

# THE GHOSTS MAY LAUGH

by Stuart D. Lee

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*“But the men of '14 and '15, and what meagre records of their day were safe to keep, have long been lost; while the crowded years between remove their battles across dead Belgian towns and villages as far from us as the fights in Homer.*

*Doubtless, all will be reconstructed to the satisfaction of future years when, if there be memory beyond the grave, the ghosts may laugh at the neatly groomed histories.”*

—R. Kipling, Introduction to *The Irish Guards in the Great War* (1923)

## **Cast of Characters**

JONES, a British Army officer  
JENKINS, a British Army officer  
LEWIS, a British Army officer  
SAUNDERS, a British Army officer  
WATCYNS, a British Army NCO  
MAN ON BENCH  
STRANGWICK, a British Army private  
MO, a British Army medical officer  
STONE, a British Army private  
MALONEY, a British Army private (*Irish*)  
SMITH, a British Army private (*Irish*)  
O'CONNOR, a British Army private (*Irish*)  
SHAW, a British Army private (*Irish*)  
CORPORAL, a runner

## **Setting**

A dug-out on the Western Front, Christmas Eve, 1917

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## ACT I

### Scene 1

*(Curtain rises and the stage is in complete darkness. There is a distant flash of light revealing the silhouette of a doorway centre stage, and JONES is huddled on the floor. The stage returns to darkness. There are distant sounds of machine gun fire.)*

**JONES.** Hello? Is anyone there? *(Pause.)* Who's there? There's someone there I can tell, I can see you moving. *(Pause. Sobbing:)* Oh sweet Jesus, oh God no, please God no. Get back, get back I tell you! Don't come any closer or I'll shoot! Oh Jesus Christ, oh sweet Jesus!

*(There is a loud explosion of a shell, and a burst of light silhouetting WATCYNS in the doorway. Behind him is JENKINS, hidden from view. WATCYNS is carrying a Lewis gun across the back of his shoulders: his silhouette appears like a crucifixion.)*

**JENKINS.** *(Offstage:)* Hello? Anyone there? Can't see a bloody thing. Watcyns! Watcyns man, get down that dug-out smartish and get a bloody light on will you?

**WATCYNS.** Yes sir!

*(There is another shell explosion, followed by the sound of distant machine gun fire.)*

**JENKINS.** That's it man, hurry up now. See if you can find a lantern or something. Get some light around this place.

**WATCYNS.** Yes sir.

*(WATCYNS enters the room. He trips over JONES, who is still on the floor. JENKINS moves to the top of the stairs.)*

**WATCYNS.** Fucking hell!

**JENKINS.** Watcyns? What is it man?

**WATCYNS.** Sorry sir, but there's someone in here, sir. *(He lights a match and sees JONES. He crouches over him.)* It's Lieutenant Jones, sir.

**JENKINS.** Is he dead?

**WATCYNS.** *(Pauses.)* I don't know, sir.

**JENKINS.** Well is he injured then?

**WATCYNS.** I can't tell, sir.

**JENKINS.** Well, damned inconsiderate if he isn't, lying around like that.

*(WATCYNS lights another match and finds a lantern near by. He lights it and the room is lit up to reveal a dug-out occupying the centre of the stage. The stairs up to the outside are centre stage and the doorway is flanked by two beds. Above each bed is a shelf with a few clothes and books on. There is a small table and two chairs in the centre of the stage and a metal cooker to the right. There is space to the left and right of the scene but this is in darkness. The sides of the stage are in darkness. WATCYNS puts the Lewis gun in a corner, lights another lantern, and begins to inspect the cooker.*

*JENKINS comes down the stairs and approaches JONES.)*

**JENKINS.** Jones! Jones! Wake up man! Either that or have the decency to crawl off and die somewhere else will you?

**JONES.** *(Wakes up.)* Jenkins? Jenkins. Heavens, sorry, I...I must have dropped off.

**JENKINS.** Yes, by the looks of things from the bed. Probably one of the Minnies he's been chucking over all night, the blast must have knocked you off. A little present from the Kaiser, I'd say; don't worry we've all been getting them.

**JONES.** *(Gets to his feet.)* Yes, more than likely. *(Looking at WATCYNS:)* Who's that?

**JENKINS.** Oh, that's just Watcyns. I found him straggling around in the communication trench and got him to carry what remains of that blasted gun back.

**JONES.** Right. (*JONES brushes himself down and adjusts his uniform. He moves across to look at the Lewis gun.*) Where's the rest of it?

**JENKINS.** (*Sitting at table:*) Probably with the crew, halfway across no-man's land by now. A shell exploded in the trench when they were carrying it along. The gun seems intact but the poor bastards who were carrying it aren't. We had to retrieve it from some human soup, all that was left of them. There's still some bits of one of them all over it.

*(JONES stops himself just in time from touching the Lewis gun.)*

**JENKINS.** OK Watcyns. Run off now and see if you can lay your hands on some provisions will you? If anyone asks, tell them I sent you, regardless of who they are. And be sharp about it, there's a good chap.

**WATCYNS.** Right-o sir. (*Exits up the stairs.*)

*(JENKINS waits for WATCYNS to leave and turns slowly to JONES.)*

**JENKINS.** Are you all right? You look a bit pale.

**JONES.** Yes I'm fine. I'm just a bit ... I'm fine.

**JENKINS.** Hmm, right. (*Pause.*) You heard about Miller I suppose?

**JONES.** Yes.

**JENKINS.** Damned shame that. (*Pause.*) Still, if you're going to play silly arses with a sandbag on the parapet what do you expect? (*Pause.*) Still, damned shame. Damned damned shame.

*(Quiet. After a while JENKINS reaches into his pocket and pulls out a hip flask. He unscrews the cap. He offers it to JONES, who shakes his head. JENKINS shrugs and takes a swig. JONES sits on one of the beds. He picks up a newspaper and begins to read it.)*

**JENKINS.** Watch yourself there on that bed! Hold on tight now. (*Laughs to himself*) If you fall out any more times they'll be sending you up to the

Flying Corps. You'll be one of those silly buggers arseing around above our heads and waving at us all the time. Ha ha. (JENKINS goes to take another drink from his hip-flask but finds it is empty. He shakes it to make sure.) Bugger and arse. That's all I need. (He looks around.) Where the bloody hell is that Watcyns when you need him? (He looks again at the flask.) Damned damned shame.

*(There is the sound of machine gun fire outside. Then the whistling of a shell and a large explosion. Dust settles down from the ceiling. JONES and JENKINS do not seem to be bothered by it. JENKINS sits back on his chair, clearly bored, and begins to whistle "Keep the Home Fires Burning.")*

JONES. Where's Lewis got to?

JENKINS. Oh he's coming. He's bringing up some new chap. I suspect he's probably just showing him around at the moment.

JONES. Just the sort of thing Lewis would enjoy doing. Making sure the poor sod knew all the regulations.

JENKINS. Yes, ha ha. Still, I can't help thinking that it will be good to have someone new around the place. Bit of fresh air and all that.

JONES. *(Without enthusiasm)* Really? I don't share your optimism.

JENKINS. Oh come come. With Miller gone now, well you know, out with the old, in with the new.

JONES. I suspect he'll be just like any of the others. Full of enthusiasm but actually knowing bugger all, and what's more he'll keep getting in our way the whole time.

JENKINS. Possibly. He'll need some nurse-maiding that's for sure.

JONES. Yes. More wasted effort.

JENKINS. Eh? Oh come now. A new perspective on things is always healthy. Might shake us up a bit *(Loud explosion of a shell. Dust settles)* If you know what I mean.

JONES. *(Dusts off his newspaper)*. We'll see.

*(Outside there is the sound of LEWIS and SAUNDERS, who are approaching the dug-out.)*

**LEWIS.** *(Outside:)* Here we are then. Head down those stairs there.

**SAUNDERS.** *(Enters the dug-out. He looks around.)* Oh I say, this is rather splendid.

*(LEWIS enters behind him carrying a leather folder.)*

**SAUNDERS.** *(Noticing JENKINS and JONES:)* Oh, hello.

**LEWIS.** Right, well some formalities first. Saunders, allow me to introduce you to Jones. Saunders, Jones; Jones, Saunders. Jones has been with us for let me see...is it nearly two years now?

**JONES.** Yes.

**LEWIS.** Yes that's right; and this is Jenkins ... well he's been with us since...oh, the Crimean War?

**JENKINS.** Absolutely, Lewis. I've been internally pickled since the Charge of the Light Brigade don't you know.

**SAUNDERS.** Hello, pleased to meet you both.

**JONES.** Are you? How curious. *(He looks SAUNDERS up and down.)*

**JENKINS.** Travelling light aren't we young fellow?

**SAUNDERS.** Oh, my bags are being brought up I gather. There was a bit of a mix-up...

**JENKINS.** Ha ha. You'll get used to it. This whole bloody place is a bit of a mix-up.

**LEWIS.** Don't mind this old fool, he's really rather decent once you get to know him.

**JENKINS.** At the moment, I'm really rather thirsty. *(Pause.)* I don't suppose...

*(LEWIS smiles and reaches into his trenchcoat, pulling out a bottle of whiskey. He places it in front of JENKINS. JENKINS looks overjoyed.)*

**JENKINS.** Lewis, you are a gentleman and a scholar sir. In fact I would go so far as to say you are a thoroughly decent chap.

*(JENKINS reaches for the bottle, dusts out an old glass on the table, and pours himself a drink.)*

**LEWIS.** Merry Christmas Jenkins.

**JENKINS.** Eh, what? *(JENKINS looks puzzled.)* By God it is! Keep forgetting, old bean. December the 24<sup>th</sup>, Christmas Eve! Well, I'll be. Merry bloody Christmas. In a few hours at any rate.

*(There is the sound of an incoming shell followed by an explosion. Again the dust settles. SAUNDERS is seen to flinch at the noise.)*

**LEWIS.** Don't worry about that. It landed yards away.

**SAUNDERS.** Right, sorry.

**LEWIS.** Well, just make yourself at home. Take that bed there for the time being. Your bags will soon be up. Now if you'll excuse me I've just a few bits of paperwork that need sorting out.

**SAUNDERS.** Yes, of course.

*(JENKINS begins to read the label of the bottle. SAUNDERS takes a seat on the other bed; LEWIS sits down at the table. He begins to get some papers out of a leather folder he is carrying. He sorts them into a neat pile. He starts to read through them.)*

**JENKINS.** "Canterbury Whiskey." Well, I've never heard of this stuff before. *(He takes another sip.)* Not bad though. I wonder where it was distilled. Southwark perhaps? Wouldn't that be wonderful. Lewis, did you bring it all the way from Southwark?

**JONES.** Southwark's not in Kent.

**JENKINS.** No, it's a literary joke, Jones. Southwark and Canterbury you see? No? Oh well. Anyway, where did you find it Lewis?

**LEWIS.** What? (*Looks up from his papers, annoyed.*) Oh that. I found it in Miller's belongings.

**JENKINS.** Ah.

**LEWIS.** Don't worry, it's clean enough.

*(Silence. LEWIS returns to his papers. JENKINS looks around bored.)*

**JENKINS.** Damned shame. (*Pause.*) So Saunders, tell me, where do you hail from then? No hang on a second, let me guess. It's a bit of a party trick of mine – guessing accents that is. Say something.

**SAUNDERS.** Sorry?

**JENKINS.** Say something.

**SAUNDERS.** Like what?

**JENKINS.** Anything, just say something. Some poetry, for example.

**SAUNDERS.** Well... I... Well, here goes: "There's a breathless hush in the Close tonight / Ten to make and the match to win..."

**JENKINS.** Stop there, stop there, that's quite enough of that thank you very much. Hmm... Well... Interesting. I was going to place you originally in Surrey, but now, now I would go for Oxfordshire... Let's say Oxford itself.

**SAUNDERS.** Heavens, I say, spot on. I was brought up in Surrey but I was living in Oxford when I joined up. How did you know?

**JENKINS.** Oh, not hard really. You have a non-descript Southern accent, look healthy, so Surrey was a fair bet. And only someone from Oxford would quote that tosh.

**SAUNDERS.** Oh sorry.

**JENKINS.** Which college then?

**SAUNDERS.** Balliol.

**JENKINS.** Oh hell, another bloody Julian Grenfell to contend with. That would explain the Newbolt arse you came out with.

**SAUNDERS.** Sorry.

**LEWIS.** Don't worry Saunders. Jenkins here likes to class himself as a literary snob. He's always quoting something or other at us, but no one ever listens to him.

**JENKINS.** "Beat! Beat! Drums! – blow! Bugles! Blow!  
Through the windows – through doors – burst like a ruthless force,  
Into the solemn church, and scatter the congregation,  
Into the school where the scholar is studying"

*(JENKINS finishes by pointing at LEWIS with a flourish who is still holding the papers. LEWIS smiles.)*

**LEWIS.** See what I mean?

**JENKINS.** Philistines the lot of you. *(Pause.)* So where are you from in Oxford then?

**SAUNDERS.** Well, Boars Hill I suppose.

**JENKINS.** You don't seem very sure.

**SAUNDERS.** Sorry. I mean that's where I was staying...before... It's just to the south of the City...

**JENKINS.** I know it. In fact I know it very well, but I will refrain from making the obvious literary allusions to keep Lewis happy.

**SAUNDERS.** Well, yes, anyway, just there.

**JENKINS.** Officer Training Corps?

**SAUNDERS.** Yes.

**JENKINS.** Bugger all use wasn't it?

**SAUNDERS.** Yes it was rather.

*(Pause. JONES has been watching all of this.)*

**JONES.** Did you know that the average life expectancy for a subaltern new to the line is a mere six weeks?

**JENKINS.** I say Jones!

**LEWIS.** Yes Jones, that was in rather poor taste.

**JONES.** Just thought he might want to know, that's all. Give us all something to look forward to.

**SAUNDERS.** No, I didn't, "know" that is...in answer to your question.

**JENKINS.** Just ignore Jones. He's had one sniff too many of the phosgene if you ask me, and it has fair soured the milk of his human kindness, what?

**JONES.** Some might say that it is better than drinking yourself to death.

**JENKINS.** Then they'd be arses and fools the lot of them.

**SAUNDERS.** My brother was out here last year.

**JENKINS.** Oh really?

**SAUNDERS.** Yes. I think he actually lasted eight weeks.

*(Pause.)*

**JENKINS.** Ah.

**LEWIS.** Are you happy now, Jones? (*JONES remains silent for a moment, then shrugs and returns to his newspaper. LEWIS returns to his papers. He finds a sealed envelope and opens it. He reads the letter.*) Oh Christ. Jenkins, could I have a word?

**JENKINS.** Certainly old chap. Fire away.

**LEWIS.** I think it's better if we talked outside.

**JENKINS.** A slight flaw in your plan old man - the whisky's in here. (*Shows no sign of moving*).

**LEWIS.** We've to select eight men. They're needed for when we pull out of the line.

**JENKINS.** Eight men? What for?

**LEWIS.** (*Looks at JENKINS:*) What do you think?

**JENKINS.** (*Pause.*) My God, at Christmas? Is it someone we know?

**LEWIS.** I've no idea. Not that it would matter in any case. And I don't suppose there are exceptions to military law based around religious festivals. If you don't mind, old chap, I could do with some assistance in this.

**JENKINS.** Certainly.

*(LEWIS and JENKINS exit. JONES and SAUNDERS are left behind. SAUNDERS stands by the bed uncertain as to whether he should follow LEWIS and JENKINS. JONES reads his newspaper occasionally glancing over to SAUNDERS. JONES slams his newspaper down in annoyance.)*

**JONES.** Is there something wrong?

**SAUNDERS.** Sorry?

**JONES.** It's just that you look like you've forgotten something.

**SAUNDERS.** Sorry...

**JONES.** For God's sake, will you please stop saying sorry? You've nothing to apologise for, not yet at any rate.

**SAUNDERS.** Sor ... well, it's just that I don't understand.

**JONES.** Don't understand what exactly?

**SAUNDERS.** I don't understand why they needed to select eight men.

**JONES.** Ah right, well I can help you there. (*JONES sits up on the bed clearly enjoying himself*). Eight men, old boy. (*Pause*) A firing squad.

**SAUNDERS.** What for? A spy?

**JONES.** Good God no. We'd treat them a damn sight more decently than that. No this is for one of ours. Some poor sod who finally couldn't take it anymore no doubt.

**SAUNDERS.** You mean "ran away"?

**JONES.** Could be. Or they may simply have dropped their rifle and lost it. You can get shot for most things round here.

**SAUNDERS.** That's...I mean...that's....

**JONES.** Tragic, appalling, futile, horrible - yes yes, I know. Forgive me for sounding bored but we've rather exhausted the dictionary already. (*JONES returns to his newspaper*)

**SAUNDERS.** My God.

**JONES.** And there's no point calling on him. He deserted the ranks years ago.

*(SAUNDERS sits down in disbelief for a few moments. There is a long pause. JONES looks up and stares at SAUNDERS thoughtfully. JONES puts down his newspaper and sits facing SAUNDERS. SAUNDERS notices him.)*

**SAUNDERS.** They seem awfully nice.

**JONES.** Who does?

**SAUNDERS.** Lewis and Jenkins.

**JONES.** Oh them. Well I suppose if your idea of a pleasant evening is either shuffling bits of paper endlessly or drinking yourself into a stupor then yes, Lewis and Jenkins are nice. (*Pause*).

**SAUNDERS.** Oh.

**JONES.** So, how are you enjoying army life then?

**SAUNDERS.** Oh ... well it's different .... From what I used to do, that is. Quite a laugh though, so far at least.

**JONES.** Really? So where did you train then?

**SAUNDERS.** Romford ... it's in Essex.

**JONES.** Good bunch of chaps were they?

**SAUNDERS.** Rather.

**JONES.** I bet you got into all kinds of scrapes.

**SAUNDERS.** Yes we did at times. (*Laughs*) There was one fellow...

**JONES.** And I suspect it must have been quite exciting when you finally got your orders to come out.

**SAUNDERS.** Oh yes. We had quite a night of it in the mess.

**JONES.** I can imagine. And was there a weepy farewell at the station?

**SAUNDERS.** Er ... yes. Mother was quite upset to be honest. Father was fine about it, on the surface at least.

**JONES.** And was there a young lady?

**SAUNDERS.** (*Slightly embarrassed*) Well yes there was, is someone. (*He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a wallet. He opens it, stands up, and shows it to JONES. He returns to the bed staring thoughtfully at the picture in the wallet.*) She was ... well ... you know ... upset.

**JONES.** I've no doubt she was. Though I'm sure you will have both promised to write to each other every day.

**SAUNDERS.** Yes.

**JONES.** And let me see. You would have said something along the lines that you would see her soon on your first leave, wouldn't be long, things can't be as bad at the front as they all say, you'll not take any risks...

**SAUNDERS:** (*Laughs*) Yes, yes, something like that.

**JONES.** (*Pause*) Undoubtedly the exact same words your brother probably used. And where is he now? (*Returns to his newspaper*). Six weeks old boy. (*He shakes his head and looks at his watch*). Tic Toc.

(*SAUNDERS stares at JONES for a few seconds clearly upset. He wheels around and starts to busy himself taking his trenchcoat off and unbuttoning his revolver. JONES looks over. After a few seconds he*

*stands up and moves to the table in the centre carrying his newspaper. He watches SAUNDERS).*

**JONES.** Do you need any help?

**SAUNDERS.** No thank you.

*(Pause)*

**JONES.** Here, you may want to read this *(He offers the newspaper to SAUNDERS. SAUNDERS looks at it suspiciously).*

**SAUNDERS.** Why? To read through the casualty figures?

**JONES.** No *(Laughs).* They're all made up in any case, but it's good you've started to think that way. It shows you're learning. Read the rest of it though - anything you can, the news, the adverts, the sport. Anything that reminds you of the other world away from all this. *(SAUNDERS accepts the newspaper).*

**SAUNDERS.** Thanks. *(JONES returns to his bed and lies on it. SAUNDERS looks at the newspaper briefly and then back at JONES).* You've survived.

**JONES.** Sorry?

**SAUNDERS.** I said you've survived, more than six weeks I mean.

**JONES.** I wouldn't call it that.

**SAUNDERS.** But you have, you're still alive.

**JONES.** You call this being alive? *(Pause.)* I don't think I can remember what real life is like. I can't even remember... *(Pause again.)* It doesn't matter.

**SAUNDERS.** No, tell me.

**JONES.** There's nothing to tell. I was just going to say I can't even remember what I was like before all this started. *(Pause).* Let me give you two pieces of advice...S..

**SAUNDERS.** Saunders.

**JONES.** (*Shrugs*) First, never bother to learn anyone's first name around here. You'll notice that none of us do it.

**SAUNDERS.** Why?

**JONES.** Simply because it's not worth the effort. Every week or so you'll just have to learn a new set of names. (*Pause*) Second, don't ever think there is anything special about you.

**SAUNDERS.** I don't, honest.

**JONES.** Well you'd be the first person to come out here who didn't then. We all think we're special, at first, that we'll get through this, that we can't possibly get killed - not us, not now. But this war can end anyone, at any time. It's the supreme democracy, you know. Everyone is equal here, regardless of class, nationality, or religion. You could be the best soldier in the world, or the fittest athlete; but as soon as the whistle goes and you scale that ladder you're the same as everyone else. You have exactly the same chance as surviving the next ten seconds as the man next to you.

**SAUNDERS.** Yes, I suppose you're right. It all seems rather pointless now, all that training back...

**JONES.** Who knows? If you do manage to get across no-man's land then the training may come in useful.

**SAUNDERS.** Why?

**JONES.** Because you have been trained to kill without thinking, to get them before they get you. You see an enemy uniform, not another human being. That sort of attitude could well save your life.

*(LEWIS and JENKINS re-enter the dug-out)*

**JONES.** I say that was remarkably fast, well done. We can only hope he dies even quicker.

*(LEWIS and JENKINS look at him but ignore him. They both sit down. JENKINS takes a drink of whisky)*

**JENKINS.** Getting a bit cold isn't it?

**LEWIS.** Yes - and damp, and muddy. Supplies are already getting bogged down.

**JENKINS.** That's the spirit! Nothing like looking on the bright side. *(Pause.)* You heard about Miller I suppose?

**LEWIS.** Yes, I wasn't far away when it happened.

**JENKINS.** Really? Sniper wasn't it?

**LEWIS.** Yes. Straight through the eye. *(Pause.)* Damned fine shot.

**JONES.** Damned shame, some might say.

*(Uneasy silence.)*

**JENKINS.** I think I did, didn't I?

*(JENKINS begins to read the label of the bottle. SAUNDERS takes a seat on the other bed; LEWIS sits down at the table. He returns to reading the papers. JENKINS looks around bored.)*

**JENKINS.** A-ha! Our new young recruit. Forgot about you. Has Jones been keeping you amused then?

**SAUNDERS.** You could say that. *(Pause)*

**JENKINS:** Yes I can imagine. I've always thought that when Chaplin hangs up his cane we have a natural replacement here in Jones. Eh, Jones? What do you say to that? *(JONES ignores him).* Oh well. So how long have you been over?

**SAUNDERS.** Only three weeks I'm afraid. There's been quite a bit to take in.

**JENKINS.** No doubt.

**SAUNDERS.** What about you? When did you get here?

**JENKINS.** What, to this dug-out?

**SAUNDERS.** No, I meant to France.

**JENKINS.** Oh right. Well, let me see, now. I came out on December 16<sup>th</sup> 1915, so that makes it, my God, I've been out here over two years now off and on. Bit longer than six weeks, eh Jones?

**JONES.** I did say a subaltern "new" to the line.

**LEWIS.** I think you'll find we're all new at some point.

**JENKINS.** Ho ho. Point to Lewis I think.

**SAUNDERS.** So you were here for the Somme then?

**JENKINS.** Well, almost. Sort of. *(Pause.)* Poor show all round to tell the truth.

**LEWIS.** I always thought you were actually in it, Jenkins. I could just picture you kicking footballs across no-man's land.

**JENKINS.** Ha ha! Wrong shaped ball for me. No, no, I didn't get in the line until two weeks afterwards. We had been held in reserve for the breakthrough, you see. *(JENKINS starts to arrange the bottle and glasses on the table as if laying out a battle plan.)* No, that's not right. *(He shuffles them a bit, looks puzzled, and then sits back, giving up.)* Anyway, we were meant to exploit the breakthrough by following the cavalry. Probably we would have been asked to shovel all of the horse-shit up so that Rawlinson wouldn't get his boots dirty on his victory march to Berlin. But of course it never quite happened. Ah well. So most of the time we sat on our arses getting the runs. Hardly the most inspiring of memories.

**SAUNDERS.** But you did see action though, in the battle that is.

**JENKINS.** You know I never really thought of it as a battle before; just a great big mess with a lot of people running, usually away from things if they had any sense. Ha! Well, now I come to think of it I suppose it was a battle. Or at least as near a battle as this war will ever get to. But I'm not sure I could claim to have seen much action as such, no no. In fact, throughout the whole bloody thing I never actually saw a German. A live one that is, saw plenty of the dead buggers. Isn't that strange! *(Pause.)* I remember going to the front line for the first time, and getting the usual tour, you know, latrine here, sap there, danger spots, that sort of thing.

Usual bollocks about not caring too much as the breakthrough was bound to happen any day now. Ha ha. Well, it was while I was walking around I suppose that I realised that the trench wall... Well, it was stuffed with hundreds and hundreds of tiny bits of paper rammed in between the sandbags, flapping and fluttering in the breeze. I couldn't work out what they were at first, a bit odd you see, so I pulled one out and had a look at it. Do you know what it was? It was a letter, in fact they all were; hundreds of letters, all written on scraps of paper, card, cigarette packets, whatever. Very possibly the last letters the poor sods ever wrote. There was an address on the front of each of them, and then scrawled inside were a few lines – to a wife or girlfriend, that sort of thing. *(Pause.)* All rather pathetic really, all those small scraps of paper, all that were left of those boys.

**JONES.** How poignant. *(He looks across at SAUNDERS who returns his glance).*

**JENKINS.** *(Swirls his drink in the glass.)* Anyway, no man's land was in a pretty bad state, as you would guess. You know the first time I looked over I couldn't understand why on earth there were so many men walking around out there. I was in half a mind to yell out to them to get their bloody heads down, silly buggers, until I realised that they weren't out on patrol. They were in fact all the boys who hadn't made it across. Dead. Hanging on the barbed wire. Hundreds of them. Probably, now I come to think of it, they were the poor bastards who had written the notes. And whenever there was a strong wind it made their arms and heads move *(Acts the movement out.)* like puppets...as if they were sort of waving at us. They'd been out there over two weeks, you know, just rotting and flapping about. *(Pause)* Flapping and fluttering. *(Pause)* They hadn't got further than fifty yards by the looks of it before the machine guns had caught them. And whenever a shell exploded nearby, bits of them – arms, legs, kilts – I remember the kilts – they would all go hurtling into the air like sticks and twigs and then fall to the ground and then Boom! – up they'd go again, more of them this time. Not a pretty sight all in all. And do you know they stayed out there for another four weeks until the stench got unbearable.

*(WATCYNS enters carrying two large cases.)*

**JENKINS.** Watcyns, what the hell have you got there? And more importantly, is it edible or drinkable.

**WATCYNS.** No sir. At least I don't think so sir. This case is Mr. Saunders', and this one sir... well this was Lieutenant Miller's, sir. I thought I'd bring it here for safekeeping.

**JENKINS.** Ah yes, Miller. Forgot about him.

*(Fade to darkness)*

## Scene 2

*(Lights come on to reveal LEWIS pinning a map on the wall. JENKINS is standing behind the table. On the table is MILLER'S case. JENKINS is staring at it curiously. SAUNDERS is unpacking his case on the bed and putting some things on the shelf above. JONES is lying on the other bed observing. WATCYNS is not in the room. JENKINS starts to whistle 'Pack Up Your Troubles in Your Old Kit Bag' whilst peering at Miller's suitcase. After a few seconds thought he opens it. He starts to look in it.)*

**JONES.** Found anything interesting, Jenkins?

**JENKINS.** *(Jumps)* I say old man, give me a bit of warning next time will you? *(After a few seconds, he pulls out a small book.)* Hello, what's this? *(Flicks through some pages)* Oh, I say, it's a diary. Did you know Miller kept a diary, Lewis?

**LEWIS.** I saw him writing a few things down once. He shouldn't have, you know. If he'd been captured...

**JONES.** It would have been the least of his worries I suspect.

**JENKINS.** Hmm. It's got a couple of photographs in it. *(He looks at one.)* Must be his parents, I suppose.

*(JENKINS shrugs and looks at the second photograph.)*

**JENKINS.** Now who is this, I wonder? Pretty young thing. *(He puts the photograph back in the diary, and then the whole lot back into the case. He rummages around a bit more.)* Ah, now here we are! *(He pulls out a German*

*helmet and holds it up.*) Here, Saunders, you'll like this. Do you know what this is?

**SAUNDERS.** (*Approaches JENKINS.*) It's a German helmet isn't it?

**JENKINS.** Ah, correct, good to see the training wasn't a complete waste of time. But this is not just any helmet. German, true, but this is from an Uhlan. Now do you know what one of those is?

**SAUNDERS.** Cavalry?

**JENKINS.** In theory, yes, but one of the Kaiser's elite no doubt.

**SAUNDERS.** Heavens. (*Looks a bit closer at the helmet.*)

**JENKINS.** And pray young man that you never see one of these that is occupied. Fierce buggers they are, great fighters, and worse than that, they actually believe in what they are fighting for. A dreadful combination! (*He puts the helmet down on the table, closes the case, puts the case on the floor, and picks up the helmet again.*)

**LEWIS.** Where did he actually get it from. Did he ever say?

**JENKINS.** Apparently he found it on a corpse.

**JONES.** Lucky for him then.

**JENKINS.** Quite, quite. But the important thing is not where he got it from, but more importantly what do we do with it now? (*Pauses for thought.*)

**JONES.** What do you mean?

**JENKINS.** Well, I mean to say, this is a valuable regimental heirloom don't you know. A prized trophy fought for by the heroism of one of its finest soldiers.

**SAUNDERS.** I thought you said he found it on a corpse?

**JENKINS.** That's a mere technicality my boy, a mere technicality. The important point is that it should stay here with one of us. Not head back to the Miller household so his mother can stick daffodils in it.

LEWIS. I think it's officially Army property you know.

JENKINS. Tosh and nonsense, Lewis. You know we must seriously think about getting those manuals and regulations off you.

JONES. Do you know a decent surgeon then?

(LEWIS looks at JONES and then returns to the map.)

JENKINS. Anyway, back to the point in hand. What are we to do with this? (JENKINS stares at the helmet. Suddenly JENKINS claps his hands). I know, let's have a competition. That's it, a competition and the winner gets the helmet, what do you say?

LEWIS. Sorry?

JENKINS. A competition - for the helmet. What do you say Saunders?

SAUNDERS. Well, I don't know. I didn't know...M...

JONES. His name was Miller, but well done for not remembering.

SAUNDERS. ...Miller.

JENKINS. Yes but it's Christmas dear boy. Didn't you ever play games at Christmas?

SAUNDERS. Yes, of course.

JENKINS. Well, which ones?

SAUNDERS. (Pause.) Blind man's buff?

JENKINS. Hmm, not perhaps the best of ideas around here. We don't want you heading off over the top with a blindfold on. Still a game or competition is definitely the way to sort this out; no doubt whatsoever. How about a game of cards?

LEWIS. I've seen the way you play cards.

JENKINS. You insult my honour sir!

JONES. Why not a game of dice, or have the Roman Centurions taken them all?

**JENKINS.** What?

**JONES.** I was struck by the similarity of another scene I had heard of where people gamed over a dead man's belongings, that's all.

**JENKINS.** Miller would have wanted it this way. (*Pause*) I think. Now then, now then. (*He pauses and looks around. He sees the bottle of whiskey.*) Aha, there we are! Canterbury, 'course. Why didn't I think of it before. We'll have a storytelling competition. The Army Officer's Tale and all that. What do you say, Saunders?

**SAUNDERS.** I... I don't know.

**JENKINS.** Right then, I'll take that as a yes. Off you go then.

**SAUNDERS.** I'm sorry?

**JENKINS.** Well, only right old boy. Last in, first on and all that.

**JONES.** Yes do entertain us Saunders. See if you can drag Lewis away from his beloved map for more than five seconds.

**LEWIS.** It's important (*JONES snorts his disgust*).

**SAUNDERS.** I don't think I know any stories, to be honest.

**JENKINS.** Come now, come now, a young man like you? You must know some.

**SAUNDERS.** Well, there's nothing really, sorry. I'm not that adventurous, to be honest. And I roomed in the Vicar's house as a student, so...

**JONES.** Well that's the end of that game (*Picks up his newspaper*).

**SAUNDERS.** Oh don't get me wrong. They were, sorry *are* a lovely family, but ...

**JONES.** But not exactly into massed orgies.

**SAUNDERS.** No. Not really, or at least they never invited me if they did have them.

**JENKINS.** Ha! Point to Saunders. (*Pause.*) OK let's try another tack. What about the University, the dreaming spires and all that.

**SAUNDERS.** You mean Oxford?

**JENKINS.** Usually, yes. There must be a story there. Tell us a bit about ... oh I don't know ... the city...

**SAUNDERS.** Well, I don't know what to say really, it all seems so strange, so far away now.

**JENKINS.** Well what's it like in the spring?

**SAUNDERS.** Well... (*shrugs*)

**JENKINS.**....the summer...

**SAUNDERS.** I don't really...well...

**JONES.** Oh for God's sake.

**JENKINS.** Now now Jones. Don't give up! Where would we be if we all did that?

**JONES.** Back in England I would suggest.

**JENKINS.** Yes well. Now come now Saunders. There must be something. Tell me about actually going to the University. What was that like?

**SAUNDERS.** Well, I went up in '15, but what with everything happening out here it all seemed a bit silly really. That's why I eventually left and enlisted.

**JENKINS.** Explain.

**SAUNDERS.** Well it's just that all that Latin and Greek ... well it just didn't seem real, or relevant. It was as if Oxford was in its own world, cut off from everything.

**JENKINS.** Carry on.

**SAUNDERS.** Oh, well, you could tell there was a war on, of course, because there were less men around and some of the colleges were being used as hospitals. (*Laughs*). One of the colleges is even being used to house both men and women at the same time! It's causing all kinds of fuss you know. But, well, when you went to your college room or to a tutorial after reading the paper in the morning it all seemed to be...a bit pointless.

**JONES.** How utterly unsurprising.

**JENKINS.** OK then, what about Boars Hill. What's that like?

**SAUNDERS.** I thought you knew it.

**JENKINS.** Just humour me, there's a good fellow.

**SAUNDERS.** Oh, sorry, well it's rather lovely in its own sort of way. You can wander for miles in the woods, cut away from it all, and then come out into a clearing and you'll be looking down on one of the villages, or even Oxford itself if you're lucky. It really is rather wonderful, you know, especially on a summer's evening.

**JENKINS.** "And is there honey still for tea?"

**SAUNDERS.** I say, do you like Brooke?

**JENKINS.** No, not really. And I have to say I found Churchill's obituary positively nauseating.

**SAUNDERS.** Oh, well, anyway, that's Cambridge of course; no honey in Oxford. Plenty of jam though, or treacle.

**JENKINS.** Well, what else?

**SAUNDERS.** Well ... well there's the river I suppose. You can walk for miles down the river, its almost as if it never ends, winding your way past the boathouse, through Iffley, right down as far as Radley or Abingdon on a good day. And it's always busy. Whatever the weather there are always people walking along the bank or cycling, and rowers, families, boats, geese, swans, everything. It really is rather splendid, come to think of it. The War doesn't seem to have touched it in any way.

**JENKINS.** That's nice to know, it genuinely is. *(Pause. He sits down at the table. Pause.)*

**SAUNDERS.** There was something that did happen once, near the river come to think of it. I suppose that could make a story if you wanted.

**JENKINS.** Top man, that's the spirit. Now we're into the Christmas parlour games.

**SAUNDERS.** It's not much of a story though.

**JENKINS.** Come, come Saunders, don't do yourself down, we're all ears. Look on it as an initiation into the company, old boy, and just think, this helmet could be yours. Quite a prize to show the young ladies back in Oxford eh?

**SAUNDERS.** Well, I don't know about that.

**JONES.** Just get on with it will you?

**SAUNDERS.** Sorry. Well, let me think, it was around November I suppose, yes November last year. I recall it was rather cold and there had even been a bit of snow which is most unusual, I gather. You see, the family I was staying with had, well probably still has I suppose, this lovely old dog called Max. A golden retriever. Getting on a bit now, but still quite sprightly, and able to manage reasonably long walks. Well we were walking along and we came across...

**JENKINS.** Stop there, stop there. That won't do.

**SAUNDERS.** Sorry?

**JENKINS.** You need to describe the scene to us. Paint a picture so that we can see it. We need some building up to it, some tension. For a start, where were you walking? Was it day or night? What did it look like? That sort of thing. We're relying on you to take us away from this...*(Looks around)* this tomb.

**SAUNDERS.** Well I'll try ... *(Pause.)* Well it was November as I've said, and there was snow ... yes snow ... it had managed to coat most things;

nothing really deep of course, but just enough to give the trees and buildings a ... a silvery grey look.

**JENKINS.** That's more like it!

**SAUNDERS.** Well, as it was a bit cold ...

**JONES.** Don't tell me, because of the snow...

**JENKINS.** Jones, will you be quiet and let the lad tell his story? Carry on old chap.

**SAUNDERS.** Well as it was cold I offered to take the dog out that evening; I hadn't been feeling too well from what I recall, and I thought a good bit of fresh air would do me the power of good. To be honest, I wanted to see all the woods and the river again, as the moon was quite full and everything had gone a shade of purple.

**JENKINS.** Perfect, perfect!

**SAUNDERS.** Well, we went for quite a walk. We went right down the hill towards the Hinkseys, and then cut across to the Isis...

**JENKINS.** That's the Thames to those of you who did not have a classical education.

**SAUNDERS.** Sorry yes, down to the Thames. It was a clear night as I said, but there was a wind getting up which made it quite cold on the river so I decided to walk down to the pub just before Iffley lock. It really was rather splendid to tell the truth. The moon was sitting just above the village, and there was the church on the hill and the cottages and all of them were reflecting in the water. Well, as I've said, I thought I could go to the pub and pick up a brandy to warm me up, and then if that didn't do the trick I could pay one of the locals to take both of us, me and the dog that is, back up the hill on a cart or something. So we crossed over the fields and picked up the river at the end of a lane and began to cut down along the tow-path to the pub. It's not a long way and not far ahead I could see the lights of the pub. And, well then it happened.

**LEWIS.** What?

**SAUNDERS.** Well it was the dog, Max, he had trotted on ahead of me for a bit but I suddenly noticed that he had stopped and was growling at something off to the right, something just hidden behind the bushes. I didn't think too much of it at first, it could have been a rat or a rabbit, but as I got nearer he suddenly started whimpering and then he was off, right along the riverbank towards the pub. Well, I was just about to run after him in case he fell into the river when I noticed something, right where he had been barking.

**JENKINS.** What?

**SAUNDERS.** A man. *(Green lights to the right of the stage suddenly come on to reveal a MAN, dressed in dark clothes sitting slumped forward on a bench. Lights in centre stage dim).*

**JENKINS.** Sorry?

**SAUNDERS.** There was a man, sitting on a bench. *(He moves towards the right of stage. He approaches the bench slowly.)* He had been hidden behind the bushes so I hadn't seen him right up until then. *(SAUNDERS moves behind the bench, the MAN remains motionless)* But he was crouched over so I couldn't see his face *(SAUNDERS stops and moves to the side of the bench. He addresses the MAN).* Hello there. Look I say I'm dreadfully sorry if the dog was bothering you. *(Silence).* He's not normally like that. *(Silence.)*

**JENKINS.** And what did the man say in reply?

**SAUNDERS.** *(Looks back to the centre of the stage).* That's the thing. Nothing. Absolutely nothing. He just stared down at the river in front of him, as still as...well as still as a statue I suppose. But there was something strange about the whole thing. *(There is a very faint sound of water dripping slowly. This continues throughout.)* At first I couldn't quite put my finger on it, you see. It was like when you go into a room you know well and something has been moved but you can't quite work out what it is at first? Something was wrong. *(Pause. SAUNDERS looks down at the man.)* I say, are you feeling ill? *(Pause.)* Do you want me to go and get some help?

*(Pause. MAN very slowly looks up facing the audience. His face is very pale and his eyes black.)*

**MAN.** (*Whispers.*) I can't remember.

**SAUNDERS.** I'm sorry? (*Pause.*) Can't remember what? (*Pause.* SAUNDERS *addresses the centre of the stage.*) And that's when I realised what had been strange about the whole thing; I could hear it now as plain as day. The sound of dripping, of water dripping onto the wooden bench and onto the floor. (*Sound of water dripping gets louder.*) He was completely drenched from head to foot, and there were what looked like weeds in his hair and mud all over his clothes. (SAUNDERS *addresses the MAN.*) I say old chap, you're absolutely soaked. Have you been in an accident? (*Pause.*) Look there's a pub just along the path I can go and get some help if you like.

**MAN.** (*Whispers.*) Why are you here?

**SAUNDERS.** Well, I was just walking my dog you see...

**MAN.** (*Whispers.*) Why are you here?

**SAUNDERS.** Well I live here. I'm a student you see.

**MAN.** (*Whispers.*) I was a student once, when I was young, before everything was cold and dark. Now I am nothing.

**SAUNDERS.** You know I really think we should get you inside, into the warmth. (SAUNDERS *very slowly reaches out to touch the MAN. The MAN suddenly grabs SAUNDERS by the arm. SAUNDERS cries out in pain.*)

**MAN.** I am so alone. Down there in the dark and the cold. I am nothing.

**SAUNDERS.** (*Struggling.*) Let go of me will you! (*The MAN slowly stands to his feet. He grabs SAUNDERS with his other hand. SAUNDERS continues to struggle.*) Let go I say!

**MAN.** I am so alone. Come with me. Come with me down there to where it is dark. Be with me.

**SAUNDERS.** (*Shouting*) No! (SAUNDERS *manages to break free and runs to the centre of the stage. The lights in the centre of the stage return to normal, and the right hand stage goes to darkness. SAUNDERS composes himself.*) Well, I must have shouted or screamed something because I suddenly managed to

break free. You can call me a coward if you like, but I ran for my life as quick as I could straight towards the pub. *(Pause.)* But when I got near to the gate I stopped and looked back. *(He turns back to look stage right. The bench is lit again in a green light. It is empty.)* Thankfully though, he wasn't running after me, in fact the whole tow-path was completely deserted and the bench was completely empty. But...

**LEWIS.** But what?

**SAUNDERS.** Well, the damndest thing. Although the path was empty, and the field behind it, I was sure I could see something in the river moving out towards the centre.

**LEWIS.** Could have been a swan.

**SAUNDERS.** No, it was too dark a shape.

**JENKINS.** A duck then?

**SAUNDERS.** No, too big. *(The bench returns to darkness. He approaches the table.)* Anyway, I didn't feel like going back to see what it was and went straight into the pub where I found the dog cowering in the corner. I had a quick brandy, a double in fact, and thankfully managed to get someone to give me a lift back to the house. I didn't really want to walk down the riverbank again, to be honest. But all the way back I kept thinking about him. It was all so strange you see. When I first saw him I thought he was an old man, but when he actually looked at me I could see he wasn't that old, probably the same age as me in fact but ... Well, he *felt* old.. and at the same time ... sad. *(He pauses.)* And now, telling you all about it here I can distinctly remember most things, the river, the pub, the cold, but I couldn't for the life of me tell you what he looked like. I can't see his face anymore.

*(Silence.)*

**JENKINS.** Capital! Capital! Well, done, Saunders, old boy, welcome to the company. That was an absolutely first class yarn, a good old-fashioned Christmas ghost story to get us all in the spirit of things if you'll excuse the pun, and it's put your name nearly on the helmet I'd say. Of course, if I had written it I would have finished it off with you in the pub recounting your story to the locals and then suddenly everyone would go quiet and

then the wise old barman would shake his head and say in the thickest accent you ever heard, "Ar, well, you may not know this, but back in '96 a young student was drowned in the river, just about where you says you met that man, he'd gone in to rescue his dog but got caught up in the currents and was pulled down, din't stand a chance. Ar."

**SAUNDERS.** Oh, I didn't actually say it was a ghost story.

**JENKINS.** No, of course you didn't, but that's the truth of it, isn't it? You think the chap on the bench was a ghost, someone who had drowned in the river and had come back to seek someone to be his companion, to share his ghostly loneliness.

**SAUNDERS.** Well, I...

**JENKINS.** Don't worry old chap. It's all rather comforting in a way. It lets us think that there may be something waiting for us after all this.

**SAUNDERS.** Heavens.

**JONES.** All rather dishonest then some might say.

**JENKINS.** There we are, you see! We can always count on Jones to come in with a merry encouraging remark.

**JONES.** Oh I've no doubt Saunders is relating what he saw, but there is another way to tell the story of course.

**LEWIS.** Such as?

**JONES.** Isn't it obvious? (*Gets to his feet*). Well allow me to demonstrate then. (*Imitates SAUNDERS' voice*). A couple of years ago I was up at Oxford visiting some pals. Heavens, what a night we had of it. Well one of the chaps suggested we get a few of the college punts out and take them down the river. Lorks, what a laugh. Well off I went and I started to drift off and before I knew it I'd lost the oar.

**JENKINS.** Pole.

**JONES.** Of course, pole. Well what with everything when I was trying to get the pole I only went and fell in! What! I managed to struggle to the

bank and collapsed on a bench, and then guess what? First, this dog came along and started to bother me and then this young chap appeared. I tried to get to my feet and talk to him but when I took hold of his arm he only went and took off and ran away. What a rotter. Eh? (*JONES gets back onto the bed*).

*(Pause.)*

**JENKINS.** Hmm, well that's that then.

*(After a few seconds WATCYNS stumbles in carrying a sack.)*

**JENKINS.** A-ha! The wanderer returns, and with good news and provisions I hope?

**WATCYNS.** Not much sir. Ration party got hit on the way up. But I've managed to scrounge a bit of bacon and some bread.

**JENKINS.** Watcyns my dear man, you have just described a feast fit for a king. Maybe even a Kaiser if I was feeling generous.

*(WATCYNS heads towards the cooker gradually unpacking the bag. Fade to darkness. Curtain.)*

### Scene 3

*(Curtain opens. Lights come on to reveal LEWIS sitting at the table reading papers. JENKINS is also seated but is supping from a glass. The bottle of whiskey is on the table, now noticeably emptier. No one else is in the room. JENKINS checks his watch.)*

**JENKINS.** How long have they been now? *(Looking around.)*

*(LEWIS looks up from his book and checks his watch.)*

**LEWIS.** About two hours I would say.

**JENKINS.** Oh.

**LEWIS.** Should be back soon. They were probably held up at Shaftesbury Avenue. He's got a machine gun trained on the gap by the old farmhouse

and can keep you pinned down for an hour or more if he puts his mind to it.

**JENKINS.** Yes, I had to run that little gauntlet two days ago. *(Pause.)* Anything interesting?

**LEWIS.** *(Looks up)* Sorry? Oh the papers. No nothing at all, just the usual nonsense.

**JENKINS.** Thank God for that. I wouldn't want to a repeat of that last order.

**LEWIS.** No, quite.

**JENKINS.** Bad show all round. *(Pause.)* I must say, I did rather take to Saunders. That was a damn fine story, and jolly decent of him to tell it in front of us all, what with us being strangers to the poor chap. I do hope he breaks Jones's six-week record, you know.

**LEWIS.** He may do. If he's lucky.

**JENKINS.** He was saying he had a brother.

**LEWIS.** Yes, killed last year. He was telling me all about it on the way up here. It seems he went missing in an attack and they never found the body.

**JENKINS.** Ah, I see. Well, at least Miller's kin will have a grave to go to. I wonder where they'll bury him afterwards?

**LEWIS.** *(Puts his papers down.)* I don't know. Now you mention it I can't remember where he was from, to be honest. Not sure I can recall much about Miller at all.

**JENKINS.** No, me neither. I know he told me once, but now he's gone...

**LEWIS.** ...Yes, now he's gone. *(Picks up his papers again. Starts to tick off items on a sheet. )* Anyway, I expect they'll leave him here, along with everyone else when it all finishes.

**JENKINS.** Really? You don't think they'll ship all the bits and bodies back to England?

**LEWIS.** I doubt it. (*Pause.*) It would cost too much.

**JENKINS.** Yes, you're probably right. I'd never really thought about it, to be honest. It would cost a fortune and hardly the heroic homecoming they told us we would all get. Ha ha. I can just see it now, little Tommy on the quay squealing "Oh look, there's Uncle Bill. And ooh look, here comes another bit of him. And another..." (*LEWIS laughs in agreement but still reads his papers*). I wonder how *The Daily Mail* would get round that one. You know now I come to think of it I find it really difficult to imagine where they could put everyone after this is all over. The dead ones that is. I mean where would they find that is big enough to bury them all?

**LEWIS.** Hmm, yes, it would require quite a bit of space. Perhaps they could just seal off a load of islands in the Hebrides or some such place and bury us all there. Or at least what's left of us.

**JENKINS.** Yes. You know I quite like that. An island of the dead, for the dead. And those of us who survived could ask to live there. At least we would all be with our own then, and not have to mix with any dreadful civilians. Just think, no one asking you what it was all like, no ghouls hanging off your every word waiting to hear another gruesome story. Yes, an island of the dead. That gets my vote.

**LEWIS.** Well, as I said, it would all cost too much.

(*Pause*)

**JENKINS.** Yes, I suppose so. Shame. You know that does remind me of a graveyard I once saw though. It was in the middle of a town to the south of here which we'd taken over from the French and they'd taken over from the Germans by the looks of it. Anyway, right in the middle was the old graveyard you see, but all smashed up. Well as I say, the French had been there before us, and they'd carried on using it but they'd run out of space so they had to use anywhere they could find. There were graves inside houses, in shops, anything without a cellar, and on nearly every bit of flat ground they could find, as far as the eye could see - wooden crosses everywhere, little ones, some by themselves, some in groups of two or three, and you know I thought to myself it was almost as if they had grown up out of the ground, like the trees and flowers. And on top of the

crosses they had placed the caps of the men buried there—French kepis, German grey ones, and our own khaki caps. It was like everything everywhere was dead—dead men, dead trees, dead village. And do you know it was as if that was normal, as if someone was telling us that this was how things were meant to be and would always be; a bit like this island of yours I suppose. This is how it will always be. *(Pause)* Anyway, that was until the Germans found a range on us. They'd lob one over every now and the crosses, the caps, and everything would just disappear. *(Gestures with his hands)* Nothing.

**LEWIS.** Well, there's your answer then. They simply need to bury some of them, blast the place to bits with heavies, and then bury some more. Just keep going like that until they've got rid of everyone. Perfectly feasible come to think of it.

**JENKINS.** Well, it's a thought. Can't imagine the relatives would be too impressed though, but I suppose it doesn't matter much once you're dead. *(Frowns.)* Unless, of course, Saunders's story was true, about that ghost on the riverbank I mean.

**LEWIS.** *(Shaking his head:)* I doubt it. If there were such things as ghosts we would be surrounded by them; the amount we've created these past three years.

**JENKINS.** Ah but who is to say we're not? Who is to say that this very dug-out is not heaving with all the ghosts of the men who have died here fighting over this hole in the ground, eh? They may well be here, all around us, and it's just that we can't see them. I bet they're all here, sitting on the beds, walking around, reading your papers over your shoulder, having a damn good laugh at us poor sods still left behind.

**LEWIS.** You're drunk.

**JENKINS.** Hardly old boy. But I certainly intend to be. *(Pours another drink.)* By the way, what do you make of Jones?

**LEWIS.** Not much.

**JENKINS.** No. Strange sod, isn't he. He'll sit there, quiet as anything, and then come out with something quite cruel. I mean, that stuff about

surviving only a few weeks. What a thing to say to Saunders, poor chap. To be honest, if it wasn't for the fact that he's been out here for so long I would probably punch him into the next dug-out.

**LEWIS.** *(Still reading his papers)* You know he was sent back for several months, don't you?

**JENKINS.** What? Jones? No. Really?

**LEWIS.** Yes, sometime after the opening of the Somme. Taken out of the line, back to Blighty for several months.

**JENKINS.** Injured?

**LEWIS.** No... *(Looks up from his papers)* at least not physically.

**JENKINS.** Well I never.

**LEWIS.** He doesn't talk about it of course; tries to keep it a bit of a secret. I only found out from Miller, he'd been with Jones from the time he came out and was around at the time.

**JENKINS.** Never talks about anything if you ask me. That's his problem. Like a kettle simmering away but the spout's blocked. Pretty soon...Boom! But that is interesting though. *(Pause.)* And you know, that reminds me. When I came down here with Watcyns we found Jones stretched out on the floor in the dark. Completely flat out. What do you make of that? Eh? Oh hello, here they are.

*(Voices from outside. JONES and SAUNDERS enter through the doorway centre stage. They are closely followed by WATCYNS, who is carrying STONE. STONE is shell-shocked.)*

**JONES.** Right, put him down there, Watcyns.

*(WATCYNS drags STONE to one of the beds and sits him down.)*

**LEWIS.** What the devil?

**JONES.** Shock. Just as we were getting back from the tour. We found him in a funk-hole screaming his head off.

**LEWIS.** Well, why the devil did you bring him here?

**JONES.** No rooms at the Savoy old bean, fully booked. Where else would you have me put him? I couldn't send him back; they're shelling the whole damn road as far as the CCS. And anyway he was putting the wind up the other men. They probably would have shot him before long if we had left him there.

**JENKINS.** What happened to him?

**SAUNDERS.** We don't know. The men said he had curled up in his hole and the next thing they knew he started screaming. They saw a rat crawl out from under the gas blanket but that was it.

**JENKINS.** A rat? A rat did that to him?

**JONES.** I would suggest it was probably the hundreds of other rats that have run over him in the nights since he's been here, that plus a few months of Germans shelling.

**JENKINS.** Well, he's not screaming now.

**LEWIS.** No. (*Gets up and approaches STONE.*) Mute I would say. (*He peers at him closely.*) I doubt you will get anything from him now. He'll have to go back to a CCS at some point.

**JONES.** Not at the moment I would suggest.

**LEWIS.** No. And I don't suppose we could send him back to the men. Bad for morale and all that. I suppose we'd best just have him here and keep an eye on him. Watcyns.

**WATCYNS.** Yes sir.

**LEWIS.** As soon as the shelling dies down I want to know. Then get another man and get him the hell out of here.

**WATCYNS.** Yes sir.

**LEWIS.** Hell. That's all we need. (*Sits down at table.*)

**SAUNDERS.** Who is he?

**LEWIS.** Stone.

**JENKINS.** Not been out too long from what I recall. Poor sod. Seen it a million times myself, of course. What about you, Jones?

**JONES.** *(Sitting on the bed:)* I've seen a few.

**SAUNDERS.** What does it to them?

**JENKINS.** Oh, who knows. Probably being out here so long it just builds up and up until something, could be the slightest little thing, just sets them off. Some start screaming, some huddle into a ball, a lot just get the shakes. I've even known one man who just said "That's it, I'm off," and climbed over the parapet and walked straight towards the Hun. Didn't get very far of course. Nice looking chap and all. Farmer lad, from Somerset.

**SAUNDERS.** Heavens. Does it ever happen to Officers?

**JENKINS.** Yes, but I've never seen it though.

**LEWIS.** Not as much as it happens with the men of course. I've often thought that it's because they can't really say anything; they've had it trained out of them; whereas we...

**JONES.** You seem to have given it quite a bit of thought Lewis.

**LEWIS.** You mean you haven't?

*(Silence.)*

**JENKINS.** Well, this allows me to go in for the competition, come to think of it. I have a story that will absolutely knock you for six.

**JONES.** Please don't feel obliged in any way.

**JENKINS.** I shall ignore that. Anyway this was the strangest thing I ever saw, well, heard of, I suppose, and seeing Stone here brings it all back. There was this chap you see, we had him back near Albert. He was a runner this lad, called Strangwick. Not a bad sort, in fact quite a bit of a star to think of it, definitely NCO material. Well, we were back out the line for a break and, you know, out of it—but you could still hear the guns all the time, and on the third evening we were there I was called out by one of

our sergeants. He came to me and said that there was a bit of a problem with the men and could I come and look at it. Well, obviously I followed him but when I got there I found it was this chap, this Strangwick you see. Well, by all accounts he'd gone completely to pieces, it was fairly obvious just looking at him.

**SAUNDERS.** Why, what was he doing?

**JENKINS.** Well, not a lot, to be honest. He was just pacing back and forth, totally lost to the world just muttering to himself. Most of the time you couldn't understand what he was saying, but I could pick up some of the words. They were bits from the Bible: "If after the manner of men I have fought with beasts at Ephesus, what advantageth it me, if the dead rise not?"

**LEWIS.** Corinthians.

**JENKINS.** Really? Well I'll take your word for that. Anyway he kept pacing back and forth, just muttering the last bit, "if the dead rise not." Well, I tore the sergeant off an enormous strip of course for dragging me out instead of the MO, and told him to run off and get him. So I was left alone with this chap for a few minutes and I began to study him closely, and I noticed that there was something odd about him, beyond the fact of course that he was totally mad. Every now and then I'd catch him sneaking a glance at me, you see, almost as if he was checking that I was still looking at him. So, I could tell that something wasn't quite right. Usually in these cases, once they go, they go, and they're not in the least bit interested as to what is happening around them.

**JONES.** Could you speak up a bit? I don't think Stone quite caught that last bit.

**JENKINS.** Oh right, well there you are you see. Look at him, completely oblivious. Proves my point. Anyway, back to my story. This lad, Strangwick, well he certainly had the jumps all right but somehow it just didn't ring true. Something wasn't quite right. But at the same time it was clear that he wasn't shirking. *(Pause. Takes a drink.)* Well I suppose I was bored by all the R and R, which up to then had just meant more bloody paperwork and stupid lectures on how to avoid blowing your head off

with a Mills bomb; so Strangwick presented a bit of a diversion, a bit of interest. Worth a study, what? Well, the MO eventually arrived and confirmed what I already knew, shell-shock, or apparently so at any rate; and the sensible thing, of course, would have been to pack him off to some hospital or other but I asked the MO to delay it for an hour or so, as I wanted to see if I could find out a bit more about this one.

**JONES.** How wonderfully clinical.

**JENKINS.** Maybe. *(Pause.)* Well, we sat this chap down and peered at him a bit more. And the more I looked the more I could tell that my previous suspicions were right. Sometimes he was clearly with us, and sometimes he was not; he'd gone back to whatever it was that he was seeing.

*(JENKINS stands up and moves to the left of stage. We can now see STRANGWICK seated on a chair; next to him is the MO. JENKINS approaches STRANGWICK. STRANGWICK is clearly in some distress.)*

**JENKINS.** Strangwick, Strangwick, can you hear me?

**STRANGWICK.** If the dead rise not, if the dead rise not... Oh sweet Jesus...

**JENKINS.** Strangwick, you can hear me, I know you can.

**STRANGWICK.** Sir?

**JENKINS.** Strangwick, look at me.

**STRANGWICK.** Sir...the dead rise not... It says so in the Bible... The dead rise not. It was my uncle, he said that, he was a great man for the Bible he was. "If after the manner of men I have fought with beasts at Ephesus, what advantageth it me, if the dead rise not?"

**JENKINS.** Yes, I know that...

**MO.** His uncle?

**JENKINS.** Yes. His uncle. Sergeant Fisher.

**MO.** Fisher was his uncle? Christ, no wonder he has gone off the rails.

**JENKINS.** Hmm, yes. Strangwick, listen to me. I want you to tell me what happened to make you like this? Do you understand, Strangwick? You're a good soldier and it would be better if we could sort this out here and now without you having to go back. Can you hear me Strangwick?

**STRANGWICK.** Sir?

**JENKINS.** Good. Good lad. Now take it easy and tell me what happened. Let's take it from the beginning. Was it something that happened when we were last up?

(STRANGWICK *nods.*)

**JENKINS.** I know you Strangwick, you've been through a few heavy shellings in your time, and our last stint was hardly that bad. So it must have been something else. Is that right?

**STRANGWICK.** Yes sir.

**JENKINS.** Good, good. Now why don't you tell me, as slowly as you want to, what it was that happened.

(STRANGWICK *looks worried and takes some time to speak.*)

**STRANGWICK.** Well, sir, it was me uncle you see. Sergeant Fisher that is, sir, begging your pardon. Most people didn't know he was me uncle you see, but a few did. To be honest, though, he wasn't really, not by blood at any rate; but I'd grown up calling him that 'cos he had been very close to my Auntie Edith. You see my parents died when I was young and me mum's sister, that's Auntie Edith, she looked after me and my sisters and brought us up. Ron, that's...sorry, that was my uncle's first name, was always round the house and I sort of grew up with him and all, like a father he was. Well, when the War came Uncle Ron joined up, and I followed quickly after as soon as I was old enough. It was the money you see? Things weren't that good in the village and this was a steady wage for both of us, and it would keep me aunt and me sisters well off. Well, it was a stroke of luck us being in the same regiment and with me being runner I could get to see him quite often. He never treated me any different from the rest of the lads though, but he looked out for me as best as he could. Well, a few days ago I was bringing up some mail and I saw I had a letter

for Uncle Ron. Well, when I brought it to him he made me a cuppa and we had a long chat about old things. After a bit though he opened the letter. It was from one of my sisters, I could tell the handwriting you see. He reads it over and over and I could see his face gradually going whiter and whiter. After a few moments he put the letter back in the envelope, tucks it into his pocket and looks up at me. "She's gone," he said. That was it. "She's gone."

**JENKINS.** Your aunt? Your aunt had gone?

**STRANGWICK.** Yes sir. I got it out of him a couple of days later. She'd died a week ago. That was what my sister had written to tell us. Influenza it was.

**JENKINS.** I'm sorry to hear that.

**STRANGWICK.** Thank you sir. Well, after that I tried to keep an eye on my uncle as best as I could. But whenever I spoke to him he seemed distant, somehow, as if he was never thinking about what was going on around him. I told him he had to shape up or he was going to get careless, or if he was really feeling ill to see the MO, begging your pardon sir, to see if he could get some leave. But he wouldn't have none of it. Just kept quiet and went about his business.

**JENKINS.** Go on.

**STRANGWICK.** Well, it was the last night we were up there sir. If you remember we had quite a bit of sorting out before the Bucks came and took over. It was quite a busy day and in the evening you sent me with that message for Major Sutherland.

**JENKINS.** Yes, that's right, I remember. Go on.

**STRANGWICK.** Well, I was still worried about my uncle so I thought I'd try and speed things up a bit.

**JENKINS.** And?

**STRANGWICK.** Well, the quickest route to the Major's dug-out was through Napoo Trench, sir.

**JENKINS.** You went through Napoo Trench?

**STRANGWICK.** Yes sir.

**JENKINS.** But it was sealed off. The men had put boards up at either end.

**STRANGWICK.** I know sir. But it was the quickest way you see, and it would mean I could cut my journey by a good hour or so.

**MO.** Wasn't Napoo the old trench the Frenchies had abandoned?

**JENKINS.** Yes that's right. We took over that whole sector not long ago.

**MO.** Sorry, I don't understand. What was wrong with it?

**JENKINS.** Nothing strategically. But Napoo was where they had to hold the line for one week without any reinforcements. After a day or so they ran out of anything to repair the trench walls and had started to use the corpses. Built parapets, firing steps, everything with them. By the end of the week there were dead men in every gap, under every duckboard.

**MO.** And they're still there?

**JENKINS.** No one has ever had the time or the inclination to move them. It was easier just to seal the trench off; the men were told to keep clear of it.

**STRANGWICK.** I know sir, but it was a short cut you see. I didn't think anyone would mind.

**JENKINS.** Go on then.

**STRANGWICK.** Well, I got over the wall all right and then began to head along the trench. *(Pause)* There were dead men everywhere. Everywhere I tell you. Peering out of the walls, under the duckboards in the water. That was the worst of it. Every time you took a step forward there was a squeak or a gasp as air came out of them. Not that there was much left after the rats had been at them. Horrible it was. Well, I was about half way along when I saw a shape ahead of me. At first I thought it was a German patrol and I'd walked right into it, but then I could make out the shape of the helmet and knew it was one of us. I started to walk forward and then I

could see it was my uncle. Uncle Ron. I was about to run to say hello when...when ...

**JENKINS.** Go on.

**STRANGWICK.** When I saw her.

**JENKINS.** Her?

**STRANGWICK.** Yes, her. My aunt. My Aunt Edith.

**MO.** Impossible.

**STRANGWICK.** No sir, it's true. It was her, as clear as day. She was just standing there, by a dug-out, waiting.

**JENKINS.** (*Looks at the MO*). I see. Well what happened.

**STRANGWICK.** Well, I couldn't move, sir. I tried to, but I couldn't. And my uncle he just walked towards her, he was carrying something...

**MO.** The charcoal burners?

**STRANGWICK.** Yes sir. It must have been. Well, he walks towards her, and she's smiling all the time, and then the two of them just went into the dug-out.

**JENKINS.** And then?

**STRANGWICK.** I ran sir. I'm not ashamed to say it, I'd stand up to anything he could throw at us, gas, shells, what have you, but that wasn't right. It couldn't be. She was dead. My sister said so. So I ran. I ran like the Devil was after me, and for all I know... She was dead. She'd died weeks ago of the 'flu. "The dead rise not." It says so in the Bible doesn't it? So it must be true.

**JENKINS.** Yes lad. It must be true.

*(JENKINS stands up and returns to centre stage. He sits down opposite LEWIS. Stage left, where STRANGWICK and the MO are, returns to darkness.)*

**LEWIS.** So what did you do?

**JENKINS.** Sent him back of course. That sort of thing would only do the men harm if they heard it. Bit like Stone here.

**SAUNDERS.** And what about the uncle?

**JENKINS.** Well, we'd known about him before. When he took the charcoal burners he did so without permission so the quartermaster was up in arms. Some men had seen him heading for Napoo so it wasn't hard to find the dug-out the next day.

**LEWIS.** And?

**JENKINS.** Well, suicide was the official verdict. He'd sealed the entrance off with a gas blanket and burnt the charcoal. Asphyxiation. Not pleasant.

**LEWIS.** Did you see him?

**JENKINS.** No, but some men I knew did. Apparently...and I say apparently...the look on his face was ... well... he was laughing; as if he'd been told the funniest joke in the world. *(Pause.)* Now if that doesn't win me the...

*(JENKINS starts to reach towards the helmet, but there is a sudden series of loud explosions from outside. All the officers get to their feet.)*

**LEWIS.** Jesus Christ. *(He runs towards the opening and exits.)*

**JENKINS.** *(Finishes his drink.)* All right, Saunders. Get ready. Looks like there's a show on!

*(LEWIS re-enters.)*

**LEWIS.** Minnies. Dozens of them coming over. Falling short, thank God, but it could be a raid. Out we go.

*(Shells continue to explode. All the officers exit. There are shouts and screams from outside. LEWIS can be heard shouting orders. Sound begins to fade with the lights. Only a spotlight is left on STONE, who is still sitting on the bed. He begins to laugh. Curtain.)*



## ACT II

### Scene 1

*(Curtain rises. The stage is empty. After a few moments JONES enters wearing a gas mask. He pulls the gas blanket by the doorway tight behind him and walks to the centre of the room. He lifts the mask slightly, pauses, and then takes it off, breathing deeply. He collapses on one of the chairs and pours himself a drink, gulping it down. He coughs. Pours another drink and swallows it, more slowly. After a few moments JENKINS enters, taking off his mask.)*

**JENKINS.** Not to worry old, boy. Gas has gone.

*(JENKINS sits down at the other chair. He picks up JONES' glass. JONES motions for him to drink it.)*

**JENKINS.** Thanks.

*(Long pause.)*

**JONES.** Christ.

**JENKINS.** Yes.

**JONES.** Your sector?

**JENKINS.** Fine. We were lucky. The men were excellent.

**JONES.** Yes.

**JENKINS.** Caught sight of Saunders. Seemed to be doing well.

**JONES.** Good.

**JENKINS.** Lewis?

**JONES.** Don't know. Haven't seen him.

**JENKINS.** Hell, I'm tired. Couldn't spit sixpence either.

**JONES.** Get some sleep.

**JENKINS.** No. No. I won't be able to sleep for a few hours. Never can. Amazing really. Half an hour walk at home and I could sleep forever. Four hours of that and I'm wide awake. Four hours. How many damn shells have they got? (*JONES shrugs. Looking around.*) Jesus. I've just realised. Where the hell is Stone.

**JONES.** Oh him. (*Pause*) Oh it doesn't matter.

**JENKINS.** He'll turn up I expect. (*JONES laughs and then pours himself a drink and swallows it.*)

**JENKINS.** Not like you.

**JONES.** Really, and just what is like me?

**JENKINS.** Sorry. (*He raises his glass in a toast.*) Three years!

**JONES.** (*Returns the toast.*) Or the duration!

*(They both swallow their drinks. There is a long pause.)*

**JONES.** How old are you Jenkins?

**JENKINS.** Well now, 32 come to think of it.

**JONES.** I'm 24. That's all. Just 24. (*Pause.*) And I suspect Saunders is probably only 19.

**JENKINS.** There are a lot younger here than 19.

**JONES.** Yes, yes. (*Sighs*) Do you know, old chap, the longer I stay out here, the more certain I am of one thing.

**JENKINS.** What's that?

**JONES.** It's that I don't want to die. Simple as that, I just don't want to die. You know I sometimes wake up, sweating, convinced I'm dead. That I've been killed during the night. Strange. It's part fear you see, but it's also part anger. So bloody angry that I'm here and it is so unfair.

**JENKINS.** Ah, right. I see.

**JONES.** I doubt it. (*Pause*) What is more, I know how I am going to die.

JENKINS. You're just thinking the worst.

JONES. No really, I've seen it so many times in my dreams, that I'm convinced. I'll be in an attack, and I'll end up in a trench, one of their trenches. And I'll find myself standing face to face with this German, and he is armed with a rifle and a bayonet. Only I haven't got anything you see. So I know he is going to kill me. I know that in a few seconds he is going to stick the bayonet into me, and twist it. And those seconds pass so slowly. And I'm feeling angrier and angrier. I keep asking: Why me? What did I do to deserve this? So angry that I can't stop it happening, that it is so unfair. I feel like an animal at the slaughterhouse who in those few minutes before it is killed gains a glimpse of understanding, and realises what is about to happen to it. Totally powerless. And I can see my wife, years after I am dead. All those years I should have had with her, they're gone, they've been taken from me. She'll find someone else, and I'll be angry at him because he lived and I didn't. Because he can hold her, and kiss her, and love her, and I can't. It's like I'm sinking...sinking into an endless infinite sea of hopelessness, but infinity just isn't big enough.

JENKINS. Maybe you should have another drink.

*(JENKINS pours JONES a glass, but JONES ignores it.)*

JONES. I don't think that's a solution.

JENKINS. Seems to work for me right enough.

JONES. Really? Or does it just make you forget?

JENKINS. What's the difference?

JONES. Well, "working for you" implies things get better; "forgetting" just means that when you sober up the problem will return.

JENKINS. A-ha, well there's the trick, you see?

JONES. What's that?

JENKINS. Don't sober up.

*(JENKINS is very pleased with himself. JONES pauses before speaking.)*

**JONES.** I think back a lot to the last time I saw my wife, you know.

**JENKINS.** It's not wise to do that.

**JONES.** I know but I can't help myself. Do you know it was the strangest thing. The day before I left we just went around the house doing odds and ends, but we could hardly look at each other. I think it was because that if we did we would have seen the fear in each other's eyes and we would have had to suddenly face the truth. I remember I spent most of the day in my little office, getting all the papers in order and so on, and she was with the children in the garden. And even in the evening we busied ourselves by cooking the dinner, washing the plates, bathing the children, but never once did we look at each other. It was only when we had put the boys to bed and we were sitting there by the fire, not saying anything, just staring at the flames, that it finally broke. She came slowly over to me and just sat down by the chair and put her head on my knee. I could feel her trembling and beginning to cry, and then it just hit me. The awfulness of it, the unfairness of it all, and I...I started to cry as well.

**JENKINS.** Jones, old man, this really isn't doing you any good you know.

**JONES.** It's not meant to be. On the contrary. Do you know we spent the whole night just lying in bed, not saying anything, not even kissing, just lying there in each other's arms. Occasionally she would start to cry and I would try and console her but I couldn't do anything. Every tick of the clock just meant we had even shorter together, but even knowing that, we still did not have anything to say to each other. And when it was dawn I just got up and put on my uniform. She busied herself downstairs putting some food together, anything I suppose than to see me. She was...extremely brave. Even when I said goodbye she managed to hold it all in and stood at the doorstep as I got into the cab to take me to the station. It was only as we were heading out of the gate and over a small hill that she broke, and began running towards us, trying to catch up. She stumbled and fell over, I saw it, but I couldn't do anything. I couldn't. I couldn't get out of the cab and help my wife, my own wife, to her feet, the woman I love, because I was duty bound to stay in that cab and get to the station.

**JENKINS.** You did what you had to do.

**JONES.** I did it because I knew that if I had got out I would never have got back in.

**JENKINS.** We all feel like that. Every morning on every platform station in England thousands of people are re-enacting that very scene. But we all get on the trains, we all get into the cabs, we never look back.

**JONES.** Why?

**JENKINS.** Because that's what we are trained to do. That is what we have been trained to do since we were young. Never look back, never show emotion.

**JONES.** Not even when we are killing someone.

**JENKINS.** That depends upon the emotion.

**JONES.** Clever. *(Pause)* Do you ever wonder about it? Killing that is.

**JENKINS.** Not something I really need to do, old chap. It's happening every day.

**JONES.** No I mean the killing of someone. I do. Sometimes I think it is like turning off a light. Cutting off all that brightness. When you kill someone, you don't just kill someone, you end everything about them. All the millions of memories and bits of knowledge they hold, all the emotions they feel, all the future years. All gone. Like that.

**JENKINS.** I thought the official line was that the Huns didn't have any emotions. That's treasonous talk you know. Court-martial offence if I had my way.

**JONES.** Yes you're probably right. *(Pause.)* But there are so many, have been so many. So many men, destroyed, gone. I feel I can see all their faces, you know. All the ones I've had under my command. Parading past me like a moving picture. *(Pause.)* Do you think anyone cares? That anyone will remember all this in the future, that is? All the men, all their stories, all the...all what we've gone through here?

**JENKINS.** You mean like Miller? Yes, they'll have to. Their guilt will force them to.

**JONES.** People are very good at forgiving themselves you know. But what about in the future? Does anyone now remember Waterloo, I mean really remember?

**JENKINS.** Hard to forget, old man, when there's a bloody great station named after it.

**JONES.** No I didn't mean that, I meant remember the battle, what the men at Waterloo did for Europe. I doubt it, and it will be the same for us in a hundred years. No one will remember us, no one will care about what we did. Sure, they remember Wellington, the date of the battle, and the like, but who remembers the junior officers, or the men? Who will care about all the men we have lost, gone, forever? No one. No one will care. It makes me angry to think of it.

**JENKINS.** Don't get on that theme again.

**JONES.** *(Stands up and begins to pace around)* I just wish I could do something that meant that in fifty or a hundred years people will take a moment to think about us, and try to remember us as people, not just casualty figures in some historian's notebook.

**JENKINS.** Hold on, old man. I don't actually intend to become a casualty figure you know; and if I'm careful enough I'll be around in fifty years to give the damn historian a good kick up the arse.

**JONES.** I don't suppose anyone ever thinks they will become a casualty...a figure.

**JENKINS.** You do.

*(Pause.)*

**JONES.** Again, very clever.

**JENKINS.** OK then, let us suppose you had your wish. What exactly would you want to happen in this Great Act of Remembrance?

**JONES.** (*Faces JENKINS across the table*). I don't know. Maybe someone could write something, or build something. It would be the greatest memorial of all, surpassing anything the Egyptians managed, reaching hundreds of feet into the air, so that when it is all over people will come and look at it and realise just how big and monstrous the whole bloody thing was.

**JENKINS.** That of course rather assumes that it will be all over at some time. What if it never ends? What if what we've been through up to now is only the start of it?

**JONES.** It will have to end; there'll be no one left soon to carry it on.

**JENKINS.** You think? It strikes me that the people running the whole thing are really rather enjoying it all. Furthermore, what would they do with themselves if it ever ended? Not to mention the buggers who are making a mint out of the whole bloody thing. Do you know the last time I went back I came across a rather beastly little man I had known before the whole thing started. Back then he had a pokey little factory which made tin soup bowls or some such bloody nonsense, and a rather plump and suspiciously hairy little wife. Anyway, the little blighter turned his factory into a production line for mess cans or something and has obviously done rather well out of it all. He now owns a rather splendid house in what up to before the war had been a careful part of town, and his factory is all painted and twice the bloody size. Even his blasted wife has had a shave. (*He pours himself a drink and raises the glass.*) Here's to you Kaiser Wilhelm, patron saint of the bearded lady! (*Pause*) Getting back to this memorial thingamabob. What would you put at the top of it then?

**JONES.** I don't know. A statue perhaps?

**JENKINS.** Ah, but who?

**JONES.** Well, not Haig, that's for certain. Not if it's so high that I can't get a shot at it whenever I want to. No. Maybe...nothing. Yes that's it. Nothing. That seems appropriate some how.

**JENKINS.** Yes but it wouldn't get the tourists flocking in, would it old boy?

(SAUNDERS enters in a hurry in a bit of distress. He is wearing his gas mask.)

**JENKINS.** Good heavens lad, are you OK?

**SAUNDERS.** *(Takes off his mask and gasps for air. There is a pause.)* Yes. Thank you for asking.

*(SAUNDERS moves to the bed. Sits down slowly. He begins to shake and cry. JENKINS stands up and moves over to him. He sits down beside him and puts his arm around him.)*

**JENKINS.** I say.

**SAUNDERS.** I'm sorry. I'm so sorry.

**JENKINS.** Not to worry, not to worry. Jones, pour him a drink would you.

*(JONES pours a drink and brings it to SAUNDERS. SAUNDERS, still shaking, takes the glass and gulps it. He coughs.)*

**SAUNDERS.** Thank you. *(He takes another drink.)* I'm sorry. It was the men. The men, you see? They were disappearing...men were just being turned into...into nothing. I was making sure one of the machine gun emplacements was ready, and aimed, just as we are meant to do. I came about twenty yards and then...a minnie landed on them. I looked back and there was nothing. Just nothing left. Not a sign that a few seconds beforehand... I'm sorry.

**JENKINS.** No need to apologise, old man. It was your first time, the first men you lost. At least it was quick; they wouldn't have known a thing about it.

**SAUNDERS.** Is that something to be thankful for?

**JENKINS.** It is, believe me it is. I once saw an entire trench taken out by a German flamethrower. Some of the men were still moving nearly a minute later. At least yours didn't suffer. There's consolation in that.

**SAUNDERS.** *(After a pause, he looks at JONES.)* Is it always like this?

**JONES.** You mean the fear?

(SAUNDERS *nods.*)

**JONES.** Yes, always. But the next time, although you will feel the same, you will be able to hide it better. I promise.

**SAUNDERS.** So it never gets better? You never get used to it?

**JONES.** No. You never get used to it. And that's something we should be thankful for.

*(LEWIS enters. He looks at the other three and heads straight for the table. He grabs the bottle and takes a swig. He pauses and then takes another swig.)*

**LEWIS.** The King! *(He takes a third swallow. JENKINS moves across and takes the bottle out of his hand.)*

**JENKINS.** I say, old man. Leave some for the rest of the war, will you?

*(LEWIS looks at JENKINS and laughs.)*

**LEWIS.** You know Jenkins, there are times when I could almost say I quite like you.

**JENKINS.** Why thank you Lewis. The feeling is mutual.

*(Pause.)*

**LEWIS.** Your sector?

**JENKINS.** Oh you know. Not that good.

**LEWIS.** No. *(Pause.)* I'll need to put it all down in the report at some time.

**JENKINS.** Yes.

*(JONES goes to the other bed and sits down. LEWIS sits at the table. JONES looks across at SAUNDERS and LEWIS.)*

**SAUNDERS.** Where's Stone?

**JONES.** Who knows. Wherever you go to after this.

**JENKINS.** Sorry?

**JONES.** Shame really. If he'd managed to get fifteen yards further his end would have been worthy of a song. But as it is he didn't quite make it.

**LEWIS.** Jones, what the hell are you on about?

**JONES.** Oh I'm sorry. Not being clear and succinct am I, as we were taught in training. Wouldn't do for the battalion diary would it? Well, I will try and clarify then. Try this: "Place: Hell; Date: 24th December 1917; Summary: Attack launched across no man's land. Neither right, left, or central objective reached. As per bloody usual. Casualties (*Pause.*) casualties light."

**LEWIS.** We didn't launch an attack.

**JONES.** Ah, well you may not have, and I may not have but Stone... Well Stone, it would appear, got rather lonely sitting here all by himself whilst we were out having our Christmas party, so he must have decided to get up and go for a little walk. Unfortunately for him, Mrs Stone, and all the little Stones back home he chose to take this walk over the parapet and right across no man's land. I say across of course, but more correctly I should say he got about ten feet before a piece of shrapnel sliced through his neck cutting his head straight off. And do you know the most curious thing about it all? Even though his head was rolling across the ground his body still stood upright, as if to attention. Isn't the discipline of the British Army absolutely amazing.

**LEWIS.** That's enough.

**JONES.** Really? I would have thought that sort of attention to detail would have appealed to you.

**LEWIS.** What do you mean?

**JONES.** Nothing, nothing. Just that you are noted for your admiration of all things officious. Maybe Stone misheard someone and thought we were giving the order to advance, and even in his condition the training worked and off he went. Oh don't get me wrong, take it as a compliment, Lewis. When HQ hears about Stone's last ditch attempt to breakthrough the German lines despite his slight disability I would say your up for at least two or three medals as his CO...

**LEWIS.** *(Shouting:)* I said that's enough! *(LEWIS grabs a glass and pours a drink.)* The duration! *(Swallows drink. He pauses for while, playing with his glass.)*

**JENKINS.** You don't think Stone heard me talking about those shell-shock cases I knew?

**LEWIS.** I doubt it.

*(Silence. SAUNDERS gets to his feet and looks at the wall near him.)*

**SAUNDERS.** I...I don't believe it.

**JENKINS.** What?

**SAUNDERS.** This, here. Is it German?

**JENKINS.** What the wall? No I think officially it has now been liberated and is part of France once again.

**SAUNDERS.** No, sorry, I meant this. There's some writing here. "Gott mit uns."

**JENKINS.** Oh yes, that's German all right. It means "God is with us" or something similar.

**SAUNDERS.** But why? What's it doing here?

**JONES.** Perhaps they dictated it from the other side of no man's land.

**JENKINS.** Ha ha! Point to Jones.

**SAUNDERS.** Sorry?

**LEWIS.** He's only joking, Saunders. This was originally a German trench.

**JENKINS.** Yes, hence the fact that it is so well built you see. Our trenches are pretty ramshackle in comparison. The official line being that they are only meant to be temporary, as we should be constantly moving forward reclaiming land from the Boche. I've always thought the Germans have a much more enlightened view on how long this war will last. At least better than us that is. Do you know when this whole mess started we were told

that they'd simply roll over and surrender and we'd be in Berlin in time for Christmas! Unfortunately nobody told the Germans that.

**JONES.** Yes but isn't it all so wonderful. We only lost 800 men taking this trench. A small price to pay to free this particular lump of clay one could say.

**JENKINS.** True, true.

**JONES.** But then again we must not forget all of the worms and insects and rats that live in here that we have also freed from Prussian tyranny. Some of which undoubtedly contain parts of the corpses of the men who died for their liberty. It's all quite incredible in its beauty. (*LEWIS glares at him then returns to his glass*). Something wrong Lewis? You look troubled. (*LEWIS remains silent*).

**JENKINS.** Your analysis of detail as always, Jones, is worthy of Poe at his finest. However, you do touch on something you know. I mean, if you think of where the Germans are I wonder at what point the ground, according to international law that is, actually becomes the property of the Kaiser. Do you think it's exactly halfway between the two trenches? Lewis, you know these sorts of things, what's the answer?

**LEWIS.** I have no idea.

**JENKINS.** Hmm, it's an interesting point though. In fact we English don't actually own any of this, do we? To the East it's German, at some point, and well here and to the West it's all French, to the north it's the Belgians who own it, and to the south, well, the Swiss I suppose. Come to think of it, what the hell are we doing here? (*Pause.*)

**JONES.** I think the men say "we're here because we're here".

**JENKINS.** Yes, yes, but what would they know. (*Pause.*) Then again if we work on an idea of soil displacement, I suppose, then all the dead Englishmen must amount for quite a few hundred acres surely? All those corners of foreign fields, eh, Saunders? I expect if we added all the buggers up and we might get something approaching the size of Tunbridge Wells.

**LEWIS.** Have another drink.

JENKINS. Only if it's an order.

LEWIS. It's an order.

JENKINS. Sir!

(JONES gets to his feet and moves slowly towards the centre. He stops behind LEWIS.).

JONES. Why Jenkins, old chap, I think for once you've actually hit on something quite interesting.

JENKINS. Really? There's a first.

JONES. Yes, all this talk about the ground, and buried people, it reminds me of something. A story I heard about.

JENKINS. Good, good! That's more like it. You can enter the competition then.

JONES. No, no, you get me wrong. (JONES moves to the centre so he can see LEWIS.). It's not a story I was involved in, but something I heard about once. Miller told me I think. Yes that's right, it was Miller who told me. I wonder...I wonder if maybe Lewis can help us.

LEWIS. I don't know what you're talking about.

JONES. Really? That's strange. Could have sworn you were involved in it all. (Pause) Something about a tunnel wasn't it? And someone insisting that orders should be carried out to the letter...

JENKINS. What are you on about?

JONES. Yes that's it. Didn't somebody get sent on a suicide mission or something like that. Certain death I gather. Just because some idiot at HQ had got things wrong with a few co-ordinates or ...

LEWIS. That's enough.

JENKINS. Lewis, what's he talking about?

JONES. Yes it's all coming back to me now. In fact, from what I recall it was you Lewis...

(LEWIS stands to his feet and stares at JONES).

JONES. Temper, temper. (*Holds his hands up.*) I may have remembered it all wrong, of course. Then again...

(LEWIS faces away from JONES. JONES smiles and returns to his bed).

JENKINS. Lewis...

LEWIS. What?

JENKINS. Did you...you know.

LEWIS. Did I what?

JENKINS. Well, what Jones said.

LEWIS. You mean send someone out knowing they would die? (*Pause.*) You mean you haven't?

JENKINS. Well, I...

LEWIS. In answer to your questions Jones, yes, I was 'involved', but 'no' I didn't knowingly send someone out to die. At least ... at least I don't know. I...I didn't know.

JONES. Oh splendid! Do tell, Lewis, we're all ears. (*LEWIS returns to his papers.*)

LEWIS. There's nothing to tell.

JONES. Oh come now! Where's your party spirit? You simply can't leave your audience hanging like this. Anyway, look on it as a training lecture. It could be very educational for young Saunders here.

(LEWIS looks from JONES to SAUNDERS and then to JENKINS. They are all looking at him.)

LEWIS. Fine. Right. (*Pause.*) If that's what you all want, I'll tell you. (*Takes a drink.*) If that's what you want. (*Pause.*) We were holding a quiet sector south of Messines, away from the salient. Cushy job. Good bunch of Germans opposite, Saxons I think and everyone kept themselves to themselves. (*Pause.*) Anyway I received orders to arrange a scouting party

- but slightly different to normal. I had to send them down one of our old tunnels under no man's land as there was a suspicion they were mining under ours. There was a rumour going around that they may start a few diversionary attacks against us before one last push at Verdun, so a mining operation was possible. Well, the CO had asked me to select four men and an officer to go down for a few hours and to see what they could pick up. Thankfully I'd just had a new chap in from England who was still keen so finding the officer was no problem, and all I had to do was pick the men. I went through the list as usual, selected the men and then sent my sergeant off to tell them to report to me in a couple of hours. *(Pause)* Anyway, one of the chaps I had chosen was called Maloney, he'd come over with a friend...what was his name...Smith...yes that was it, Smith...came over from Cork and enlisted in '15 and they had teamed up with another couple of Irishmen, O'Connor and Shaw. Good chaps overall, reliable, though with a tendency to keep their heads down when volunteers were called for. Well, anyway, whilst waiting for the sergeant to return I took a wander out along my section, to see what was what, and I came across these four playing cards.

*(LEWIS moves left of stage, which is now lit to reveal a wide front-line trench. Four privates, MALONEY, SMITH, O'CONNOR, and SHAW, are crouched down playing cards. All are Irish. LEWIS looks on from a distance unnoticed by the soldiers.)*

**SMITH.** *(Examining his cards:)* Ah Jesus, where the hell did you get these cards from. Did I do something to offend you or something, dealing me a hand like this?

**SHAW.** Just shut up and play will you?

*(SMITH plays a card, followed by the other three. SMITH wins the trick.)*

**SMITH.** Ah-ha, I got you there my beauty. Now, let me see. *(Pauses.)*

**O'CONNOR.** Come on, come on. We haven't got all day y'know.

**SMITH.** Why, are you in a hurry for something? Do you have an appointment with a lady friend you're not telling us about?

**O'CONNOR.** Sure Jesus, wouldn't that be fuckin nice. Some great big lass from Kerry, all round and full of it, like the back end of a carthorse.

**SHAW.** Yeah, right. More like a skinny girl from Dublin with an English nose up her arse. Now are you going to play that fucking card, Eamonn, or aren't you?

**SMITH.** I'm thinking, I'm thinking.

**O'CONNOR.** Christ, now there's a first. Stop the war, for fuck's sake, Private Eamonn Smith is having a think.

**SHAW.** Sure he is that, I can smell it from here.

**SMITH.** Ah wisht will you, and leave a fellow alone. Be like Maloney, the quiet man here. *(Pause.)* Right then, here we go.

*(SMITH plays a card, followed by the other three. MALONEY wins the trick.)*

**SMITH.** Will you be looking at that now. Where the fuck did you get that from?

*(MALONEY quickly plays a card, the other three follow, MALONEY wins the trick again.)*

**SMITH.** Jesus, where did he...

*(MALONEY plays a card, the other three follow, MALONEY wins the trick again.)*

**SMITH.** Christ, where's he pulling them from. Sure there's only one explanation - he's a German spy, old Von Maloney here's been sent over to rob us good Irishmen of our pay.

*(MALONEY again plays a card, the other three follow, MALONEY wins the trick.)*

**SMITH.** That's it, he's got the devil in him. Either that or the Kaiser's got his hand up his arse and is working him from Berlin.

**O'CONNOR.** Sure he's touched. There's no other explanation for it.

**SHAW.** Aye, the quiet man is touched, I've always said it.

*(MALONEY plays his last card, the other three follow, MALONEY wins the trick.)*

**SMITH.** Will you be looking at that. The Seven of Spades on his last bloody card, and he wins with it. Well, me mother was always right, never play cards with a West Corkman carrying a grenade.

**O'CONNOR.** Your mother said that?

**SMITH.** No, no, but she would have. She was a great one for the sayings, God rest her soul.

*(MALONEY picks up the coins on the floor and the rest of the cards.)*

**SHAW.** Well, that's me out. The quiet man has cleaned me out good and proper with his devilry.

**MALONEY.** Ah sure it's all skill. It's me skill that's beating you.

**SHAW.** Skill my arse. You're touched I tell you, touched. I've always said it.

**SMITH.** Aye that he is. He was left at his mammy's doorstep when he was a kid, a changeling I tell you. The fairies took one look at him and said we're not having that pig-ugly bastard messing up our mountain and chucked him out.

**MALONEY.** Ah, away with you. You're talking nonsense.

**SMITH.** Well, if that's not the case then, how can you be doing the trick.

**MALONEY.** That's enough now.

**O'CONNOR.** What trick?

**SMITH.** Ah, haven't you seen Maloney do his trick then?

**MALONEY.** Quiet now will you.

**SMITH.** Ah go on now. Show the lads your trick.

**O'CONNOR.** Yeah, go on. You've cleaned me out of money so you might as well give us something back.

**SMITH.** I tell you, you'd get up in the middle of the night to see this trick. You could charge admission in Phoenix Park for it, they'd be coming from miles around. How about it Maloney?

**MALONEY.** (*Sighs*) OK, then.

**SMITH.** Hey hey. Here we go. You're a grand man. Now then boys, give me that pack of cards here. But first give them a good shuffle.

(*O'CONNOR shuffles the cards and hands them to SMITH.*)

**SMITH.** Right now, the trick is you see, Maloney here can tell you exactly what card is coming up. Name it as clear as day without seeing it.

**SHAW.** Bollocks.

**SMITH.** Is it bollocks you're saying now? You don't believe me then? Do you hear that, quiet man, these heathens are calling me a liar? Well, you'll be laughing on the other side of your faces soon, me boyos, and cleaning out the inside of your trousers by the end of this. OK, you ready Maloney? Here we go.

**MALONEY.** OK then. Queen of spades.

(*SMITH turns over the top card.*)

**SMITH.** And there you are, the Queen of spades. Next one please.

**MALONEY.** Four of diamonds.

(*SMITH turns over next card.*)

**SHAW.** Jesus.

**SMITH.** The four of diamonds it is.

**MALONEY.** Six of clubs.

(*SMITH turns the card.*)

**SMITH.** Read it and weep boys.

**SHAW.** Fuck me.

**O'CONNOR.** He can see them. He must be able to see them or something?

**SMITH.** Really? Then you take them. *(He hands the deck to O'CONNOR.)*  
Now put them behind your back and when he says the card's name take the top one off and show it to us.

*(O'CONNOR puts the cards behind his back.)*

**SMITH.** Go on Maloney, enlighten the unbelievers.

**MALONEY.** Four of clubs.

*(O'CONNOR produces a card from behind his back.)*

**SHAW.** Jesus wept. It is. It is. It's the four of clubs.

**MALONEY.** King of diamonds.

*(O'CONNOR produces a card.)*

**O'CONNOR.** Bugger me.

**MALONEY.** And you pulled that from the middle of the pack.

**O'CONNOR.** Jesus, how did you know that.

**MALONEY.** *(Gradually getting quicker as O'CONNOR produces cards:)* Five of spades, two of hearts, nine of diamonds, three of diamonds, six of hearts, ace of spades.

*(SMITH and SHAW are looking increasingly scared.)*

**SMITH.** OK now, I think we've seen enough.

**SHAW.** Too fucking right we have.

*(Silence.)*

**O'CONNOR.** So what else can you tell? Can you see the future all the time?

**MALONEY.** I don't know.

**O'CONNOR.** I mean, could you see what is going to happen to us? Can you tell us if we're going to get through it?

*(MALONEY looks straight at O'CONNOR.)*

**MALONEY.** No.

*(Pause)*

**O'CONNOR.** No? No? What the fuck does that mean? Is he saying he can't see the future or is he saying we're all for it?

**SHAW.** Ah Jesus, let's stop this now. This has got well out of hand.

*(LEWIS approaches the group.)*

**SMITH.** Officer, lads!

*(The four scramble to their feet.)*

**LEWIS.** Don't worry about that men, stand easy. Maloney, has Sergeant Spiers seen you yet?

**MALONEY.** No sir.

**LEWIS.** OK then, well I might as well tell you. I'm putting you on a patrol tonight. It's an underground one I'm afraid though. You'll be going with Lieutenant Gates, so trot off now to find him to sort out your orders.

**MALONEY.** Yes sir.

*(SMITH, MALONEY, O'CONNOR, and SHAW exit the stage, leaving LEWIS by himself.)*

**LEWIS.** Well, I didn't think too much of it and went back to my dug-out to start on the blasted paper-work.

*(Stage lighting increases to reveal a table and chair. On the table are a series of papers. LEWIS sits at the table.)*

**LEWIS.** Well, the team was due to set off in a few hours, and should have been back relatively quickly, but about half an hour before they were due to leave Maloney appeared.

(MALONEY *marches on to stage and stands to attention by LEWIS.*)

LEWIS. Maloney? What do you want?

MALONEY. Permission to speak sir.

LEWIS. Go on, and stand easy there.

MALONEY. Sir, I'd like to request that I'm not asked to go on the patrol.

LEWIS. I beg your pardon?

MALONEY. Sir, I'd like to request that I'm not sent on the patrol to be led by Lieutenant Gates, sir.

LEWIS. May I ask why? Are you ill?

MALONEY. No sir, it's not that.

LEWIS. Maloney, I'm not used to soldiers marching into my dug-out requesting to be let off duties without a damned good reason.

MALONEY. Yes sir, I know sir.

LEWIS. Well, I'm waiting.

MALONEY. Sir...well, sir...it's just that if I go on the patrol...

LEWIS. Yes?

MALONEY. If I go on the patrol, sir, I know I won't come back.

LEWIS. What on earth do you mean?

MALONEY. I mean I'll be going out to die, sir.

(*Pause.*)

LEWIS. May I ask how you know this with such certainty?

MALONEY. I...I just know sir.

LEWIS. I see. (*Pause*) Look I saw the trick with the cards Maloney. Very impressive it was too. One day I might get you to show it to me. But it was a trick, that's all. Neither you, nor me, nor even Field-Marshal Haig can tell

the future. And the simple reason is because it hasn't happened yet, and there are too many things which can change it. Some depend on luck, some on the actions of men, but either way you cannot predict what will happen, to you or to anyone.

**MALONEY.** It was no trick.

**LEWIS.** I'm sorry?

**MALONEY.** It was no trick, sir.

**LEWIS.** Maloney, even if I was willing to believe you, which I'm not, Army Regulations rather frowns upon predictions of the future. The General Staff don't like it. It reminds them that they're living in the past. Now you and I know that I cannot permit you not to go on that patrol don't you.

**MALONEY.** Yes sir.

**LEWIS.** You were selected from the list and the rest of the men know that.

**MALONEY.** Yes sir.

**LEWIS.** In fact you were ordered to go on the patrol weren't you.

**MALONEY.** Yes sir.

**LEWIS.** So you see I've no choice in the matter. (*Pause*) Very well. Then the decision has been made I'm afraid.

(*MALONEY turns to leave.*)

**LEWIS.** Maloney. One more thing, have you ever disobeyed an order from a superior officer?

**MALONEY.** No sir.

**LEWIS.** Good, well let's keep it that way then. Take it that I am ordering you go on that patrol, and more importantly I am ordering you to come back. Do you understand me?

**MALONEY.** Yes sir.

LEWIS. Good. And Maloney?

MALONEY. Sir?

LEWIS. Best of luck.

(MALONEY exits. LEWIS sits down at the table.)

LEWIS. Well, I got down to the paper-work again. I suppose in a way I just tried to forget about it all. But I couldn't. It was the certainty in his voice. "I'll be going out to die." Terrible. Well, time dragged on and the patrol went out. And then...well that's when it started. Some idiot back at HQ had made a mistake you see. They were sent down the wrong tunnel. They should have been in one a mile further along the line, I mean it wasn't even in our sector. *(Pause)*. Anyway they started to shell the ground, trying to hit the German front trenches but they were falling short. Hitting no-man's land. Hitting the very ground over our tunnel, and, well, it was old, hadn't been maintained.....*(Pause)* About five hours later I received the report. The patrol had gone into the tunnel fine, but on the way back the shelling had started and there had been a cave-in. The whole tunnel had started to collapse and the men had to run for their lives. They got out, just, but when they did they noticed one of them was missing—Maloney. I suppose I knew deep down it was going to be him. We tried a rescue attempt but it was no good. It would have taken weeks to dig him out. *(Pause.)*

JENKINS. I say Lewis...

LEWIS. Let me finish. *(Pause.)* Well, after a few days I began to forget about it. Or at least I tried to. But every now and then I found myself thinking of him and what he had said. It began to play on my mind you see, these things can. I kept thinking how I could have easily got him off the patrol but I'd chosen not to. So in a way I had killed him. And then it began to get worse. I started to get a feeling that something was...well approaching, getting nearer. Every day when I woke up, I felt this...presence. Always that much nearer. I tried to fool myself that I'd been up the line too long and was getting a bit edgy, but somehow it was different. It wasn't like the way you jump inside at a shell, it wasn't like the few moments before an attack... It was... *(Pause.)* Well one night a

couple of weeks later we were back in the line and I was there in the same dug-out filling in the same blasted reports. *(He picks up some papers, sorts them.)* And I was looking through a pile of papers and then suddenly, something fell out of them. *(A playing card falls out onto the table. He picks it up.)* It was a card, a playing card. The queen of spades. And suddenly I remembered Maloney's trick and it all came back to me. *(Tense music starts.)* And then suddenly I felt it again. The presence. But this time it was so near, much nearer than before, so near that it almost felt like it was in the dug-out with me. I was convinced that there was something there, something was behind me. I couldn't turn around, I couldn't even move. I just sat there waiting. And I knew then what it was. It was Maloney. He was obeying the order, he was coming back. And I could picture him, hear him, almost feel him, clawing his way back through the earth slowly, a few feet a day, coming back, coming back for me.

*(MALONEY appears suddenly from behind LEWIS out of the dark. A light is focused on his face. He stands motionless, his face pale. There is a few seconds' silence. Then there is a loud shell explosion offstage. MALONEY disappears.)*

I don't know what would have happened if that shell hadn't landed then. It was pretty close, in a sap only twenty yards away, but it did the trick. It knocked me into my senses and I ran out of the dug-out as quickly as I could. *(Stands up and moves back to centre stage to stand near JENKINS.)*

**JENKINS.** Good heavens. Do you actually think he came back? Like Strangwick's dotty old aunt?

**LEWIS.** I don't know. I just know that in those few seconds before that shell exploded I wasn't alone in the dug-out. Someone, or something was there with me.

**SAUNDERS.** Maloney?

**LEWIS.** As I said, I don't know.

**JENKINS.** But the cards. The trick. That's all it was, after all. As you said. A trick.

**LEWIS.** I expect so, but when I next spoke to one of the men who was there they denied it. They said Maloney was “touched.” That he had the second sight.

**JENKINS.** Well, trick or no trick, that’s the best story we’ve heard all evening. Tops mine and old Saunders’s here. You may as well take the helmet now before we bother to put it to a vote.

**SAUNDERS.** Yes, rather.

**LEWIS.** I don't know about that.

**JENKINS.** What about you Jones? Did you like it?

**JONES.** (*Shrugs*) I only like stories if they are true, old man.

(*LEWIS and JONES glare at each other. Curtain.*)

## Scene 2

(*Five minutes later. JONES is stretched out on the bed reading a newspaper. LEWIS is sitting at the table with JENKINS. SAUNDERS is not in the dug-out. LEWIS and JENKINS are in mid-conversation.*)

**JENKINS.** ...yes, yes, that's right. But what about before the War? What did you do then?

**LEWIS.** Oh, before I joined up I was a teacher.

**JENKINS.** Hmm, I can see that. Yes, that fits somehow.

**LEWIS.** And what about you?

**JENKINS.** To be honest, I’m not entirely sure what I did. Something to do with my father’s factory I suppose. I sort of walked around a bit, nodded at the workers, and went and played golf. Now what would you call that?

**JONES.** Officer material.

**JENKINS.** Ha. Yes, I suppose so. Well, now, we know Saunders was a student, you were a teacher, and I was a whatever, which just leaves old Jones over there. I say, Jones, what you were in your previous life.

**JONES.** If you must know, I was a journalist.

**JENKINS.** Which paper, if you don't mind me asking?

**JONES.** Manchester Guardian.

**JENKINS.** Really? Good for you. Bit provincial for my taste though, of course.

**JONES.** But before that I spent a year in a seminary.

**JENKINS.** What?

**JONES.** A sem-in-ary.

**JENKINS.** Well, I'll be buggered. Who'd have thought it.

**JONES.** You seem surprised.

**JENKINS.** Well, yes. To be honest, you don't exactly come across as the priest type old man.

**JONES.** Really? How interesting. In fact it was the perfect training for the British Army now I come to think of it. Disciplined, all proceedings conducted in an obscure language, and expertise going back centuries in peddling lies and half-truths.

**JENKINS.** Ha. Good point.

**JONES.** I wasn't trying to score points.

**LEWIS.** No really? What were you trying to do?

**JONES.** Oh forget it. I was lying in any case. I'm married if you hadn't noticed.

**JENKINS.** (*Whispers to LEWIS*). Kettle, you see. Woooshh, boom!

(*SAUNDERS enters. He looks quite embarrassed.*)

**JENKINS.** Ah here he is. Did you find the latrine?

**SAUNDERS.** Yes.

**JENKINS.** And did you do your duty, old chap?

**SAUNDERS.** Yes.

**JENKINS.** Good man. Splendid. And I hope you threw it as far as you could towards the Bosche.

**SAUNDERS.** Yes.

**JENKINS.** Good. Ha ha. You're learning.

**JONES.** (*Sings:*) With a tra-la-la-la for the British Grenadier.

(*SAUNDERS stares at him and sits on the bed.*)

**SAUNDERS.** It's been a long day.

**JENKINS.** It has that.

**JONES.** Not for some.

**SAUNDERS.** Pardon?

**JONES.** Well not for Stone or Miller at least. Neither of them made it to (*Looks at his watch*) well tea-time at least. No I think we can safely say that their day has truly ended.

(*A CORPORAL enters in a hurry. He comes to attention in the middle of the room.*)

**LEWIS.** Yes, what is it Corporal?

**CORPORAL.** Message sir. From Major Campbell, sir.

**JENKINS.** It's not wrapped round a bottle of something by any chance, is it?

**CORPORAL.** Er...no sir.

**JENKINS.** Bugger. Still, a Christmas card from the Major is rather touching don't you think?

**CORPORAL.** I'm not sure it's a card, sir.

**JENKINS.** No. I was joking, man.

**CORPORAL.** Yes sir. Right you are sir. *(Pause.)* Very funny sir.

**LEWIS.** Give it here Corporal. And then head off and get some food.

**CORPORAL.** Yes sir.

*(CORPORAL hands LEWIS an envelope, about turns, and exits sharply from the dug-out. LEWIS sits down and reads it. He pauses.)*

**JENKINS.** Don't tell me. Another one of those damn messages forbidding truces on Christmas Day.

**LEWIS.** No, no, I ... *(LEWIS looks tired and rubs his eyes. He then recomposes himself and stands up smartly.)* Apparently two hundred and forty two tins of jam went missing in the reserve stores last night.

**JENKINS.** What flavour?

**LEWIS.** It doesn't say. Anyway, we have been ordered to organise a search of the men to check that none of it has reached here. I suppose we will have to...

**JONES.** Oh for God's sake. Stop the war! Someone is stealing the preserves!

**LEWIS.** What?

**JONES.** You, the pair of you. Listen to yourselves.

**LEWIS.** I don't see...

*(JONES leaps to his feet and comes to the centre. He grabs the order off LEWIS and rips it up).*

**JONES.** There, that was all you needed to do.

**LEWIS.** Jones!

JENKINS. Good God, Jones. That's going to far.

JONES. Really? Listen (*Pause. Faint sound of shelling and machine-gun fire*).

JENKINS. Listen to what?

JONES. Can't you hear? Surprise, surprise, the war is still going on. Ignoring an order didn't quite bring down the Western democracies.

LEWIS. What do you mean?

JONES. That orders are just bits of paper. They can be destroyed a damn sight easier than the men we lose everyday. Can't you see? Can't either of you see? Only a couple of hours ago you calmly went out and selected a party of men with orders for them to blow the brains out of some poor fool who just couldn't take it any more. And you didn't bat an eye. Yet when some tins of jam go missing, well, that's horrendous. Don't you see? It's the same bit of paper, issued by the same idiot back at base. But if you had just ripped it up, then some poor sod would be alive in a week's time and eight men wouldn't have to live the rest of their lives with walking nightmares.

LEWIS. It's an order. They were both orders.

JONES. Well, it's a shame they didn't issue a similar order when we were up to our waists in blood and shit last year on the Somme. It's a shame that they didn't show the same amount of care about the thousands of men who went missing every day, blown to fucking pieces, as they do about a few tins of jam.

JENKINS. Two hundred and forty two.

JONES. Who in God's name can possibly care?

LEWIS. I repeat, it's an order.

JONES. Oh, so there's my answer. You do. You care, Lewis.

LEWIS. No, I don't *care*. But it's an order. And I obey orders (*Pause*) however damned stupid they may appear.

**JONES.** Oh, I don't think that's the whole story, is it? You actually like obeying orders, however damned stupid they might appear. It all comes very natural to you doesn't it Lewis?

**LEWIS.** It's what I'm paid to do. It's what we're all paid to do.

**JONES.** Yes but not all of us take such delight in carrying them out though. Well, how about this. Whilst you're at it *old boy*, why don't you ask the great jam search party to go out and see if they can find anything left of that poor Irish bastard you had buried alive? The one you never went to look for. Remember? Or is jam slightly more important in your view? (*Sings:*) "The bells of hell go ting-a-ling-a-ling, for you but not for me. And the little devils have a sing-a-ling-a-ling, for you but not for me..."

**LEWIS.** Shut up!

**JONES.** "Oh death where is thy sting-a-ling-a-ling, oh grave thy victory?"

**LEWIS.** I said shut up!

*(LEWIS leaps to his feet and punches JONES. JONES falls back onto the floor and stays there. JENKINS leaps up and restrains LEWIS.)*

**LEWIS.** Let me go.

**JENKINS.** Calm down, old boy. Calm down.

**LEWIS.** If you ever say that again I'll kill you, I swear.

**JONES.** (*Getting to his feet:*) Calm, down old boy. Play the officer - not the teacher.

**JENKINS.** Jones, that's enough.

**JONES.** Do you know what I found most interesting about your story Lewis? No? Well I'll tell you. That deep down, for all the training they have drummed into you, you still believe that you did murder him, don't you?

**JENKINS.** Jones, I said leave him alone.

*(Pause.)*

**JONES.** Oh what's the use? (*Slumps on the bed.*)

**LEWIS.** It's fine. You can let me go now. (*He shrugs off JENKINS and straightens himself up. He looks at JONES and then moves to the other side of the dug-out. Slowly he turns.*) I'm fine. (*Pause.*) Right Jones, I'm prepared to accept what you're saying. You're right, Jenkins and I probably do have a different view on the way things are being conducted out here than you do. We may deep down question the orders, but we would never do it openly. Whereas you, in your oh so superior way, feel at liberty to do so. We may think it's a duty to carry on regardless, but you clearly don't. And who knows who is right? And yes, earlier we did follow the order to get a firing squad together. And why? Because it was an order, true, and because I believe that if we don't follow orders or only follow the ones we like then we're doomed. But also because the man was a deserter. He had run away and left his friends to face an attack. He'd left them to carry on whilst he ran away from it all and hid. And do you know, he reminds me of you. You're both (*Pause*) cowards. Oh, I don't mean in the normal sense of the word; I've seen you stand up to the worst barrages and not run; but you still are one. You're a coward because you run away and hide too. You hide behind your sneering and your jibes and your cynicism, but deep down everyone knows you're as scared...

**JONES.** As scared as the rest of you?

**LEWIS.** Yes, perhaps. But you sit there, as if you were above all of us, as if your record was unblemished. You act as if you are the only one who can see what is happening around us, that you're the only one who cares; and the rest of us are just carrying on, and somehow it is all our fault but not yours. By criticizing everything, well that lets you off doesn't it? Somehow, in your mind that takes the guilt away from you. But it doesn't. You're as much to blame as the rest of us.

*(Pause)*

**JONES.** Maybe you're right, Lewis. Maybe I am to blame.

**LEWIS.** Oh, I haven't finished yet. You see there is something else that makes you different from the two of us. For whatever reason, even if it is just blind obedience, Jenkins and I have stuck it through. Whereas you?

Can you say you have? *(Pause.)* No. Not you. Shell-shock wasn't it? Something you would really like us all to forget wouldn't you? Something you had hoped Miller had taken to his grave.

**JONES.** I think you'll find the correct term is neurasthenia actually. If you're going to accuse me of it you may as well get the name right.

**LEWIS.** Neurasthenia or shell-shock, it doesn't matter. It still boils down to the same simple fact—you broke down. You couldn't take it any more, could you?

**JONES.** No. No I couldn't, if it pleases you to hear me admit it.

**LEWIS.** It doesn't, to tell the truth. But I would be interested to hear why. What it was that was so terrible that you, of all people, broke down and had to be sent back. If you tell me that, then I'll be pleased.

**SAUNDERS.** I say, is this necessary?

**JONES.** No he's right. I'm as much a part of this as anyone else. So fine, I'll tell you Lewis. I'll tell you why I was "sent back," as you so kindly put it. I'll finish this little story-telling game of yours.

**JENKINS.** Jones, there's no need. You don't have to finish anything.

**JONES.** Oh, but I insist, old boy. After all, I may even win mightn't I? But my story is different you see. Because it's all true, everything happened, and that's ... that's what was so bad. You see the truth can sometimes be more horrible than any ghost story you can make up. *(JONES moves to the lanterns and turns them down)*. But let's make some atmosphere shall we? *(JONES returns to the centre of the room)*. That's better. More apt I'd say. *(Pause.)* So, where to start? Well, this all happened about a year or so ago. It was late summer, August, and we'd been taken out of the line as we'd been in the thick of it since the start of the Somme. Anyway we were eventually moved slightly to the north to hold a sector, but even there ... even there the corpses were everywhere. Just everywhere. *(Pause.)* Well the men were exhausted, but as always they carried on. Yet all the time ... whenever they peered over the parapets and saw the bodies, they were wondering how long it would be before it happened to them. *(Pause.)* We all did. *(Pause.)* And then they let their imaginations get the better of them.

It was quite soon after we got there that the stories started. All kinds of ideas began to spread, but there was one story that took off the most. It went through the men like a disease and pretty soon they were all believing it. It sounds stupid now when you're away from it all, but then, surrounded by all that, it didn't seem so unbelievable. *(Pause.)* The story went that there were... 'things' living out in no man's land. Some creatures or something that were out there, somewhere...crawling around feeding off the dead. Oh there were a lot of theories as to what they might be. Some said they were soldiers driven mad by it all. Some said they were some form of animal, rats or the like as big as dogs. But most just went for the age-old idea of ghosts or demons, and before we knew nearly every one of the men was wearing a cross or something; and pacts were set up between them that if one of them was wounded so bad that they couldn't be brought back from a patrol then the other would shoot them. *(Pause.)* As I say, it all sounds stupid now, but not then. Not then. *(Pause. JONES moves to the front of the stage.)* It was even getting to the Officers. Anyway our CO told us we had to come down hard on any talk like that, and issued an order that anyone found discussing the subject would be placed on a charge. *(Pause.)* Well one night I was asked to lead a wiring party out and ... *(Pause. JONES is finding it difficult to speak.)* I asked for volunteers ... but no-one ... the men ... no-one is ... no-one is stepping forward... everyone is looking to the floor ... what can I say to them? ... but there, wait, yes you Powell, yes good man, well done... and you there ... and you... excellent, well done men. It shouldn't take long. *(JONES moves stage left, which is dimly lit. Centre stage darkens. The ground is barren, a few bits of debris litter the floor; in the middle there is the crater of a shell hole. He looks around slowly. He breathes in deeply.)* My God, this is it ... this is right ... I'm there. I can smell it, the summer evening, the dead. *(JONES touches his face.)* Blacking *(JONES looks at his hands)*. And I'm wearing gloves, but they won't be thick enough. *(Pause. JONES crouches.)* And now we're going out, crawling, keeping low ... *(Whispers)* yes there, cut that bit.... *(JONES gestures for his imaginary companions to crouch down)* ... and that ... shhh now .... Steady, steady ... *(Sound effect of wire cutters hitting the floor)* What was that? Which idiot ... *(There are sudden bright lights and the sound of machine guns)* Take cover! *(JONES throws himself into the shell hole.)* Ah! I've been hit *(JONES touches his face.)* Oh Christ blood .... It's going dark ... Oh

Christ ... *(Long pause. Lights brighten to left of stage.)* But now I'm awake, it's daylight ... I'm so thirsty... Powell, is that you Powell?

**POWELL.** *(Voice off-stage)* Yes sir.

**JONES.** You wouldn't happen to have any water would you?

**POWELL.** *(Voice off-stage)* Sorry sir, 'fraid not. I sent one of the lads back an hour ago but ....

**JONES.** Who's left?

**POWELL.** *(Voice off-stage)* Just you and me sir.

*(There is the slight sound of an incoming shell but no explosion.)*

**JONES.** What's that?

*(Smoke starts to crawl across the stage from behind.)*

**POWELL.** *(Voice off-stage)* Gas sir! Gas! Quick sir!

*(JONES picks up a gas-mask lying to his side. He puts it on quickly. From now on JONES's dialogue remains clear but may need to be played through an audio device. There is the sound of slow breathing.)*

**POWELL.** *(Voice off-stage, muffled)* I'm going to try and get some help sir.

**JONES.** What's that?

**POWELL.** *(Voice off-stage, muffled)* I said I'm going to try and get some help sir.

**JONES.** Powell! Powell! Come back! Come back ... *(Pause.)* He's gone. *(JONES tries to move).* Ah! Jesus wept *(JONES grabs his leg. He manages to prop himself up.)* Christ! Water. Water.... *(Long pause. JONES slumps. Lights darken a bit and become green.)* Where am I? Must have passed out. It's night, must have been out for hours. *(JONES tries to move)* Ah! Jesus Christ, my leg! Fuck! *(Long pause, it is very quiet).* No, no. *(Long pause. There is the sudden sound of a twig snapping).* Who...who's there?

*(He looks around. Quickly he reaches down and gets his revolver out. He adjust his seating position, slowly and painfully. We can hear his breathing,*

*and the faint beat of his heart. He moans in pain. There is another loud snap. JONES spins round to his right, looking around.)*

Hello? Is anyone there?

*(There is the sound of splashing water.)*

There's someone there, I can tell, I can see you moving. Show yourself, or I'll shoot!

*(We can hear JONES breathing harder, and his heart beating faster. Suddenly an arm appears over the crater wall, the lights turn red, and then the head of a SOLDIER in a gas mask appears.)*

Oh sweet Jesus, oh God no, please God no.

*(Sobbing. The SOLDIER begins to crawl towards JONES reaching out towards him.)*

Get back, get back I tell you! Don't come any closer or I'll shoot! Oh Jesus Christ, oh sweet Jesus!

*(The stage goes completely dark. There is the loud sound of a single shot followed by three more shots as JONES fires his revolver. The lights on the side come back on slowly. JONES is now standing up, he has his gas mask off. He faces the audience. Pause. Behind JONES a MEDICAL OFFICER appears. He is dimly lit; it is important that his facial features are hardly shown. If this is difficult, he should wear a medical face mask. He is wearing a medical apron, covered in blood. The MO speaks in an uncaring, false voice.)*

**MO.** There there now, you shouldn't be out of bed you know. You've lost a lot of blood.

**JONES.** Where am I?

**MO.** In hospital. Safe.

**JONES.** What...what happened to me out there.

**MO.** Why, you received a head wound and a graze on the leg. Nothing more. Lost a lot of blood and passed out.

**JONES.** But how? How did I get here?

**MO.** Your men found you. They went out to look for you and found you in a shell-hole. A couple of them brought you in...

**JONES.** But the shell-hole. Was there anything else in the shell-hole with me?

**MO.** No. *(Pause.)* Just your sergeant. *(Pause.)* But there wasn't anything they could do for him, you see, he was riddled with bullets. Apparently he'd gone ahead to look for you before the stretcher party arrived and he must have been caught by a machine gun or something.

*(The MO disappears into the darkness. JONES is left alone.)*

**JONES.** A machine gun. *(Pause.)* If only he knew. But I knew. I knew what had happened. And I will always know. *(Silence. The lights centre stage return to normal. JONES moves slowly back to the centre.)* It was too much you see. I'd allowed myself to believe the unbelievable and because of that a man had died. *(Pause)* Well they must have noticed. I suddenly got a lot of visits from doctors, different ones, more often than before and then they said I was being sent home for a bit. For a rest. I didn't know anything was wrong with me but ... when I got back to England I was interviewed by a panel of doctors and they decided that I had neurasthenia. Shell-shock. Thought I needed a spell out of it. Away from it all. *(Pause. JONES looks at the three of them.)* So there you are. That's what happened. That's why I was sent back.

*(Silence)*

**LEWIS.** It was a tough break, that's all. It could have happened to anyone.

**JENKINS.** Yes, quite right Lewis. Jones, you couldn't have known it was your sergeant. It was a mistake anyone could have made, and probably is making all the way up and down the line, on both sides. People are killed by accident, that's all it was, an accident.

**JONES.** No. No. I killed him. Oh I've no doubt there's some very quaint official expression for it ... killing one of your own men ...but the truth is I murdered him.

**JENKINS.** Come now, old man.

**JONES.** No, don't you see? That's why I told you the story. That's the whole point.

**LEWIS.** You're not making sense.

**JONES.** That I killed him because of a lie.

**SAUNDERS.** I don't understand.

**JENKINS.** Neither do I. What lie? What are you talking about?

**JONES.** A lie, *the* lie! A lie we have been told ever since we were born. A lie we were told in school, in church, by our parents, by the newspapers. All day, every day. It's the lie all three of you have been repeating tonight with your bloody ghost stories. Don't you see? You've all been avoiding the truth, the simple horrible truth that when we die, we die, and that's it. Nothing more, nothing left, napoo. But you can't accept that can you, and you've bought into the lie. The man on the riverbank, the woman in the dug-out, the soldier in the tunnel. They all came back you see, and that's what you want to believe. That even if you die here there will be something afterwards. But that's not true. It's just what your all hiding behind. You see there's nothing special about us. Nothing that makes us better than the animals around us. We're just mishaps of biology, collections of cells that form into bones and skin some into a brain which makes us slightly more intelligent. And what do we do with this? What do we do? I'll tell you, we use that slight gain in understanding and awareness to think up new ways to kill each other, or to order other people to kill, because we've all bought the lie that there is something we can go to after all of this - because we're special, we're chosen. And it's a coward's insurance; we're banking on the fact that the men we kill or allow to be killed will be going somewhere else. That they will be living on.

**LEWIS.** Steady on, Jones.

**JONES.** Don't you see? The dead can't come back. If we, if our generation can't understand that with all that we've seen is there any hope? They're dead that's it. If I had known that simple truth, and believed it, I wouldn't

have been so damned scared when I was sitting in that shell-hole. I wouldn't have emptied a revolver into my own sergeant. I wouldn't have had to sit there and watch him die. A man who had committed no crime, but had risked everything to come and get me. I wouldn't have had to live with that knowledge. But then I didn't, I suppose. I couldn't live with it. You were right Lewis. After that I couldn't take it. I couldn't face what I had done, so I hid. Tried to forget. *(Pause. JONES walks to the table and places his hand on the German helmet.)*

**JENKINS.** Look they were only stories, old chap. Something just to while away the time, nothing more.

**LEWIS.** Yes, that's all.

**JONES.** No they weren't. They were part of it. You are all part of it. And that's the difference between us.

**LEWIS.** That isn't true Jones.

**JONES.** Isn't it? Let me put this to you then. If you knew with absolute certainty that the soldier who is going to be executed would not live on in some afterlife would you carry out that order? If you truly knew that there was nothing after this, would you have that man killed?

**LEWIS.** I...I don't know. Yes, probably, yes I would.

**JONES.** Why?

**LEWIS.** Because it was an order, and order is society.

**JONES.** For god's sake man, people are society, not order! Sometimes ... sometimes I swear I can feel it welling up inside of me, and I can only just keep it down. I just want to rush out into it all and scream for them all to stop - to stop this madness. But they'll only stop when they understand the truth. That after this there is nothing, there can be nothing. They're all liars. Haig, French, the Kaiser, Kitchener, the scum back home, the King, the Church, the Pope, the Archbishop of fucking Canterbury. All liars. *(JONES collapses on the bed, his head in his hands).*

**LEWIS.** You're wrong.

JONES. Sorry?

LEWIS. You're wrong. Or at least you can't prove you're right.

JONES. Am I? Then tell me this, why do we carry on living through this hell? And why do we inflict it on others? If we all knew that each shell we fired, each trigger we pulled, was dispatching men off into nothingness, then we just might stop. We'd just get up and walk away from all of this fucking madness. But instead we just continue, we carry on, we obliterate lives and memories and relationships in seconds at the rate of thousands a day. If there truly was a God, and he really cared for us, the best thing he could do would be to appear before us all and tell us that there is nothing to look forward to. That this is it, and we're to make the most of it. (*During this JONES has gone to his kit by the bed and has put on his coat and cap.*) And the worst thing of all is that even with all this around us we're not learning. Even if this war ends there will be some madman out there wishing to start more, in ten, twenty, a hundred years we'll still be repeating this insanity because we think, in some way, we're special.

JENKINS. I think we should all just calm down. (*Pause*) Maybe Jones you should do the rounds. See to the men, get some air, what?

JONES. No. We haven't finished. We haven't finished the game.

JENKINS. I really don't think...

JONES. Oh but I insist. We must *finish the game*. We must decide who has won, isn't that the way we do things round here?

LEWIS. I think you've said quite enough. Ever since I brought Saunders in here...

JONES. Of course, Saunders. It was Saunders that started this all...

LEWIS. Ignore him Saunders. Jones, I think it's time you saw to the men.

JONES. No, remember Jenkins? What you said earlier. That it was good to have new blood around, might shake us up a bit. (*JONES moves to the table*).

JENKINS. Let's just forget it shall we?

**JONES.** No, no we must finish this. And it's as clear as anything that it must be Saunders who decides.

**SAUNDERS.** Me?

**JONES.** Yes, you. You must decide – between the three of us. Lewis with his orders here, Jenkins his bottle, and me...me with my lie. Who won? Who do you believe?

**SAUNDERS.** I don't know.

**JONES.** You need to decide. Everyone needs to at some point.

**SAUNDERS.** Do I?

*(JONES stares at SAUNDERS for a few seconds. He then looks at LEWIS. Finally he turns to JENKINS.)*

**JONES.** Jenkins, you keep quoting poetry to us all, but I often wonder if you really understand what you are saying half the time. Well, it's my turn now. And it's the last thing I'll say this evening. Some words from a chap I met when I first got out here. He was killed at Loos you know, shot through the head, like ... M... Miller. But by then this man had seen the truth and had written about it. He'd seen it before any of us. And he let me see some of his work, and talked to me about it. He knew that there was no need to say prayers, or to cry, or to erect memorials for the dead. Because the millions of mouthless dead were just that, dead. It is easy to be dead, he told me. So I'll leave you with two of his lines which I've remembered ever since, and somehow seem an appropriate ending to our game:

*Say only this, "They are dead." Then add thereto,  
"Yet many a better one had died before."*

There's nothing more to be said. Well Saunders? Are you coming with me, or staying with them?

*(Silence. Curtain.)*

*End of Play*