent)**. So I wrote 'Dear Chuck' and worded it how he spoke. He came from up north.

Billy: What else did you say?

Polly: I'm not telling you, it's personal and private.

Howard: Quite right. What other chores did you have to perform? When will you become a nurse?

Polly: I don't know how long it will take, Dad. But I've already starting on a basic medical training.

Gladys: My, you are a busy girl. I must say your dad and I are very proud of you. I do like your uniform.

Billy: You look smarter than those girl conductors on the trams, and better than those working in the munitions factory.

Gladys: Where's your hat? Have you got a hat dear? Put it on. Let's see what it looks like.

(Enter Colin from upstairs. He notices Polly's uniform)

Colin: I say, look at her - is that our Florence Nightingale?

Polly: Cheeky beggar! **(she puts on her hat)**

Gladys: Very smart, dear.

Billy: I wish I was in uniform.

Howard: So where are you doing all this voluntary aid stuff?

Polly: They've converted Milton Hall into a nursing home. You know. The place where Sir Jeffery lives. The family has moved out to a cottage on the estate.

Gladys: They won't be sending you to Belgium or France. Will they?

Polly: Steady on. I got to get trained first.

Howard: **(stands up, and checks his appearance in the mirror)** It is good to see that the upper echelons of society are doing their bit for the war effort.

Colin: Moving out of a mansion to live in a five bedroom cottage: hardly a sacrifice is it?

Gladys: Hark at Mister Doom and Gloom.

Colin: Well, it's true. Isn't it?

Howard: If it wasn't for the likes of Sir Jeffery the wounded wouldn't have anywhere to convalesce. And, incidentally, both his sons have just been sent to the Front … and they're not causing industrial unrest.

Colin: You forget to mention which parts of the country and which social class is making the most profit out of this war, and which class is providing the most recruits.

Howard: The war affects everyone … It's a joint effort.

Colin: But the struggle is unequal …Some have got more to lose than others.

Howard: It doesn't matter how rich your family is. If someone gets killed it still hurts: death renders us all equal.

Gladys: For goodness sake! Give it a rest you two **(Colin and Howard sit down).**

Colin: So … Who is going to the latest patriotic, patronising, pathetic performance at the Empire Theatre?

Polly: I am

Howard: And who are you going with?

Polly: I've been invited to step on to the stage.

Gladys: Oh, how come?

Polly: At the end of the Review we will sing a couple of numbers, along with the audience.

Colin: You mean it is a recruiting drive. I've no doubt the Army recruiters will be in attendance.

Howard: I see the entertainment industry has got involved in recruiting. Last week an actor gave a wonderful rendition of Henry V's speech. **(standing)** 'Once more unto the breach dear friends …'

Colin: **(standing)** '… or close this wall up with our English dead'

Polly: **(impressed)** I didn't know you could quote Shakespeare.

Colin: I've heard it so many times. Every bloody actor on the recruiting bandwagon recites it.

Howard: I still find it stirring. But I must say I don't think it'll be long before they introduce conscription for everyone.

(Polly is practicing put a sling on Billy)

Billy: Does that mean I'll soon be in the army?

Gladys: Not until you're old enough.

Colin: You've got a bit of time yet. I'd relax and enjoy what life you've got left.

Billy: I want to do my bit. I want to put on a uniform like our Polly.

Colin: **(laughs)** You'd look silly in a nurse's outfit.

Billy: You know what I mean. Some of my pals are already in the Army and another volunteered last week. Did you see the soldiers marching through town on the way to the station? Two of our ex-apprentices were in uniform, they looked really smart. All the girls were waving.

Howard: There's nothing heroic about carrying a rifle.

Gladys: There's time enough for that. You've got to finish your apprenticeship.

Polly: I think he just wants to attract the girls.

Gladys: So what's this about you treading the boards – stepping out on the stage, my girl?

Polly: They're not just looking for soldiers and sailors; they also want more nurses. I was asked to don my uniform and be part of the recruiting drive.

Gladys: **(looking at Howard accusingly)** Who asked you? Don't tell me, I know! Anyway, good on you my girl.

Colin: And what do you get out of it?

Polly: Two free tickets to the show; one for me, and another one for my guest.

Billy: Can I come?

Polly: Yes, you can be my guest. Is that alright, Dad?

Howard: Yes, I see no harm in it, as long as he behaves himself. I'll keep an eye on both of them.

Gladys: How come?

Howard: As vice chairman of the military tribunal, I've been asked to deputise for the mayor who is sick. I shall act as MC and introduce the military.

Gladys: Well, you're a dark horse. When did you know this?

Howard: Just before I left work.

Gladys: So, what's the show?

Polly: It is called 'By Jingo If We Do'. It should be fun.

Colin: Not another Hun bashing farce … more gratuitous violence under the guise of patriotic humour. It's so hypocritical.

Howard: You can't expect the playwrights to stick up for the enemy, can you?

Colin: No. But you want a bit of realism. Not all Germans are barbarians.

Polly: I think he has a point. But how do you show the war on the stage? Do you remember the last one-act play we saw? The producer got them to indicate an explosion by banging on a drum. It sounded pathetic. It said in the newspaper that the censor was frightened of scaring the audience … three quarters of them were in uniform, I bet they don't bang a drum when they're practising!

Billy: I'm off out, Mum. See you all later at the theatre.

Gladys: Don't be gone long, or you'll miss the show.

Howard: Are you coming to the show, dear?

Gladys: No, I promised to give my sister a hand with preparing gifts for the soldiers.

Billy: **(sings) '**Sewing socks for soldiers' ...

Howard: **(interrupts)** Yes, we know the song!

Billy: Bye.

(Billy exits)

Gladys: Where the heck is he going?

Colin: I expect he is going to watch the part-timers drilling at the barracks.

Polly: Billy is really eager to join up - especially now that he's seen some of his pals enlisting. I heard that one of them had a big row with his girlfriend. She called him a coward and then the so-and-so presented him with a white feather.

Colin: No pressure then!

Gladys: On the way home today I noticed another set of curtains being closed.

Colin: There'll soon be more.

Gladys: I don't want to have to draw our curtains on account of losing our Billy.

Howard: It may be more than our Billy we'll have to worry about.

Gladys: What do you mean?

Colin: What he means is compulsory service is now for everyone; not just for unmarried men under 40.

Polly: I half expected that.

Gladys: But you'll be safe Howard dear. Won't you?

Howard: **(Howard gets up)** For the time being. They couldn't limit it to unmarried men – that's unfair. Blokes were turning up at our tribunals having hastily got married**.** Come on, we had better get ready or we'll be late for the theatre**.**

(Howard and Polly don overcoats and hats)

Colin: At the rate of casualties they'll soon run out of bodies. They'll need more men, many more.

Polly: But you're alright Colin. You're in a reserved occupation.

Colin: And what's that supposed to mean!

Polly: Don't take it the wrong way, it means what I say.

Colin: Alright, but I'd find it difficult to stay here if our Billy was at the Front. Somebody needs to keep an eye on him.

Gladys: I could lose my whole family at this rate!

Howard: Come on we had better get going, we need to be there early. I hope you're in good voice.

Polly: This should be fun. Will we have to wear make-up?

Howard: I doubt it. I intend to get the audience singing.

Colin: Is that before or after you sign the autographs?

Polly: Oh, very funny – sarky beggar!

(Howard and Polly exit)

Howard: Bye, dear.

(Black out & tabs close)

Scene 3 - Musical hall

(Front of Curtain in Music Hall. SFX Music Hall Ambience. Conclusion of the show. Howard, acting as MC, is accompanied by a recruiting sergeant and V.A.D - Polly Richardson – in uniform) Recruiting Sergeant is an old soldier – seen active service in the Boer War. Auditorium lights on. Action can take place with the aid of a microphone)

Howard: **(addressing the audience)** Good evening ladies and gentlemen. We hope you enjoyed the last sketch 'The Hem of the Flag', a great patriotic show. It is my honour to deputise for our mayor who is, alas, indisposed. I have an announcement to make on his behalf, but before that let's get in the mood and welcome our military comrades, our sergeant and our nurse – my daughter. **(nods to the sergeant & nurse)**. Ladies and Gentlemen, to paraphrase our Prime Minister 'We are here this evening to call on everyone for further effort, for further sacrifice, because it is now absolutely necessary. We must have enough men to defend the lines which we have held against a fierce enemy.

(Projection of Lord Kitchener onto curtain behind or alongside speaker)

Howard: To emphasise this need I have a letter addressed to the Lord Lieutenant of the county from the Secretary of War, which I have been asked to read out:

'It is a very serious conflict in which we are now engaged on the continent. It has been none of our seeking, and will undoubtedly strain the resources of the Empire and entail considerable sacrifices on its people. These will be willingly borne for the honour and preservation of our position in the world, and will be shared by our Dominions. Our Expeditionary Force proved itself wholly efficient, thoroughly well equipped, and immediately ready to take the field. They maintained the traditions of British soldiers, and have behaved with the utmost gallantry. While at home the munitions workers, the miners and the railway companies have more than justified the complete confidence reposed in them by the War Office. And let us not forget the gallant and essential work done by our nurses and voluntary aid detachment members. I therefore invite your co-operation in the work of raising the additional number for a second Army, the Territorials. I am your obedient servant, Field Marshal, Lord Kitchener. Commander-in- Chief of the British Army'.

Sergeant: Volunteers over here. **(beckons would-be volunteers to form a line at the side of the stage.)** Names please.

Howard: Ladies and Gentlemen our future depends on you and to all those who have volunteered this evening. Have you completed your enlistments Sergeant?

Sergeant: I think we have room for one or two more additions to the Army. Ah! Here comes another one Sir.

(Billy approaches the Stage downstairs from the auditorium. Howard and Poll realise, in horror, it is Billy and are visibly shocked).

Sergeant: Name?

Billy: Billy Richardson.

Polly: Billy!

Sergeant: **(noticing the reactions)** Is he some relation, Sir?

Howard: He's my son. But he's …

Sergeant: A big lad! How old are you son?

Polly: He's not old enough.

Howard: He's still only seventeen.

Sergeant: How old did you say son?

Billy: Eighteen.

Howard: Billy! … Not yet, Sergeant. He's too young to fight.

Sergeant: When will you be eighteen, lad? Not long eh! Eighteen is old enough to train.

Billy: **(eagerly)** Soon Sergeant - Very soon.

Howard: Not for another six months.

Sergeant: **(to Billy)** You'll spend the first nine months in training. **(to Howard)** He won't go to the Front until he is officially nineteen.

Howard: Sergeant …

Sergeant: **(aside to the MC).** You've just persuaded all these other people to send their sons to fight for their country.

Howard: Yes, but…

Sergeant: You can't take him home now, can yer! And he wants to come … don't he? Sir. **(to Billy)** Are you ready and willing lad, to sign on and take the King's shilling?

Billy: I am.

Howard: Please … no, no … not yet …

Sergeant: He wants to serve his country, Sir. What difference will six months make?

Polly: Billy, no! Not yet.

Sergeant: Think about it son. I'm just going to check the names of these other brave lads and lasses.

(Howard, Billy and Polly talk aside from the Sergeant)

Billy: I want to go Dad!

Howard: For God's sake not now, not right now, not here.

Billy: It's my life Dad. Don't try and stop me. When you run the military tribunals, you don't try and stop them. Do you!

Howard: They are trying to get out of joining the Army.

Billy: I'm joining the Army Dad … I want to do my duty.

Polly: What about Mum? She's not ready for you going yet.

Billy: I don't expect she'll ever be ready. She's wasn't really ready for you going, either! I can't walk away now.

Sergeant: Well, are you joining or not?

Billy: Yes I am.

Sergeant: Right. You're in the Army now. Well done lad. Fall-in over there.

Polly: Oh, Billy.

Howard: Oh my God!

(House lights fade down. Billy moves stage left and exits with the Sergeant. Howard and Polly look on and reluctantly exit stage left. Polly waves Goodbye. SFX. Sound of Sergeant shouting orders and of soldiers marching. Black out.)

Scene 4 - At home

(several months later in 1916. Gladys' demeanour towards Howard has altered.)

Howard: **(pacing up an around)** How long has she been on this course? When will our Polly get home?

Gladys: Not until the morning, she's working nights at the moment.

Howard: How do you think she's doing?

Gladys: Very well by all accounts. I reckon she'll end up a nurse eventually. Do you think she'll get posted elsewhere?

Howard: I expect so – there'll send her where she's most needed.

Gladys: They can't send her abroad; not without her permission – can they?

(Howard doesn't answer)

Gladys: What about our Colin?

Howard: Yes, what about him? You never seem to worry about him.

Gladys: He's old and tough enough to look after himself, besides he's not in the army.

Howard: He does a dangerous job and I do worry about him, he's still our son.

(Gladys crosses to the front door and peers out)

Howard: Where are you going? … You're checking those curtains again – aren't you!

Gladys: Another family grieving.

Howard: There's nothing we can do about that.

Gladys: **(agitated)** When will it be our turn? When will they kill our Billy? When will we be drawing the curtains?

Howard: It won't help if you keep checking on everybody's window.

Gladys: He could have stayed home for another six months, if it wasn't for you. Why didn't you stop him?

Howard: **(becoming more annoyed)** I keep telling you. I couldn't! He wanted to go and serve his country, he was determined to go. Nothing I said would stop him.

Gladys: I don't believe you.

Howard: We were in a music hall with a thousand people looking on. He would never have turned back … he couldn't.

Gladys: **(starting to cry)** You should have stopped him.

Howard: I had just tried to persuade everyone else to volunteer themselves or their sons. A number responded. How the hell could I tell my son to stay at home!
The Recruiting Sergeant knew that, I knew that, even Polly knew.
Everyone knew it.

Gladys: But he was under age.

Howard: I know that, I know … but he's a big lad and people naturally assumed that he's was old enough … besides he was only six months from being conscripted. He's still alive. It's no good crying. What's done is done.

(Howard attempts to comfort her)

Gladys: **(angry and reproachful)** Don't touch me. The only person I want to hold is my son, Billy.

Howard: He's my son, too! I know it seems unfair, but I'm proud of him. At least he didn't get presented with a white feather – he's no coward. Not like some of the people I have to deal with.

Gladys: I miss him so.

Howard: He's still in this country.

Gladys: But he's not here, is he? Thanks to you!

Howard: He'll be home on leave soon … Oh, for God's sake, give it a rest. I keep telling you there's nothing we can do about it.

Gladys: **(Gladys goes to front door)** I thought I heard a knock on the door.

Howard: There was no knock.

Gladys: I can't bear it.

Howard: Neither can I and it doesn't help listening to you going on about it every day.

Gladys: It's easy for you isn't it? You've got your work to go to. You've got something to take your mind off it. You're not his mother.

Howard: What's that supposed to mean?

Gladys: I gave birth to him – he's my son.

Howard. **(snapping)** He's also my son. Don't you think there are others in the same position? The Tribunal receives letters from parents with sons even younger, begging me to write to the authorities; all trying to get their under-age boys out of the military.

Gladys: Then why don't you? Starting with our Billy.

Howard: **(temper rising)** Billy is now old enough. And he's a volunteer. I've told you. There's nothing I can do.

(A period of awkward silence)

Howard: I know it's not easy for you sitting here alone – knitting socks for soldiers. Why don't you get more involved – work in a munitions factory, become a bus conductor or something?

Gladys: If I did you'd only complain I wasn't here to mind the house or cook for you.

(Enter Colin, hangs up cap and coat)

Colin: Hello. Has there been bad news?

Howard: No

Colin: So what's Mum complaining about now?

Howard: What do you think?

Colin: Mum haven't you heard the saying, 'No news is good news'!

Gladys: It's alright for you. **(pause)** You're in a protected occupation.

Howard: That's not fair Gladys. He's doing his bit.

Colin: If I was an office worker you'd be complaining I wasn't in the Army with our Billy.

Gladys: Hah! **(storms out)**

Colin: How do you a cope with this Dad? She's getting worse and worse. It's not your fault. He'd have been conscripted into the Army by now. If things get worse they might even call you up, Dad. I really don't know how you put up with it. Mum can't blame you for ever.

Howard: I have to hope your sister is here to pacify her, or I work late.

Colin: Or go down the pub. You've been doing that more often.

Howard: I know. That starts off another row. If Billy gets killed I don't know what I'll do … I can't win.

Colin: I don't know how to tell you this Dad ... I've been thinking about enlisting.

Howard: As long as you're just thinking about it!

Colin: It's our Billy. I can't get him out of my mind. I feel … feel, sort of inadequate. I'd hate to lose him. I'm his elder brother. He should be following me. I shouldn't be at home hearing about the dangers he's facing. I can't stay here reading the list of the lost and dead to see if my brother is still alive. I'm beginning to feel guilty … I want to be with him. Don't you see that Dad? And Polly, knowing her, she's likely to volunteer to go to France.

Howard: I thought you were against this war?

Colin: I was … still am … but, it's gone too far now.

Howard: I know what you mean - especially when the ones you care for are directly involved.

Colin: Besides, Mum doesn't seem to be too worried about me.

Howard: That's not true, son. It's just that you always appear to be in-charge of yourself. Against our wishes you went down the pit, you're not afraid to voice your opinions: you appear confident. She thinks you can handle things. You might not realise it, but she looks up to you.

Colin: Come off it, Dad! You are the one in charge.

Howard: Not any more, it seems.

Colin: I miss him. Don't you see that?

Howard: Of course I see it. I understand. Don't you think I feel the same? I'm the one who should feel guilty … at least as far as your mother is concerned. What will she say if you go? She'll blame me for that as well! She needs you.

Gladys: **(re-enter Gladys)** You both looking a bit glum, what's up? … Don't tell me, I can guess. You're thinking of going, aren't you!

Colin: No … well … maybe. How do you know?

Gladys: I can tell. I can read you like a book. I'm your mother, I know you. You may not realise it but you wear your heart on your sleeve, you can't hide things from me. You've been mooching about for days, talking more and more about our Billy. I know you're chalk and cheese, but you're still brothers … Don't go; please ... I need you here.

Colin: But you will still have Dad and Polly at home.

Gladys: Yes, I'm glad Polly's still here – at least for the time being.

Howard: I'd especially miss our little chats if you choose to go. When this war is over you and I must have a talk about your future; never understood why you went down the mine. Don't get me wrong, I've nothing against the miners, and I know you're strong. Isn't life dangerous enough down the pit? It's healthier above ground – you live longer for one.

Gladys: Polly is likely to be going away. That will be two of my children gone. I couldn't bear it if you went as well.

Colin: I'm still here Mum. Come on Dad let's escape to the pub. I'll buy you a pint and we'll have a good chat.

(Colin goes out of the door)

Gladys: Do you have to go to the pub as well?

Howard: I can't persuade him to stay by being here, can I?

Gladys: Go if you must, any excuse!

(Black out)

Scene 5 – At home

(Later that evening. 1916. Polly enters, Colin is by the fireplace)

Polly: **(to Colin)** Hello, you're looking a bit pensive, what's up?

Colin: I still can't get over our Billy.

Polly: You need to make your mind up. He's finished his training. He'll soon be off to the Front.

Colin: I know. I'm due my annual holiday. I'll go away for a bit and think about it.

Polly: It shouldn't be a difficult decision. You're either for the war or against it.

Colin: It's alright for you isn't it? You go to war to save people, not to kill them.

Polly: It's the thought of him going away to war and you still here. Isn't it?

Colin: He looked up to me. I led the way and he followed. I feel so inadequate Pol. My head says one thing and me heart says another. I want to protect my brother. I know, it sounds stupid. I can't possibly defend him, but ….

(Polly hugs him)

Polly: Yes, I know. You're not the only one.

Colin: Not you as well. Dad feels the same. You're not going away?

Polly: No. I'm thinking of Mum and Dad. Although all they seem to do is argue these days.

Colin: But you're here to keep an eye on them.

Polly: I won't be here for ever, I can be asked to volunteer to be sent abroad. Tell you the truth I can't wait to be told. Don't ask me why. I listen to the wounded Tommies and I treat their wounds, but I feel that's not enough: I just want to see what it's really like at the Front.

Colin: Hearing you talk I feel even more guilty being here. I got really pissed off the other day when this young girl handed me a white feather.

Polly: There's no need for that. You are doing an essential job. I hope you gave her a piece of your mind. Have another chat with Dad. What do the other lads in the pit say about volunteering?

Colin: I think many of them feel like me. The young ones are like Billy, they can't wait to volunteer.

Polly: Don't make a decision now. Let me know what you've decided when you get back from your holiday. Well, I've got to dash now – night shift. Good night.

Colin: Night Polly. Take care.

(Black out)

Scene 6 – At home

(The next day. Howard enters and hangs up coat and hat. Gladys & Polly are seated in the dining room).

Gladys: **(to Howard)** Back already! What did the old fogies have to say at the meeting? Did you send any more underage boys to the Front?

Howard: No, I didn't!

Polly: Leave it out Mum, that's really unfair.

Gladys: My Billy's been away for ages, it must be nearly a year.

Howard: You mean our Billy.

Gladys: You know it was his birthday last week. It's about time he got some more leave.

(SFX. sound of letter box clanking)

Howard: Was that the letter box? **(goes to the letterbox to collect the post)** We've got a letter. **(reads it)** Your wish has come true. Our Billy's coming home.

Gladys: Our Billy coming home on leave. When, when? Here give it to me.

(Gladys tries to grab the letter from Howard but Polly intercepts it)

Gladys: I missed his birthday. We'll have to celebrate his birthday. Have a party.

Polly: I don't think you'll have time for that. You know the post is unreliable. He's arriving later. Come on I'll give you a hand.

Gladys: Today? What time is he arriving? Did he say?

Polly: The trains are about as unreliable as the post – who knows? I think we best get started, Mum.

Gladys: Colin should be back from his holiday today as well. I hope he's in time for the party.

(Polly & Gladys exit to kitchen. Pause. Knock on the door. Howard answers the door. Enter Colin in uniform)

Colin: Hello, Dad.

Howard: What on earth? I should have guessed. Why didn't you tell us?

Colin: Why do you think!

Gladys: **(Off stage)** Did I hear a knock? … Is that our Billy? **(she enters the dining room. She is surprised to see Colin and not Billy, at first she doesn't register that Colin is in uniform)** Colin … Oh! I thought it might be Billy. **(embrace)** What have you done? … I mean I'm glad you are … **(hugs Billy)** … I thought you were on holiday.

Polly: **(Polly hugs Billy)** I knew you would.

Gladys: **(to Howard – with short shrift)** You should have stopped him Howard.

Howard: Where have I heard that before?

Gladys: **(to Colin)** What made you do it?

Howard: He's on his way to join Billy.

Gladys: **(ignoring Howard)** Why, oh why?

Colin: Because he's my brother!

Gladys: That's three of you in uniform. Did you know about this Howard?

Howard: No, of course not ...

Gladys: I can't say I'm surprised.

Howard: They didn't waste much time getting you into uniform.

Colin: No. They're a bit short of men. I've only got a 36 hour pass - I'll be gone tomorrow morning.

Polly: Our Billy's home today. You're in time for Billy's late birthday party. That'll be the first time the family has been together in nearly a year. At least we can celebrate that.

Colin: How are you Dad? Are you coping under the pressure?

Gladys: What do you mean, under the pressure? What does he know! He's got it easy; he's at home. You two boys are the ones under pressure.

Colin: We do what we're told, we don't have to think. You don't have to be looking down a barrel to be under pressure.

Gladys: **(agitated)** Stuff off nonsense! I don't know what you are talking about … but then I never did … always the contrary one. **(Howard gets up to move)** Where are you going?

Howard: I'm going to get our camera. I think this occasion ought to be recorded.

Colin: Yes, well it might be our last **(Colin goes to the kitchen).**

Howard: Don't talk like that son. We know.

(Howard goes upstarts. There is a knock on the door. Billy enters, hangs up his greatcoat. Excitedly, Gladys embraces everyone. Howard re-enters the room with the camera).

Gladys: He's here! My other - no, my younger soldier is here.

(Howard reaches out to shake hands with Billy. Billy is dragged hurriedly away by Gladys).

Howard: How are ….

Gladys: Colin, come here. I want to hug my boys. It's been nearly a year. Where's that camera?

Howard: **(re-enters with camera)** It's here.

Gladys: Come on, come on gather round. I want a picture of all my beauties in uniform.

(Howard arranges the family - picture taken)

Howard: Keep still … smile.

Colin: What about one with Dad!

Gladys: **(dismissively)** Leave that for now. We can do that later. You two come and sit next to me. Let's have a bit of fun while we can. Oh, I love my boys! Come on Polly let's get some food on the table. Howard, get the tea - Have we got any beer? You two boys relax**.**

(The two boys talk, aside from the others ladies who go to the kitchen to get the food)

Billy: What did Mum and Dad say?

Colin: They didn't know. Dad was more surprised than Mum. I think Mum might have guessed. Polly wasn't surprised.

Billy: Bloody hell. Those women don't miss a trick.

Colin: I didn't see you in the pub.

Billy: Had to leave, went for a short walk. Couldn't stand it – everyone's a ruddy expert on the war.

Colin: It's a different world, isn't it? They really don't understand, do they?

Billy: You can say that again. You know what drives me up the wall?

Colin: What?

Billy: It's the stupid questions … What's it like, they say? What's the weather like? How's the 'effing weather!! How many Boche have you killed … as if I know! I do know how many of ours have been killed … but they don't want to know about that! You can't explain it. They've no idea. They talk about it as if it's a game! Jesus, you know what I hate about France the most – apart from the killing? It's the stink of latrines, sweating bodies, cordite and mud, and the bleedin' rain;' up to your knees in water'. You've heard the song, We are permanently bloody wet and cold. Worst of all the shelling: you can't escape in a trench … try and explain that to them.

Colin: So, how do you stop them asking questions?

Billy: Easy! Talk about the lice and the rats. Especially the rats. Tell them how many millions there are and how they crawl over you, and look at you with their black diseased eyes. That shuts them up.

Colin: I bet it does.

Billy: You've got all that to come brother.

Colin: Oh. Thanks, for that!

Billy: So how are you coping?

Colin: Oh, alright. I've had to learn to button my lip, especially when some arse of an NCO starts shouting and gives you a bollocking over nothing.

Billy: I hope we have the chance to meet up again, once you get to the Front.

Colin: Well just in case we don't, we'll escape to the pub later, go to the dance, have fun, and find you a girl? Yeah!

Billy: Well, yeah **…** I'd like that.

Colin: What's the matter?

Billy: I got no money and I got no girl.

Colin: You're not still a virg…?

Billy: Yes. I didn't fancy any of the women over there. They're the port of last resort.

Colin: They could also be the last port of call – literally!

Billy: Yeah, I know.

Colin: **(gives him money)** Here, take this … Got anybody in mind? Don't tell me … try not to die a virgin. Come on, all that talk of rats; I feel hungry all of a sudden. **(they laugh)**

Billy: Thanks.

Gladys: **(Enters from the kitchen)** Come on Billy … Don't be so serious … sit down … You're looking a bit tired dear. You've lost weight … Don't they feed you in the Army. Come on and sit close to me like you used to do.

Billy: I'm alright. Please, Mum, don't fuss.

Howard: **(re-enters the room)** Stop fussing, Gladys. He's not a boy anymore.

Gladys: No thanks to you!

Billy: We'll have to get going soon, Mum. Time is running out.

Gladys: I've parcelled up some cake in the kitchen. Fetch it Polly will you.

Colin: I thought this was supposed to be a happy occasion! Where's the beer?

(Howard goes to kitchen, returns with two bottles of beer)

Howard: Here, put these in your kip bags.

(Boys embrace their kin and leave)

Colin: Thanks, Dad

(Screen/sound – men marching off to war)

(Interval)

Act 2
Scene 1 – At home

(A Week later. It is now 1917.)

Polly: House feels empty since the boys have gone, but so good to see them again.

Howard: **(with photograph)** It certainly was … and still in one piece, 'Thank God'. How long have they been gone? It must be a month at least. ..
Let's hang the photo here. How does that look?

Polly: There's somebody missing. You should have been in it Dad.

Howard: Yes, well, that's life.

Polly: Mum was so excited she forgot about you.

Howard: Did she?

Polly: You don't think she did it on purpose?

Howard: Your mother is very excitable. Not to say a little possessive.

(Polly takes photo and places it)

Polly: Was she always like that?

Howard: I suppose she was. It might seem funny now, but that was what attracted me to her. She was fun, exciting. I was the centre of her attention, and I liked it.
It didn't seem possessive at the time.

Polly: Did she change when Colin arrived?

Howard: Colin's arrival was somewhat unexpected; it was a difficult birth. She loved him but didn't seem to enjoy him. It was as if he took the attention away from her. We had you of course. One of each … it's what she wanted: Happy times.

Polly: Then Billy arrived. He's her favourite.

Howard: Yes. Billy was always a loving child, wanted affection all of the time. So Gladys was the centre of his attention. They sort of fed off each other – emotionally – if you see what I mean?

Polly: They still do. But the more she loves him the more she takes it out on you.
Why?

Howard: Because we are more involved with what's going on; you with the nursing and me with the Tribunals, and the boys with the Army. But she's stuck here. Perhaps she feels of less use, so she needs to blame someone for her boys going away. And I'm her whipping post. I can't blame her. It's her way of coping.

Polly: I suppose you're right, but it's not fair ….

Howard: But the boys love you. I mean your patients.

Polly: A few do. But it's the nurses they really fall in love with. It's the nurses that deal with the wounded soldiers. We do most of the menial tasks.

Howard: Don't they talk to you?

Polly: Oh yes, when we bring the tea and food round. **(She goes to the kitchen**. **From off-stage)** Tea Dad? And don't you say 'Polly put the kettle on!

(They both laugh)

Howard: No thanks. I'll have a beer. **(Polly fetches one from the kitchen)** You're still important to them … must have some interesting chats?

Polly: When we're allowed to. There's a 'them and us' culture. Some of the Voluntary Aid Girls are very posh - upper-class even, but they're still regarded as skivvies by the nurses – the same as the rest of us. One day … this will make you laugh … it would certainly amuse Colin … Adelaide … she's a V.A.D … is the Honourable Lady So-an-So; she's a higher social class than the nurses – and the doctors.

Howard: And?

Polly: Sister told her to take a pile of sheets upstairs. So she picked them up and started walking up the main staircase. Sister stopped her and said loudly 'V.A.Ds use the servants stairs at the back'. We laughed; fortunately, Adelaide has a sense of humour. Some of the trained nurses can be real snobs.

Howard: Colin would love that. You know what he thinks of the upper classes. I can't imagine him standing to attention and saluting these young ex-public school officers.

Polly: He won't have a choice.

Howard: I've got used to meeting a variety of people as a Councillor. It must be quite an eye-opener for you, meeting all these different sorts of people. Very interesting but hard work, I should think?

Polly: Yes it is. The busiest time is when the ambulances arrive from the station with another group of Tommies. It was bedlam last night. Nurses and doctors rushing about, wheeling in more beds, stacks of blankets and sheets, disinfectant, iodine and piles and piles of dressings and bandages, and of course, bed pans. My ward doubled in number last night, up to twenty now.

Howard: I'm sure the boys are grateful.

Polly: Most are. The ones I feel really sorry for are the shellshock cases. Many of them don't know where they are, or in some cases, who they are. Anything can set them off, a clap of thunder even a door banging. There's nothing you can do but try and stop them hurting themselves or anyone else. They have to be separated and put in another ward.

Howard: It must be terrifying.

Polly: It is for them.

Howard: I'd hate to see one of our boys in that state. I don't think your mother could cope with that.

Polly: Let's hope she doesn't have to. Most seem to recover once they've got their speech back. It just takes a long time.

Howard: You've changed Polly dear. More serious, we're very proud of you.

Polly: I think we have all changed, Dad. Billy's certainly grown up and Colin, well, Colin is still the argumentative one.

Howard: I can relate to that. He doesn't take anything on face value. I sometimes wonder how he is coping in the army where blind obedience is the norm.

Polly: He probably gets some perverse pleasure in arguing with his Sergeant. It's a bit ironic really, seeing as a union official he was the equivalent of an NCO when he was down the pit.

Howard: Yes, I suppose he was.

Polly: The soldiers have changed too. At the beginning of the war they were all gung-ho. 'Up and at 'em' … shouting, 'Kill the Boche! Not now … too many dead and injured. When do you think this will end?

Howard: God knows... I just hope they come back in one piece. The reports in these papers don't seem to match up with this casualty list.

Polly: Tell me about it! They had to build extra huts in the grounds to accommodate the overflow.

Howard: The Tommies must be relieved and grateful to see you.

Polly: Some of them just want to chat to a female. It's easy to get them to talk, just ask them about their family. Do those attending the tribunals talk easily?

Howard: Oh yes! When they are giving their excuses for not joining the Army: they're very garrulous. Some of them provide the most outrageous reasons. Last week we interviewed an acrobat. He thought he got away with it by travelling around the country doing shows in different music halls but he was traced: we caught him.

Polly: What was his excuse?

Howard: He said the army training would stiffen his muscles and render him unable to work. The chairman assured him that he would have ample opportunity to keep agile and fit in the Army.

Polly: Do you have any awkward cases?

Howard: An actor caused a minor bit of embarrassment. It turned out he was Irish. Not eligible for enlistment into the British Army. The chairman waved him away saying he could continue his acting tomfoolery, adding that he was no better than a vagabond.

Polly: Do you have any claiming to be too old or too young?

Howard: Yes, some. Polly … I've been meaning to tell you something **(pause)**. You know they've put the recruiting age up.

Polly: No Dad, you're not … you're too old!

Howard: Only just. Besides they don't enquire too closely ….. In truth, I can't take much more of this at home. I'm blamed for everything. Your mother talks constantly about her boys, she forgets they're also my boys. Sometimes I feel the only way I can connect with them and gain some respect is to go and join them.

Polly: **(Embracing him)** Oh! Dad …no, no!

Howard: I feel so inadequate. I let our Billy go before his time … and now Colin has volunteered. The Tribunal makes sure practically everyone goes to war.

Polly: There's no need to feel guilty, Dad.

Howard: Maybe not … but I do.

Polly: What's Colin doing?

Howard: He said something about being a tunneller.

Polly: That explains why his training was so short. So, now he digs tunnels under no-man's land.

Howard: He was already partially trained by digging tunnels in the pit … I'm beginning to think it's my turn.

Polly: Dad you are already doing your duty. There's no need to blame yourself …

Howard: I can't help it … The more she goes on the guiltier I feel. Our Colin is due home on leave sometime. I'll have a chat with him then**.**

(they embrace again)

Polly: She's just worried about the boys. I think I understand, but you won't help by going … God knows what Mum would say! She won't let you go.

Howard: How long are you going to be away this time?

Polly: I'll be back in a week's time, at the end of the course. You won't go making any rash decisions while I'm away … will you?

Howard: No, dear I won't. I'll be here when you get back. Look after yourself.

Polly: Take care Dad. I'll see you in about a weeks' time. Bye

(She kisses him on the cheek and exits. **Black out)**

Scene 2 - At home

(A week later. Polly enters. She hangs up her coat)

Gladys: **(Enters from kitchen with basket of washing)** Hello dear. Good to see you're back. How did your latest training go?

Polly: It went well. I'm now allowed to clean flesh wounds and change dressings. I must say you look tired Mum.

Gladys: Oh, do I? Well, I've got two jobs now; one home and one away.

(Gladys deposits pile of washing on the table, begins to fold items).

Polly: How come?

Gladys: Your Dad and me had a right set-to.

Polly: Oh, what about this time?

Gladys: The usual, the boys. He says I'm being selfish and blaming him for them going in the army. It was him at the theatre not me … you know that, you were there.

Polly: Yes, and, believe me, he had no choice.

Gladys: Then he said I should go out and do something to occupy myself.

Polly: And did you, did you take his advice?

Gladys: Yes. Not because he said so. It's like living in quarantine being here on my own.

Polly: So, where did you end up? On the trains, the buses, or on the land?

Gladys: None of those.

Polly: Oh, where then? Do tell.

Gladys: I've been working at the Territorial Army barracks.

Polly: Blimey, you haven't joined the Army? Can't imagine you carrying a rifle!

Gladys: Don't be silly, I got a job in the kitchen. I'm a part-time cook.

Polly: So what made you decide?

Gladys: I can't drive and I don't fancy working in a noisy factory but I can cook. And I heard they need a part-time hand in the kitchens.

Polly: So that explains the extra bit of nosh. You crafty old thing!

Gladys: And before you go accusing me of pilfering, I only bring home the left overs at the end of the day, like spuds and a few greens.

Polly: And some fruit and bread.

Gladys: Yes alright … alright. Thing is, when one lot move out there's a gap between the next course starting. Rations still arrive and rather than throw stuff away the Sergeant allows us to help ourselves. Anyway, the Army won't miss a couple of loaves of bread.

Polly: I wondered why we had some extra bread pudding in the larder.

Gladys: Don't tell other people that we sometimes get extras. It'll upset them.

Polly: Do you get to talk to the Tommies?

Gladys: Yes, one poor young lad couldn't stand his dad who used to beat him – out of the frying pan into the fire!

Polly: How is our Billy? He must be an old soldier now. Have you heard from him lately?

Gladys: We got a letter from him yesterday.

Polly: What's the matter? You don't sound very happy about it.

Gladys: He's been wounded. Didn't say how bad it is or how long he'll be in hospital. Just hope to God he hasn't lost a leg, an arm or been gassed. Can you find out dear? I can't stand not knowing – I'm worried to death.

Polly: Why didn't you tell me when I came in?

Gladys: I reckon you've got enough on your plate.

Polly: Here, let me see the letter.

Gladys: Can you do your best to find out how he is? It might be serious.

(She hands the letter to Polly)

Polly: I expect they would have told you if it was. Still, he's alive – got to be grateful for that. Cheer Up!

Gladys: Have you heard from Colin?

Polly: No.

Gladys: I was talking to some of the older veterans in the cook house. I told them he was a tunneller. They sucked in their breath and shook their heads; seems tunnelling is the most dangerous job in the army. You'd think fighting underground would be safer. Turns out they not only get blown up in the tunnels, they can also get shot at. They can't escape underground. I'm scared my boys could be cripples or worse, I could lose both of them**.**

(Gladys wipes away tears)

Polly: Don't cry, Mum … be thankful they're both still here.

Gladys: Yes, but for how long?

Polly: Where's Dad?

Gladys: **(Dismissively)** Don't know.

Polly: You sound more invigorated when you talk about your job, but when Dad's mentioned you appear depressed. I hate to say this but it sounds as if you are more alive when you're at the barracks.

Gladys: I don't like to admit it but in a way getting out of the house helps. It's been lonely here without you and the boys. Now I'm meeting more people, sometimes having a bit of a laugh. I'm in another world. It's refreshing: I have a role to play.

Polly: Goodness, you have changed, but I know what you mean.

Gladys: Yes, but shouldn't we feel a little guilty.

Polly: No. When this war is over you may well lose all this freedom.

Gladys: Yes, but we will have all the family back.

Polly: I hope you are right!

(The women continue folding the laundry. Gladys returns to the kitchen. There is a knock on the door. Polly goes to the door. Billy enters with a wooden crutch.)

Polly: Billy! Well, well. Why didn't you tell us you were coming? Come in. Come in. What have you done? **(Calling off to the kitchen)** Mum, he's here.

Gladys: **(enters excitedly)** My little hero. Come here, I've got to hug you. Now sit down Billy. How bad is it, dear? You should have written earlier.

Billy: I wrote nearly two weeks ago. Didn't you get my letter? It's not that bad. I caught a bit of shrapnel. Just need some time to let the wound heal.

Gladys: Your letter didn't arrive until yesterday. Shouldn't you still be in hospital?

Billy: I told the doctor that we have a nurse at home, and we live near a hospital. They said as long as I have the dressing changed when needed I can have a couple of days leave. How's our Colin? And how's Dad?

Gladys: Colin seems to be OK.

Billy: But how's Dad?

Gladys: **(Dismissively)** He's OK …. Come on, let's get you properly fed. How do you feel? You can tell me all about your wound: my brave little soldier.

(Gladys exits to the kitchen)

Billy: Hope you didn't mind me telling the Doc about you?

Polly: No, of course not. I expect they were glad to get rid of you!

Gladys: **(Returning from the kitchen)** Are you hungry dear?

Billy: No. I had something to eat before I left.

Gladys: Oh, look at the time! I'm on dinner duty – I'll get away early, the Sergeant will understand, he's a nice bloke – tell me all your news when I get back. I won't be long

(She kisses him and hurries out. Billy looks puzzled).

Billy: What is she on about?

Polly: She's working as a cook part-time at the barracks. Now tell me all about the wound.

Billy: I wish she wouldn't call me her hero. I'm no braver than anyone else. One or two are even younger than me.

Polly: **(Sits close to her brother)** Yes, yes, but what about you?

Billy: Don't say anything but I'm not sorry I got this; bit of shrapnel; I was hoping it would be a real Blighty one and I wouldn't have to go back**.**

Polly: How bad is it?

Billy: I can't stand much more of it.

Polly: **(she puts consoling arm around Billy)** They nearly all say that. You can tell me – I've heard plenty of heart-breaking news. Cry if it helps. I understand … Do you mean that ?…That you're not going back?

Billy: I really can't take any more. It's bloody scary out there … I … er … I was thinking of not returning.

Polly: **(taken aback, withdrawing her arm)** You can't just walk away! What are you going to tell Mum and Dad?

Billy: I wasn't going to tell anybody.

Polly: If you get caught … you know what they do to deserters, don't you.

Billy: But …

Polly: **(angrily)** No buts, Billy. Don't expect me to help you. I couldn't! Colin went into the Army because of you. And Mum, she'd be devastated, and what about Dad?

Billy: He's not here.

Polly: He's talking about going. It was you that caused Colin to go.

Billy: I know, I know. But, Dad? He can't go?

Polly: Dad would be horrified if he knew. He'd feel he would have to leave, and take your place.

Billy: It's alright for them at home. They don't know what it's like. They don't know what it feels like to have a pal die in your arms.

Polly: For Goodness sake! Why are you telling me this? You do know I'm a nurse. Don't you think I see people die!

Billy: Not the way I see some of them die.

(Polly stares at Billy with look of horror)

Billy: Sorry I didn't mean ….

Polly: I know Billy.

Billy: Dad doesn't have to go, you know. He's too old. Colin is the brave one; I'd have been conscripted sooner or later.

Polly: Everyone knows there's a chance of not coming home, but better to die doing your duty than being shot as a coward.

Billy: I feel so guilty when I think of Colin.

Polly: Don't you think he felt guilty knowing you were over there? He couldn't sit here at home throughout the war.

Billy: At least you're safe.

Polly: I couldn't face the other patients and they couldn't face me if we knew you are a deserter. If it's any consolation, I'll be out there soon. I'm going to the hospital at Le Trèport. Perhaps we'll meet out there.

Billy: God I hope not! That'll mean I'll have another injury.

Polly: I didn't mean that. Maybe you won't have to return to the Front.
According to the papers the Germans have sent a letter to President Wilson proposing an armistice.

Billy: Why did they hand it to the Yanks? Why not to us or the French?

Polly: I suppose we've been at war with them for so long they didn't expect we'd listen.

Billy: Yeah, you are probably right. Have they had a reply?

Polly: Not as far as I know. As I see it, you've got three choices. You overstay your leave and go to prison; or don't go back and get shot for desertion. Or face up to your responsibilities, return and take your chance along with everyone else: don't expect me to help you with the first two… Not much of a choice is it?

(She embraces her brother)

Polly: You're not fighting all the time

Billy: When we're not it's either a digging party, wiring party or picking up dead bodies and attending a bloody burial party.

Polly: Now come on. Try and be happy for Mum's sake. I've got to go now, I'm on duty. Mum will be back soon, when she's finished her shift. Why don't you have a kip? We'll talk again later. **(she goes to exit)**. Au revoir … Please don't make it Goodbye.

(Lights fade gradually. Background sound of soldiers marching back to barracks. Billy looks distraught. Sits in the arm chair, head in hand – eventually he falls asleep. Black out)

Scene 3 – At home

(Later that morning. Lights Up. Gladys enters, turns off gramophone. Billy goes towards the kitchen)

Gladys: Hello dear, I'm back. Where's my hero going? What are you going to do in the kitchen? … Sit down. You're on leave – albeit only for a long weekend. Now what do you want? Bacon and eggs and toast and a pot of tea. I've got some marmalade left; hard to get these days.

Billy: I can manage the kitchen. I can walk you know. It's only a wooden crutch. I've not lost a leg.

Gladys: I know. I know darling. I just want to help my courageous boy. Are you alright dear? You look a bit red-eyed.

Billy: Yes, I'm perfectly alright.

Gladys: Are you sure, is my hero hurting?

Billy: **(agitated)** Will you stop calling me 'my hero, courageous boy and my little soldier'… I can't stand it!

Gladys: **(taken aback)** I … er … I understand you're upset – and that you've lost a pal or two.

Billy: **(angrily)** A pal or two! On the last push we lost a third of the battalion. That's over a hundred men. I've witnessed men being blown to bits; arms, legs and bits of flesh flying through the air. I'm not a bloody hero … I'm just a survivor.

Gladys: **(taken aback)** Oh, God! … I'm sorry, I'm really sorry.

Billy: Please do not go on …I … didn't mean to get at you Mum. I love my family. But … but I'm closer to my mates.

Gladys: What have we done wrong?

Billy: Nothing. It's just that … my mates are really close. We don't just eat together, sleep side by side, we sweat, we laugh – sometimes we cry – and on occasions die next to one another. We share everything …. That's where I belong …. All this, this, seems unreal. False.

Gladys: But you're my son. I love my children. I don't mean to upset you.

Billy: I know, I know.

Gladys: I care about all my family.

Billy: Do you?

Gladys: Of course I do. What do you mean?

Billy: You don't fawn over Polly or Colin.

Gladys: Well, they're older.

Billy: I'm not so young now. I'm a soldier. I've had to grow up fast. – I've become a bloody killing machine.

Gladys: Don't say that! If it wasn't for your Father you wouldn't have had to mature so quickly.

Billy: Don't mock him Mum. It's got nothing to do with Dad. It was me that volunteered. I wasn't going to leave the stage at the theatre. He knew that. There was nothing Dad could have done about it.

Gladys: But …

Billy: But you blame him for it. I should have told you, only I was so pleased to get into uniform, into the Army. Seeing my mates marching through town just made me more determined. Not fair on you, or Dad – I see that now. I know you had to blame someone …. Now he's talking about going in the army. I must apologise to him. He doesn't need to go to the Front to fight.

Gladys: **(alarmed)** What? What! What did you say? When did he tell you this?

Billy: He didn't - Polly told me.

Gladys: Why? Why? Why would he do that?

Billy: Suppose he wants to be with us boys, but that's not the only reason.

Gladys: What do you mean?

Billy: Constantly being nagged at, constantly being accused of putting my life in danger. Knowing if anything happened to me he'd be made to feel even greater guilt. ***(pause)*** I so much want to see him: I need to apologise, to say I am sorry … before it's too late.

Gladys: But he could of …

Billy: **(angrily)** No he couldn't!

Gladys: Oh God … **(a slow realisation hits her)** Seems you're not the only one who needs to say they're sorry.

Billy: It's all my fault.

Gladys: No dear. I think we share the blame.

Billy: I didn't mean to upset you Mum. I must go; I've an appointment with the doctor. I'll be back soon. Take care.

Gladys: Come back safe darling.

Billy: I'll not be going anywhere soon.

(Exit Billy. Pause for Gladys to realise the implications)

Gladys: Oh, Howard what have I done!

(She picks up Howard's cardigan and holds it tight to her breast. Black out – silence)

Scene 4 - The Living room

(Knock on the door. Howard goes to the door, it's the sergeant).

Sergeant: Good evening sir. I wondered if Private Billy Richardson was here, at home?

Howard: Yes … Have we met before?

Sergeant: Yes, when your lad enlisted at the theatre.

Howard: Oh, yes! You were the Recruiting Sergeant …Why are you here? You're not the Military Police, are you?

Sergeant: No, sir. I'm Sergeant Mitchell. Your boy is in my platoon.

Howard: What's he done?

Sergeant: It's what he hasn't done, sir. He's AWOL – Absent Without Leave.

Howard: Absent!

Sergeant: Without leave, sir. He should have reported back two days ago. Tomorrow night we travel to Folkestone and then to France. If he's not there he'll be deemed a deserter. He's a good lad, a good soldier … We don't want to lose him **(pause).** Do we, sir?

Howard: **(realising the implications)** Say, no more. **(Calls)** Billy! Come down here, NOW!

(Billy descends the stairs & enters the living room. On seeing the Sergeant he looks stunned)

Sergeant: You know why I'm here, lad, don't you!

Billy: Yes, Sergeant.

Sergeant: Come with me lad, and you'll be okay. If you to stay here … you know what will happen**!** Get your cap and your coat.

(Billy dons cap and greatcoat)

Howard: Thank you Sergeant Mitchell.

Billy: Bye Dad, sorry. Say good bye to Mum for me. Tell her … you know.

(Exit sergeant and Billy. Howard ponders before going to make a cup of tea. Gladys enters, hangs up coat.

Gladys: Where's Billy, has he gone already?

Howard: He couldn't wait. Said he has to report back by 1800 hours.

Gladys: Whatever that means?

Howard: Six o'clock. He said to say goodbye to you, and that he loves you.

Gladys: Has Colin arrived?

Howard: He's not here yet. Don't expect him to come straight home; he's bound to call in at the pub first. It's a great pity they missed each other.

Gladys: For two years now this place has become like a ruddy transit camp. I look forward to the day when we can all get together. Perhaps they may meet each other over there. Who knows?

Howard: Tea love?

Gladys: Not yet**.** Come here love. Sit down. Please. I want to talk to you **(pause).** I need to apologise for all the things I've said and the way I've been horrible to you.

Howard: What's brought this on?

Gladys: Billy and I had a talk. He explained the situation he put you in. I should have seen it. He's stubborn, pig-headed – I think it's a trait in this family. He didn't listen to you or me. He was in love with the idea of being a soldier. He doesn't sound so keen now.

Howard: Did he say that? I hope he's not going to do anything stupid.

Gladys: No, I don't think so. He had a talk with Polly. She tried to persuade him to do the right thing. I'm sure she put him straight.

Howard: Are you certain?

Gladys: Yes.

Howard: I expect you are right.

Gladys: He feels guilty about the pressure he put you and me under. But, more than that, he feels responsible for Colin joining the Army.

Howard: If anybody's pig-headed it's Colin. I reckon he'd go sooner or later, despite his left-wing views. He loves his brother very much.

Gladys: And I love you Howard, more than I can say. I need you; I don't want to lose any of you.

(They embrace)

Howard: Don't worry. Let's hope the tide is turning. It's been nearly four long years. But hopes are rising. It must be due to the reinforcement from overseas. I believe we're on the winning side. With a bit of luck we will all be together again in the near future.

Gladys: It's a great pity the boys didn't meet.

Howard: I think we've been a trifle lucky. If Billy hadn't been injured we might not have seen him until next year. And it's fortunate Colin's been on a course here. Anyway, we'll be seeing him sometime today.

Gladys: You will be here to welcome him. I've got to go and help prepare the evening meal at the barracks. I'll be back straight after.

Howard: How's it going in the cookhouse? I hope you're not overdoing it. The Sergeant not giving you a hard time is he?

Gladys: No, he can't, can he? I'm not in the Army.

Howard: It's hard to imagine you working in an Army barracks.

Gladys: It's quite useful in a way. I get to know what the soldiers get up to, or rather put up with. It makes me feel closer to our own boys. And I find going out to work very satisfying.

Howard: Oh! Does that mean being at home is boring?

Gladys: No Howard, it doesn't. It just means life is more interesting when you meet people with different interests, different ways of life. It also stops me worrying about my own problems, my own family all the time. Do you know what I mean?

Howard: Yes, I do, especially when I meet the conscientious objectors. Some of them appear really genuine. If they volunteer to drive ambulances they are looked on favourably, if not its prison and hard labour.

Gladys: You know if it wasn't for my work we would not have had this chat. The work has widened my interest and knowledge. And it's partly down to you Howard.

Howard: Really. How come?

Gladys: You told me I should find something useful to do.

Howard: I didn't mean it like that.

Gladys: I know, but I was being selfish … I know that now.

Howard: Come here Love.

(They embrace)

Gladys: Well, I'm off to gain some more knowledge – and a bit of money. Here I got some 'bacci' for you.

Howard: **(Howard, reaches for his pipe)** Thanks dear

Gladys: Bye luv.

(Pause to allow for a moment of reflection for Howard. Black out)

Scene 5 – At Home

(Evening, 1917. Howard is sitting and reading and smoking his pipe when the lights go out. Howard places Colin's old miner's lamp on the table along with a box of candles, then settles himself in his chair. Colin enters and takes off his greatcoat and hangs it up, revealing his Corporal stripes)

Howard: Oh, you're here at last. It's been some time. Thought you wouldn't make it. We've all been so looking forward to seeing you.

Colin: Hello Dad**.**

Howard: Been promoted then. Corporal now, eh! I didn't think it would be long before they gave you a bit of responsibility. Congratulations are in order. Well done! How many beers did you have lined up in the pub?

Colin: The lads are very generous. Where's Mum and Polly?

Howard: They're working, should be home soon. You just missed your brother. He left this afternoon, gone back to his unit now that he's recovered from his injury.

Colin: I hear Mum's working for the Army.

Howard: Yes, I'm the only one here most of the time.

Colin: What's happened to the lights?

Howard: There was a bombing raid at Westgate. The gas supply has been disrupted again. I've made use of your lamp and got some candles.

Colin: **(picks up the candles)** God, am I used to these! Candles and dynamite. I live most of my ruddy life down a tunnel.

Howard: What time does your train go?

Colin: I've got an hour or two. Not to worry I'll be back for a couple of days leave when this explosives course is completed.

Howard: I'm glad you came home. I miss our little chats even though we didn't always agree, but that's what made it interesting. You look as though you had a jolly time in the pub.

Colin: The boys were pally, but trouble is I can't connect with them. They think it's safer being under the earth, they assume you're protected. The old miners have some idea, but even they don't understand what it's like being a tunneller. They imagine I'm doing the same job as they do.

Howard: What's the main difference?

(Howards goes to kitchen)

Colin: Digging tunnels in order to blow-up other human beings is not quite the same as digging for coal!

Howard: **(Calls from the kitchen)** I imagine not. So how long are these tunnels?

Colin: They are as long as no-man's land. 100 to 500 yards, or longer, it depends. They're dug by us engineers; ex-miners and clay-kickers.

Howard: Clay-kickers?

Colin: Yeah, those who worked on extending the London underground.

Howard: It must be a tough job…hot, stifling, sweaty,

Colin: You can say that again. Sometimes we work non-stop day shifts and only come up when it is dark. I didn't see daylight for nearly a fortnight one time last winter. We're always scared the Boche will drop another bomb and we'll be buried alive. Worst is when the enemy can hear you digging and they lay a charge and try to blow you to bits.

Howard: **(emerging from the kitchen with mug of tea & biscuits)** Blimey!

Colin: Last week we broke through their tunnel and surprised them – blew most of them up. Then it was hand-to-hand fighting: nasty, bleeding nasty.

Howard: You don't have to talk about it son, unless you want to. Relax, forget it for now.

Colin: I can't. It's with me all the time. I have nightmares every night and I daydream about my mates: I've lost a few.

Howard: It sounds horrific.

Colin: It bloody is. I don't feel as if I'm here half the time. I love my family, Dad, don't get me wrong … but my mates come first.

Howard: That's what your brother told mother.

Colin: **(Colin has been busying himself throughout this conversation tying the candles into a bunch, as if dealing with sticks of dynamite)**

Yeah, well that's the way it is.

Howard: Yes … well … just finish your tea and biscuits.

(Howard sits in his chair)

Colin: I went to see our Polly at the nursing home. Actually went to see one of my pals. Poor bastard is still in a state of shell-shock six months later. He keeps going into spasm, especially when he hears a loud noise.

Howard: Yes, she told me about that sort of thing. She's doing a really good job.

Colin: Yes I know … Christ, it's hot in here. I'm knackered.

Howard: Take your jacket off ….

(SFX. a loud whistle is heard outside. Colin ducks down)

Howard: It's alright son. It's a policeman warning of enemy aircraft in the vicinity.

(Colin collapses in the easy chair. The noise of the whistle has unnerved him; he displays a periodic twitch. He starts to nod off. Howard watches his son. Colin rises as if in a nightmare. He picks up the lamp).

Colin: Shouldn't leave this stuff **(candles)** lying around Taff, they're ruddy dangerous**. (he picks up the tied bunch of candles and places them in a small haversack)** Here you are mate, finish my biscuit. Don't let the bloody rats have it **(to Colin the table represents the tunnel. He sits down stage against a leg of the long dining table)**

Colin: How long have we got, Sarge?

Howard: **(aware that Colin is suffering from shell-shock, so decides to plays along.)** You've got ten minutes before …

Colin: **(picks up miners lamp)** Did you hear that Taff? Ten minutes of possible life left. I'd better read my letter before it's too late – might not get another chance. It's from my sister. **(extracts letter from his pocket).** It seems my kid brother is OK. Listen to this. brother is alright.

*'Dear Colin, We are all OK. Billy has recuperated from his wounds, and will be back on his way to France. Hope you get the chance to meet. He looks so big and strong now. Mum still dotes on him. She was her usual excitable self when he turned up. I'm OK, the hospitals are getting fuller and they have opened another rest home for the soldiers. Dad misses you more than ever. He especially misses your chats, or arguments, as Mum calls them. Take care, your loving sister. Polly'***.**

God, I miss them … That's it! Time for sanity is over. **(puts letter back in his pocket)** Come on Taff, time to move; time to act like a sewer rat and remember, no talking. If you hear anything, Stop and let me know – tap me on the leg.

(SFX. Sounds of thunder and lightning. Colin enters on all fours between the legs of the table (tunnel) with the lamp in one hand and pulling the small pack containing the candles. Sounds – thunder and lightning getting louder. Enter Polly – it's been raining - and the door SLAMS in the wind. She stops and stares at Colin)

Colin: Quiet! **(he stops, listens and puts an ear next to the timber)** Ssssh! Listen! … wait! … OK … It's a shell from above. A bloody close one … come on**! now on his stomach, he drags himself along)** Quiet! Did yer hear anything? **(he stops temporarily)** Sssh! Come on … silence! listen! Slowly now … just a few more feet …Taff **(Colin struggles forward. Howard rises).**

Howard: Howard goes to help Colin**.**

(Polly restrains him)

Polly: Leave him! He's got to get through this … on his own. Wait until he reaches the end, then perhaps he will …

Colin: Listen! God! They are very close … slowly now … forward.

(Colin scrambles out of the tunnel. enter Gladys and the door loudly slams again. Colin scurries cross to the wall, his head now between his knees, hands over his ears. He is wailing, making incoherent noises)

Gladys: Oh, my God!

Polly: Dad grab his other arm. Quickly. Get him upstairs to bed. Give me a hand, careful now.

(Howard and Polly haul him to his feet and bundle him up the stairs. Gladys picks up the lamp and takes the candles out of the satchel, and stares at them. She is shocked by Colin's actions. Howard returns downstairs.)

Gladys: **(desperate)** How is he? Is he alright?

Howard: He's sweating. He's stopped shaking and twitching now. Polly's seeing to him.

Gladys: I've never seen anything like it. I never expected Colin to …

(Polly returns downstairs)

Polly: He's fallen asleep, best leave him be. I'll get an ambulance and contact his unit, and make out a report. He needs to see a doctor. I expect he'll be kept in a hospital then a rest home for a while.

Howard: How long will he take to recover?

Polly: I don't know, some take weeks, others take months or longer.

Gladys: **(tearfully)** He was always so strong.

Howard: You read about shell-shock in the papers, but it's not the same. It brings it home when you see the results. First Billy, now Colin, you must see this sort of suffering all the time Polly. You must be used to it.

Polly: No Dad, you never get used to it. You just learn to cope.

Gladys: Well, thank God you're here.

Polly: Now I've got to go and get that ambulance. I'll be back soon. Keep an eye on him. I've placed a bowl of water, flannel and towel by the bed

Howard: Bye love. Get going, quick as you can.

Polly: Hospital isn't far. I'll be back soon.

Gladys: Bye dear, hurry now.

Howard: Thank God Polly was here.

Gladys: Oh my poor boy. When is this bloody war going to be over?

(Black out SFX. Rumble of thunder. Sound Cue fading out as lights come up.)

Scene 6 – At Home

(About 2 months later)

Polly: It's good to be home again.

(Polly and Gladys embrace)

Gladys: So pleased you could make it. It's been more than a month since Colin was taken to the hospital.

Polly: Just called on the way to the military hospital. I made some inquiries. He's on the mend, should be out of there fairly soon. So where's Dad?

Gladys: He's … gone.

Polly: Gone, what do you mean? Gone! Gone where?

Gladys: **(she rambles on)** He couldn't keep still, kept pacing up and down. He couldn't sleep. I've never seen him in such a state.

Polly: So where the hell has he gone?

Gladys: **(getting into an agitated state)** He couldn't get over seeing the boys injured, especially seeing Colin in such pain. I didn't realise how it affected him. And then he kept going-on about the boys that he urged to volunteer, and the hard-time he gave the young lads at the Tribunals. He said he can't look his boys in the eye. He said he feels as if he's on the outside.

Polly: Outside of what? What the hell has he done … **(shouting)** where has he gone?

Gladys: What with the boys in the Army, you nursing and me helping to feed the troops: 'I'm redundant' he said. He went on about feeling guilty and the need to do his duty.

Polly: But he is doing his duty, what with the Tribunals …

Gladys: That's not how he sees it now. He insisted that I was doing more than him. Then he packed a few things and went … I tried, really, I tried – begged him not to go but he wouldn't listen and went…. I wrote to the boys and to you, but you know what the post is like with people moving about all the time. Anyway, it was too late. He's stubborn, just like the boys.

Polly: **(shaking her mother)** Where has he gone!

Gladys: Can you get him back? He's in the Army.

Polly: What! No I can't … How long has he been gone?

Gladys: A month or so. Another Christmas coming, another year; what will 1918 hold – hopefully the end to this ghastly, bloody war. You have done your stint, your duty.

Polly: We have all done our duty. But it's not over yet. There are still lots of our boys to bring home. And they haven't stopped fighting, and now Dad! I can't believe it! This damn war!

Gladys: There's three more of you out there now. You haven't got to go out there again! Have you?

Polly: One more stint, hopefully; got to help bring the injured Tommies home. I've just time to pick up a few things.

(She goes upstairs to collect a small suitcase)

Gladys: I'll be all alone, again. **(Calls upstairs to Polly)** How long this time?

Polly: **(Polly returns down stairs)** Not too long. You go and visit Colin, see when they will discharge him from hospital. Maybe he'll have some news of Dad. I wrote to a nurse I know, she says Colin's on the mend. You may see him before long. I've got to return to France day after tomorrow. I'll write as soon as I can.

Gladys: I suppose you have to go.

Polly: Knowing Colin he'll turn up out of the blue, doubt if he will write. I'll make enquiries about Dad. How are you coping Mum?

Gladys: It's horrible being here alone much of time, especially now that Howard has gone.

Polly: How do you feel mum?

Gladys: I was beginning to feel liberated. Don't get me wrong, I don't mean freedom from your Dad. I mean freedom from the house – I suppose. That sounds awful, doesn't it?

Polly: No Mum it doesn't. I know what you mean. It's a different routine; another way of life; chance to talk to others, to be a part of what is going on. What do you talk about?

Gladys: I find it easier to relax with the other girls in the kitchen; a lot of them are married and have had children so we have similar experience. Men, naturally, see things differently. I suppose it's a sort of liberation. God, I'm beginning to sound like one of those suffragettes!

Polly: And why not!

Gladys: It sort of helps. You can talk on equal terms once you've got a job. Some of the chaps are quite humorous. The lads from the north-east are quite difficult to understand sometimes. I'll tell you another thing. This may sound daft, but I feel that I can talk to you more easily.

Gladys: But we've always been able to chat.

Polly: Yes, chat but not talk properly.

Gladys: Since you've been a nurse and gained more education, your confidence has grown and it made me feel a bit ignorant. …

Polly: I've never felt superior but I must say your confidence has improved too. I'm proud of you Mum.

Gladys: One advantage I didn't mention was getting paid. I've never earned any money before. Not that I had a problem, your Dad was always reasonably generous. But it's nice not to have to ask for money every time you go out.

Polly: Hmm, I hadn't thought of that.

Gladys: And what about you, my girl? You've had a good war, so to speak – found yourself a good career. You have a wage packet. Trouble is; what happens if you get yourself a husband?

Polly: I'd have to leave nursing …. You're jumping the gun, mother. I'll worry about that if and when the time comes. At the moment I'm happy being a nurse.

Gladys: You could end up a spinster.

Polly: Do you think so?

Gladys: No, I'm sure somebody will find you too good to resist. Anyway, family comes first.

Polly: Also for me!

Gladys: I can't get over your Dad going … out of the blue… just like that! I thought we had patched up our difference.

Polly: You had. No need to blame yourself, it's the rest of us.

Gladys: What do you mean?

Polly: We're all in the thick of it. He probably feels he ought to be leading from the front. I really must go now.

Gladys: Alright, get your coat on. I'll walk as far as the station with you. I'm on duty too this evening. Howard was right. This place is like a ruddy transit camp.

(Polly & Gladys don coats. Polly leads out of the door. Gladys stops momentary, turns and straightens the family photo).

Gladys: I'll make sure you are in the next photo Howard.

Polly: **(on the way out of the door)** Who is that over there?

Gladys: Wait, wait! ... It's only the postman. I'm still waiting to hear from Howard.

Polly: Come on Mum. He's not coming here.

(Black out)

Scene 7- At Home

(Afternoon 1917. During the blackout Gladys sits at the table writing a letter, then sets it for tea. Enter Colin from upstairs)

Colin: Morning mum.

Gladys: Good to have you home again.

Colin: Who are you writing to today?

Gladys: Dad and Billy. I seem to spend my life writing letters. You're never sure whether or not they will get them.

Colin: Be assured when they do, they will be more than pleased.

Gladys: Tea?

Colin: Yes, Ta.

Gladys: I'm so glad you are here at last. I've been on my own for too long.
How come you didn't have to wait quite so long to get leave this time?

Colin: Been in hospital … Remember. Regiment's come home on leave, so I re-joined the unit over here.

Gladys: Of course, I get so mixed up now with three of you being away. If only Howard could come home.

(Colin crouches down as if to crawl under the table)

Gladys: What are you doing down there? Come out. ***(she clasps his arm)***
Get up! Get up!

Colin: Let go, let go. I'm alright. For goodness sake!

Gladys: What were you trying to do? I thought you were having a relapse.

Colin: Just wanted to see what it was like under the table; what I went through.

Gladys: What the hell do you mean? You know what it was like. You were the one under there!

Colin: No I don't. I can't remember a thing. It was all a blur. My mind was somewhere else. The doctor asked me how I felt at the time. I don't know, so I was trying to recall the moment.

Gladys: God! You'll give me a heart attack! Don't do that again, please. You frightened me to death.

Colin: I'm sorry Mum. I didn't think.

Gladys: No, you certainly didn't.

Colin: Anyway, all this should be over soon. We've got to thank the Yanks.

Gladys: For what?

Colin: There's so many of them. They took our place in the Line. To be honest, our boys were on their chinstraps – knackered. What the Germans will make of all these reinforcements? God knows! It can't be long now?

Gladys: Let's hope not.

Colin: One more push and it could all be over.

Gladys: I'd hate to hear that you copped it at the last moment. Do you have to go back?

Colin: Probably. Somebody has to clear up the mess. Don't worry Mum, I'll be back soon. **(gives her a hug)** Promise.

Gladys: I hear that our Billy is on – what do they call it – 'Light Duties' - whatever that means.

Colin: It means he's not in the Front Line, he's still recuperating.

Gladys: Thank God for that… What was that? Did I hear the postman?

(Colin goes to the front door and returns with a letter)

Colin: It's for you, Mum.

(Gladys frantically searches for her glasses)

Gladys: I can't find me blessed glasses …. There, over there.

(Colin gets her glasses)

Gladys: Who's it from? Is it from Howard?

Colin: It's from our Polly. **(hands her the glasses)** There hear. Read it out.

Gladys: '*Dear Mum, I am in the luxurious General Hospital which before the war was a 300-bed cliff top hotel.*'

Colin: Trust her to get a cushy number.

Gladys*:* *'I have sixty patients to look after. Two days ago I was posted to a casualty clearing station where things are very different, very hectic, near the Front. We deal with Tommies and Yanks, and also Germans and Austrians – they come straight from the battlefields.*'

Colin: **(annoyed)**. Why the hell does she have to care for the enemy?

Gladys: **(continues reading)** *We don't fraternise with the enemy patients, but we're aware that they suffer too. Now for the good news; guess who I met briefly yesterday? Yes, it was Dad! He's serving as an ambulance driver. He collects the wounded, then, after we've patched them up, he transports them to the base hospitals. It can't be easy for him loading and unloading stretchers and driving day and night. I must say he looks quite tired. My tour of duty should be over soon. Love Polly".*

Colin: Oh, poor Dad

Gladys: Thank God he's still alive. I was getting so worried about Him. I haven't heard anything for ages. Well, Dad appears to be safe and Polly should be home soon.

Colin: I hope so, but wouldn't bet on it.

Gladys: Don't say that son. And how are you, have you fully recovered?

Colin: More or less. I find sleeping difficult and I get more headaches; doctor said they will go in time.

Gladys: What are you going to do once this ruddy war is over?

Colin: I'll tell you what I am definitely not going to do. I am *not*, and I repeat, *not* going back down a bloody mine! You won't be seeing me crawling under the table again. I shall spend a little time lying around looking for a suitable and a loving girl; if anybody will have me?

Gladys: You could have problems there my boy. Only joking! You'll need to get a job first. Whatever it is, you won't take orders willingly so you had better be in charge. A supervisor or manager maybe.

Colin: But *not* underground.

Gladys: I know the very job for you. They will be looking for local councillors, political types. You'd make a great politician.

Colin: I'll speak to Dad when he gets home.

(black out)

Scene 8 – At home

(Afternoon 1918. SFX. Sound of church bells signalling the end of the war. Gladys enters from having looked out of the window again. Polly bursts in to the room)

Polly: Listen to them. Can you hear those beautiful bells?

Gladys: Thank God it's over. So, where's the rest of my family?

Polly: Stop looking out of the front window, mother, you're giving me the creeps.

Gladys: I spotted another curtain being drawn, another funeral, that's eleven in our street alone. Hope it doesn't reach a dozen. It's been ages waiting for them to finally come home.

Polly: You've read their letters: today's the day. They'll be here soon.

Gladys: The sooner we can get back to something approaching normal the better.

Polly: Normal, what's normal? Do you want to go back to being at home all the time? I know I don't.

Gladys: I expect some of the women will lose out. The men will be wanting their jobs back. I've got used to going out to work and earning some money. And what about you, my girl?

Polly: I've told you – keep on nursing. Listen to those beautiful bells … at last!

Gladys: It's been a long wait!

(SFX. Knock on the door)

Gladys: Who's that? Go and see. Quick.

(Enter Colin)

Polly: Hello.

Gladys: Two here, two more to come

(They embrace)

Colin: Easy Mum, I was here only yesterday!

Gladys: I don't care. I can't wait to see them

(The three of them dance excitedly. Gladys goes to the window again)

Polly: **(To Colin)** Are you home for good now?

Colin: Spot of leave, then return to the local unit and hand in the uniform, pick up my last pay packet and home for ever.

Polly: How's Dad and Billy? Any post this morning? I heard from Dad last week, he says he hopes to meet Billy at the station. I expect Dad will treat him to a swift celebratory half pint on the way, and say 'cheerio' to their pals at the pub.

Colin: What a good idea, I'll go and meet them in the pub.

Gladys: No you won't. I want us all here together first.

Polly: They will be here shortly.

Gladys: Polly, put that kettle on!

(Polly, with a look of disdain in her mother's direction, exits to the kitchen. Colin laughs)

Colin: How are you feeling Mum?

Gladys: Excited.

Polly: **(From the kitchen)** You will all be on the Victory Parade through town Colin, won't you?

Colin: I don't know - they are in different regiments.

Gladys: Can't see why that should matter; you are local and you're home: and you're all in the same Army.

Colin: You know, I thought Billy wasn't going to make it. Thank goodness they changed the rules.

Gladys: What rules?

Colin: The War Office decided that those deemed to be of most use to the economy should be discharged first.

Gladys: That's not fair. He might not have been home for several more days or even weeks.

Colin: A few thousand veterans marched to Whitehall in protest. They didn't want a riot so they changed it to 'first in, first out'.

Gladys: I didn't see anything in the papers.

Colin: No you wouldn't. There were riots in Calais and Folkestone and a mutiny in Rhyl by some Canadians. Thank goodness the Government saw sense.

(Gladys goes to the front door to look out)

Polly: There's no need to go and see if another curtain has been drawn, Mum. The fighting's over.

Gladys: There'll be no parade today; it's raining cats and dogs.

(Colin and Polly link arms and happily break into song)

Colin/Polly: Up to your waist in water, Up to your eyes in slush; Using the sort of language, that makes the Sergeant blush. Who wouldn't join the army? That's what we all enquire. Don't we pity the poor civilians sitting beside the fire.

(They all laugh and clap)

Colin: Well, we're home now, that's what matters most. You've done what the song says, Mum. '*You've Kept the Home Fires Burning*'. Now, where is the food? I'm starving.

Gladys: I'm so glad you two are home a last. Give me another hug … I can't wait for Howard and Billy to arrive … it'll make us complete.

Polly: I'll make that tea – shall I?

Colin: Don't worry about putting the kettle on, Pol. Get the beer!

Gladys: Your sister has decided to carry on nursing, what do you think our Billy will do?

Colin: Don't expect Billy will want to finish his apprenticeship. A lot of blokes haven't come back so there must be plenty of jobs.

Gladys: The men will be wanting their old jobs back.

Polly: I don't think some of the women will be too happy.

Gladys: That wouldn't surprise me.

Colin: So, how are we going to celebrate?

Gladys: I've been baking cakes for the planned street party.

Colin: Oh good! And have we got enough beer? I've got the devil of a thirst.

Gladys: Not yet, my boy. Knowing you, you will down the lot – wait for your Dad and Billy.

Polly: What happens to those families who have lost someone?

(Colin glances out of the window this time)

Gladys: They are calling it a victory celebration. I think we can all enjoy that … They should be here by now.

Colin: I'm nipping down the road to meet them.

(Colin exits)

Gladys: Polly, put the Ivor Novello record on, the '*Keep The Home Fires Burning'* one.

(Song starts. They sing along with the chorus)

All: Keep the Home fires burning, while your hearts are yearning, though your lads are fare away, they dream of Home;

(There is a knock on the door)

(Gladys and Polly sing and dance. Polly looks out of the window, sees two figures approaching.

Polly: Mum, I can see Colin. They're here**.**

(SFX. There is a knock at the door)

Gladys: **(From the kitchen, excitedly)** Come in my darling boys.

(Polly goes to the door & Billy enters. Colin follows. He and Billy stay still, faces drawn. Pause. Colin turns gramophone off. Billy hands his mother a telegram)

Billy: It's for you Mum. It's … er … a telegram.

Gladys: **(Cry of horror and despair)** Ooh, no …no … not … Howard.

(Gladys sobs, Billy and Polly catch her as she collapses. Colin goes to draw the curtain)

CURTAIN