

# The Conquering Hero

by Allan Monkhouse



*To those who hated war and went to the war*

*Cover Photo of Piers Hampton & Samantha Barron © Craig Fuller 2014*

**Allan Noble Monkhouse** [7 May 1858 – 10 January 1936] was an English playwright, critic, [essayist](#) and novelist.

He was born in Barnard Castle, County Durham, but the family moved to Manchester when he was only a year old and it was there that he entered the cotton trade as a yarn agent on the floor of the Royal Exchange, now Manchester's foremost theatre. In 1902 he joined the staff of the *Manchester Guardian* - writing business news and dramatic criticism, and then leading articles, eventually becoming the paper's literary editor.

Along with Stanley Houghton and Harold Brighouse he began to write plays for Manchester's Gaiety Theatre shortly after it was reopened by Annie Horniman in 1912, the trio forming a school of realist dramatists independent of the London stage known as 'The Manchester School'.

During WW1, when like Colonel Rokeby he was too old to fight, he helped to launch the career of the famous theatre critic, James Agate, by publishing his open letters from France.

*The Conquering Hero* was published by Ernest Benn and first performed in 1923, but is believed to have been written during the war itself, perhaps as early as 1915, when – had Monkhouse tried to get it staged – it would undoubtedly have been refused a licence by the Lord Chamberlain's office.

It was revived at the Orange Tree Theatre in 2012, and given a script-in-hand production by Shakespeare at the Tobacco Factory and the University of Bristol, 6<sup>th</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup> October 2014, of which this text is a record.

*The play is now in the public domain*

## Cast

Christopher Rokeby	Piers Hampton
Stephen Rokeby	Edmund Digby-Jones
Margaret Iredale	Saskia Portway
Captain Francis Iredale	Paul Currier
Helen Thorburn	Samantha Barron
Dakin	Marc Geoffrey
Colonel Rokeby	Roland Oliver
Sir John Romer	David Collins
Lady Romer	Julia Hills
Megson	Jack Bannell
German Soldier	Peter Chicken <i>or</i> Tom Titherington
Prussian Officer	Paul Currier
Old Footman	Paul Nicholson

## Production

Director	Andrew Hilton
Producers	Morag Massey Catherine Hindson
Production Manager	Zoe Davis
Stage Manager	Charlie Smalley
Technician	Rozzy Adams

# Act One

*The hall of COLONEL ROKEBY'S house, which is some 30 miles from London. It is twilight on a day in late summer, and it grows darker as the scene progresses.*

*CHRISTOPHER and STEPHEN ROKEBY, MARGARET and FRANCIS IREDALE and HELEN THORBURN sit round an empty fireplace. Their voices are heard, but faces and forms are indistinguishable. The debris of tea is on a table behind them, but the detail of the room is not revealed till the lights are turned up presently. It is a pleasant, comfortable room of an ordinary type. There is a door at the back leading to an outside hall or entrance, and windows looking directly upon the garden at one side. Other doors to left and right from the hall.*

MARGARET: What about lights? Let's turn up the lights.

HELEN: Oh no, Margaret, let us cower in the dark a little longer.

MARGARET: We've got to face things at last.

HELEN: I know. You ought to be a soldier, Margaret.

IREDALE: Any reflection on me?

CHRIS: No, it's not on you, Frank. It's on the degenerate sons of the family. And as Stephen's a parson, he doesn't count.

STEPHEN: Why don't I count?

CHRIS: Well, you can't say it's wrong to be a parson. Even Margaret won't go as far as that.

MARGARET: I've never said it's wrong to be what you are. I only said I'm sorry for Father.

HELEN: What is Chris?

CHRIS: Listen to that!

HELEN: I didn't mean to be nasty, Chris, really. But you want defining, somehow.

CHRIS: Yes, it's going to be a definite world now. Drilling and marching and shooting. You're an able-bodied soldier or you're nothing.

HELEN: Chris is bitter about his novel. What will happen to it now?

CHRIS: Who cares? - except me.

MARGARET: You drilled at school, didn't you? Of course you did.

CHRIS: I never hated anything so much. Drilling's the dullerest thing in the world. It's the speed of the slowest; it's the game of the stupidest.

HELEN: Then why were you so good at it? Stephen said you were.

CHRIS: Because I'm clever enough not to be too clever.

HELEN: Well!

STEPHEN: He's speaking the truth.

MARGARET: We all know that Chris is clever. That's why it's such a pity that he does nothing.

IREDALE: Margaret -

MARGARET: I think of Father. I think of what he wanted. And now – now - he'd go if they'd let him. He's sixty-five.

STEPHEN: Well, the fool of the family went into the Church. That's all right.

MARGARET: I don't blame you, Stephen.

CHRIS: You'll never learn that it takes all kinds to make a world. Now, here's Frank -

MARGARET: Don't speak of Frank.

CHRIS: Why not?

MARGARET: You're not worthy to button his boots.

IREDALE: Oh, deuce take it, Margaret!

MARGARET: For you to be contemptuous of him!

CHRIS: Contemptuous? Of Frank? Am I, Stephen?

STEPHEN: I don't know.

CHRIS: He stands for my idea of the soldier. And it is an idea. But there's room for others. Soldiering isn't the only thing.

HELEN: It is now.

CHRIS: Do you say that, Helen?

HELEN: P'raps I shouldn't. - You make me say it.

CHRIS: But I stand for something too.

MARGARET: What good is it now? Who wants your novel? Or your pretty little

stories? He's writing a play.

CHRIS: They are not pretty.

MARGARET: What does it matter? What does the world want? What does England want?

CHRIS: Yes. When the pipe bursts you send for the plumber. And the plumber's the most important person in the world. What's the good of being amusing or charming, or wise or virtuous? Are you a plumber? Why aren't you a plumber?

MARGARET: You can't understand a man like Frank.

CHRIS: I think I do. He's not just a machine of destruction to me - no, nor of saving us from destruction. Yes, and the plumber may be a charming man, but all you want is that he should plumb. So do I, for the moment.

HELEN: This is the moment.

CHRIS: Don't you see - don't you see - the point is that some of us have to keep the eternal going.

HELEN: Why you?

CHRIS: Because I'm an artist. It's my work - my duty, if you like. It isn't only Frank we want; it's the idea of Frank. Now, I can give you that.

MARGARET: This is rubbish. You are exasperating, Chris. You are out of place. You're not serious enough now.

HELEN: The world has left you behind.

CHRIS: The world doesn't exist without me - I speak for the lot of us - wars are not worth fighting but for me.

HELEN: And you're safe at home all the time.

CHRIS: Safe from bullets, not from insults.

HELEN: I didn't mean to be unkind.

CHRIS: Turn on Stephen a bit. You can't say he isn't serious.

IREDALE: Poor old Stephen's turn.

CHRIS: Stephen interests me. Stephen's rather big.

HELEN: He's kept so quiet. We don't know what he thinks.

CHRIS: Ah! You think Stephen's just official - blessing the banners for the holy war and so on.

*The door at the back opens and DAKIN stands silhouetted against the light outside. He will be seen presently as a grave and impassive type of footman who does all his work imperturbably.*

DAKIN: Shall I turn on the lights, madam?

MARGARET: Presently, Dakin. - We'll do it when we want it.

*He comes forward to the tea-table and takes the tray, etc. As he retires he stumbles over a stool and recovers himself.*

DAKIN: I beg your pardon, madam.

MARGARET: You understand that Sir John and Lady Romer will be here with the Colonel directly. Captain Iredale will want the car again at half-past ten. Tell Bromley so as soon as they arrive, and see that he has his meal comfortably. We will dine as soon as they come.

DAKIN: Yes, madam.

*Dakin goes out.*

CHRIS: Good - the soldier's wife. Brief - to the point. You remind me of Mrs. O'Dowd in "Vanity Fair," though.

MARGARET: *[Passionately]* Oh, yes! It's a fine joke for you, and I may never see Frank again.

HELEN: Oh! Margaret. Don't mind him.

CHRIS: *[Rises]* You are unjust to me. Frank! Why! Mrs. O'Dowd was heroic.

IREDALE: It's all right, old boy. By Jove! I thought Dakin was going to spill the lot.

CHRIS: *[Sits again]* It's his first stumble. I never saw him make a mistake or turn a hair before. It's like the portents in "Julius Caesar."

IREDALE: He'd make a fine soldier.

CHRIS: Dakin! Dakin a soldier! Why! he's footman incarnate. He's got his vocation. This war will pass over Dakin like vapours over a rock. He can't be moved, can't be touched. Thank Heaven for Dakin. He makes one feel safer. He's an institution.



STEPHEN: *[Rising and making for the door]* It must be nine o'clock.

MARGARET: No dressing.

CHRIS: Stephen's escaping.

STEPHEN: *[Pausing at the door]* Escaping?

CHRIS: Have it out with them. Get it off your mind.

MARGARET: What is it?

CHRIS: Stephen on the war.

*They wait for STEPHEN to speak. He comes forward slowly.*

STEPHEN: Yes, I've been funking it.

MARGARET: Oh, don't back Chris!

CHRIS: It's nothing to do with me.

HELEN: What about the war, Stephen?

STEPHEN: Perhaps it won't come.

MARGARET: You know it will. It's here.

STEPHEN: Well, you know, Margaret, I'm a parson.

MARGARET: It's a righteous war.

STEPHEN: No.

MARGARET: If ever there was one it's a righteous war.

STEPHEN: There's no righteous war.

MARGARET: Oh, it's too late in the day to talk like this.

HELEN: But, Stephen, what can we do if we're attacked?

STEPHEN: What would Christ have done?

IREDALE: Look here, old chap! It can't be Christian to let yourselves be annihilated and a worse lot take your place.

STEPHEN: You can't kill the spirit.

IREDALE: Are we to let the Germans walk right over us?

STEPHEN: I may be wrong. It's hard to see it so.

HELEN: You are wrong.

STEPHEN: Then Christ is wrong, too.

HELEN: You haven't to be literal. It's the spirit -

STEPHEN: He was perfectly explicit. Every word He said applies precisely now.

MARGARET: He said so many things.

IREDALE: Do you want us to lay down our arms?

STEPHEN: Of course, I know you won't, Frank.

CHRIS: You want a bit of logic on your side, Stephen. You're very fine and simple, but that's what you want. Without that your Christianity won't stand the strain.

STEPHEN: Can you help me, Chris?

MARGARET: Don't listen to him.

CHRIS: It's arguable that if we disbanded army and navy and said "Come in" to everybody we should take no harm.

MARGARET: Nonsense!

HELEN: You can't believe that.

CHRIS: I don't say I believe it. I say it's arguable.

MARGARET: Arguable by lunatics.

CHRIS: Christianity was a sort of lunacy when it started. It would be extremely interesting to see it tried again. Just think of it - if we should discover that Christ was the man of common sense after all!

HELEN: Is this helping you, Stephen?

STEPHEN: I'm not sure. I must think about it.

MARGARET: Stephen, Father will be here directly. You'll do nothing - you'll say nothing?

STEPHEN: All my instincts are cowardly.

CHRIS: But he has a passion - can't you see - can't you people see how fine Stephen is?

HELEN: Why have you never spoken of this before?

STEPHEN: Yes. Why, indeed? Haven't we all changed in a week? Haven't we searched ourselves?

HELEN: The war has awakened us, then. It's not an evil. It'll help us, it'll save us.

STEPHEN: Then we must keep faith with ourselves.

MARGARET: What will you do?

STEPHEN: I suppose I shall continue to preach the gospel.

MARGARET: What gospel? There's only one gospel now for a man.

CHRIS: Margaret's good, too. She's a pure type.

HELEN: This dilettante stuff of Chris is hateful.

CHRIS: Well, I'm being faithful to myself, so I suppose I'm hateful.

HELEN: It isn't the time for you.

CHRIS: Is that my fault?

MARGARET: You can efface yourself. You can go into a corner and suck your thumb. Your day's over.

HELEN: What's the good now of your little refinements and graces?

CHRIS: Not one shall be lost.

MARGARET: We've wasted too much time. It's drill now for those who can't fight at once. Every man will be wanted.

CHRIS: Well, the old men and the boys must carry on literature and the arts.

HELEN: And a few stay-at-homes.

MARGARET: And cowards.

CHRIS: Do you think the world's books, for instance, have been written by cowards?

MARGARET: It doesn't matter.

CHRIS: No. But let me tell you this: no race, no sect, no kind has ever stood for its faith as we have for ours. Self-sacrifice! The only sort worth having is when you won't sacrifice yourself. Anything but that. When you've let the baser parts go there's nothing so austere. You ask me to give it all up, as though I were a child with a toy.

MARGARET: You are. All this is no more than a toy now.

CHRIS: All the art, all the thought, all the aspiration of the ages!

HELEN: Are you all that?

CHRIS: You think I'm negligible, but I'm not.

MARGARET: You think yourself too good to be shot.

CHRIS: *[After a pause]* Yes, Margaret. It's true. I do feel that.

MARGARET: Too clever, too important, too superior.

CHRIS: Yes, I suppose that's true. And we've no quarrel with these people.

MARGARET: We? Who are we?

CHRIS: Oh! - the artists, first and last. English or German, they're my comrades.

IREDALE: But, look here, old chap, if we don't beat the Germans you'll go under with the rest.

CHRIS: Quite right, Frank.

MARGARET: Answer him.

CHRIS: I beg your pardon, Frank. I didn't quite hear what you said.

IREDALE: What I mean t' say is this: if we're beaten you're beaten too.

CHRIS: The Germans can't beat me.

IREDALE: Would you let them run over us then?

CHRIS: You're a soldier. You must do what's good to you - your duty or whatever you call it. Leave me alone.

IREDALE: Hardly sportsmanlike, old chap.

MARGARET: It's shocking; it's abominable.

HELEN: He's angry. He doesn't mean it.

CHRIS: Yes, you'll goad me into something rash. It's going to be a bad time for me.

MARGARET: Hark! They're coming. They're here. Chris, if you talk to Father as you have done to us I'll never forgive you.

CHRIS: Don't provoke me then.

*The door is opened by DAKIN, and COLONEL ROKEBY enters with SIR JOHN and LADY ROMER. They are hurried and excited, and have still coats and wraps on, which they remove during the scene. DAKIN turns on the electric light and goes out. IREDALE'S sword in its scabbard is conspicuous on a chair. The group about the fireplace changes and disperses as the others enter. The greetings are spread casually over the next few minutes. The COLONEL advances, brandishing a newspaper. He is a fine type of the old soldier as IREDALE is of the young. SIR JOHN and LADY ROMER are of the world.*

STEPHEN:     *[Eagerly]* Good news?

COLONEL:     The best! We shall be at war with Germany by midnight.

*STEPHEN turns away and stands looking into the fireplace. As the others crowd round the COLONEL and the ROMERS, eager to see the printed news, CHRIS approaches STEPHEN and stands by him.*

STEPHEN:     *[In a low voice to CHRIS]* Untold suffering. Misery and desolation.

*Scraps of excited comment are heard as the paper is passed or dragged from hand to hand and ultimately laid on the sword. A burst of laughter from HELEN.*

CHRIS:         *[To STEPHEN as he looks round at them]* Are they sincere? Are they really joyful? What are they thinking?

COLONEL:     *[Coming forward with IREDALE, whom he holds affectionately by the arm]* Yes, I called at the War Office. Couldn't see anyone. The excitement's terrific. One or two old friends. I gave in my name, of course. Damn it, Frank, why didn't it come earlier? I'm too old for the trenches. I envy you. Ah! Chris, my boy, - Stephen - this is great news. I wish - I wish - well, what about dinner? We're hungry *[to the ROMERS]*. Now then, John - Janet. Champagne tonight.

MARGARET:   Dinner in ten minutes. No dressing.

COLONEL:     I wish we were all dressed like Frank. *[He clasps IREDALE on the shoulder]* Khaki's the only wear now. What time d'you go, Frank?

SIR JOHN:     I hear that Kitchener -

LADY ROM:     Margaret, is he all ready?

MARGARET:   Yes, Aunt Janet.

COLONEL:     I was at the War Office this afternoon. Smell of powder, by Gad! I'll get some sort of job, you'll see. Drilling!

LADY ROM:     Your father's like a boy again, Chris.

CHRIS: Splendid! Yes, it's a great thing for him.

HELEN: It is splendid, isn't it, Chris?

CHRIS: Of course it is.

COLONEL: What? What? Oh, nonsense! But Chris, my boy, what are you going to do? You've been through your drill. You'd make a soldier in a week. I believe I can get you a commission.

CHRIS: Thanks, Father.

SIR JOHN: They say there'll be an Expeditionary Force in France within a fortnight.

LADY ROM: We ought to have a million ready.

SIR JOHN: I hear that Kitchener -

LADY ROM: Chris had better give in his name at once. There'll be thousands applying.

COLONEL: *[Rather timidly]* Shall I speak to Manders, Chris? It's too late tonight. I could send him a wire in the morning. He's busy, but he'd do anything he could.

CHRIS: I think not, Father.

SIR JOHN: Well, what's your notion?

CHRIS: About what?

LADY ROM: What are you going to do?

CHRIS: I thought of just getting on with my work.

LADY ROM: What work?

CHRIS: You think I'm an idler?

LADY ROM: Oh! You mean - but surely -

MARGARET: Chris prefers to remain safely at home.

CHRIS: I wonder if I am cowardly. You make me angry and confused, Margaret.

MARGARET: Oh! take your chance, Chris. Don't refuse.

CHRIS: *[Looks at HELEN, who had made a movement, an exclamation]* It isn't quite fair.

HELEN: Don't make your mind up against it.

CHRIS: I never make my mind up.

HELEN: That's what's so dreadful.

IREDALE: But, old chap, if you go out you must make up your mind. You can't decide to chuck it and go home.

CHRIS: My body would have to go through with it. My mind would be in perpetual revolt.

MARGARET: He's a talker. He's made of words.

COLONEL: *[Who has followed the discussion anxiously]* No - no. Chris must do what he thinks right.

MARGARET: He must do what is right.

COLONEL: He sees something that I don't see. I don't understand you, my boy, and I daresay you're wiser than I am. I don't want to compel you - to bully you -

CHRIS: I know, sir. You're a trump.

MARGARET: Oh, thank God for Frank! *[She burst into tears and lays her head on IREDALE'S shoulder.]*

IREDALE: Steady! Steady!

MARGARET: I swore I wouldn't. It's his fault. If only Stephen - if one of them -

LADY ROM: Margaret should have been the boy.

SIR JOHN: Well, at any rate, Stephen can get all the young men in his flock to enlist. The parsons now will have a great chance to help.

LADY ROM: Could he get a chaplaincy to the troops?

CHRIS: Poor Stephen!

COLONEL: *[Anxiously]* It's a bad business, Stephen, but we've got to go through with it.

STEPHEN: *[Comes forward and pauses for a moment before speaking]* I'm horribly sorry, sir. I'm as bad as Chris.

COLONEL: Of course, of course, my boy. I understand -

MARGARET: Don't listen to them. They don't belong here.

SIR JOHN: What's Stephen's point?

STEPHEN: It's useless, but I do protest against this war - your delight in it, your levity.

COLONEL: Levity!

MARGARET: Protest then and be done. Father, what more news?

COLONEL: But, Stephen -

STEPHEN: What insolence it is - I don't speak to you, sir - to assume that a minister of Christ cares nothing for Christ's word.

LADY ROM: But, surely everybody - all the bishops - are agreed that - Ah! your mother was an eccentric woman. I beg your pardon, Henry.

CHRIS: Be warned, Stephen. The bishops are against you.

COLONEL: I do my best to be a Christian, Stephen. If Christ is against this war - *[He makes a gesture of dismissal.]*

CHRIS: That's it, sir. We must all do our best - not somebody else's best.

LADY ROM: Well, Stephen, you must just keep quiet and you'll do no harm.

STEPHEN: I'm afraid I can't keep quiet.

MARGARET: Why, what will you do?

CHRIS: Stephen's a whole hogger. And he's got his pulpit.

MARGARET: What!

LADY ROM: But surely -

STEPHEN: I must make my protest. I can't be silent.

LADY ROM: Henry, I pity you.

COLONEL: My sons must do what they believe to be right.

CHRIS: You're beautiful about it, sir. I shall have to come to your side yet.

COLONEL: Ah! if you could -

*CHRIS looks at him wistfully and turns away.*

MARGARET: They don't matter. Father, Uncle John, you haven't told us whom you've seen. What's happening? Have you any idea where Frank will go?



- COLONEL: No, they're keeping it all very dark. They're alive, though. I think they know what they're about.
- SIR JOHN: This Radical Government has its chance now.
- MARGARET: But we've no army.
- COLONEL: Let them keep things going and we shall have. India, Canada, all over. They'll flock in. And we shall raise a million men here in six months.
- CHRIS: Conscription?
- MARGARET: You'll all be dragged in.
- CHRIS: It's the end of freedom then?
- MARGARET: Freedom! It's a fight for freedom. Can't you see that? Are you a fool? It's so simple.
- SIR JOHN: What is your point, Chris? There may be a certain amount of logic in Stephen's position though, mind you, - but you've never set up for being a religious man. We'd no option. Grey's a peace man. Germany would have it, I tell you -
- MARGARET: He's willing to be a German's slave.
- CHRIS: We're all slaves to something.
- SIR JOHN: It's an end of us. It's an end of the English race if we lose this war.
- CHRIS: Perhaps. Then have no war.
- HELEN: Why do we listen to him? He's decadent. He lives in a little circle. They talk big - among themselves. Great things are done, and they say smart things about them. The men of the nation will die in the trenches and they'll be at home writing sarcastic, witty things. They'll be keeping up the standard - the standard of diction - of words.
- CHRIS: *[After a short pause]* Yes, you hurt me. You hurt me considerably. Well done, Helen. That was awfully clever. She got at me, Stephen, didn't she? I wish my convictions *were* convictions. I'm not a politician. I don't understand these things you're talking about. I'm quietly at work - the work that matters more to me than anything in life - and you come buzzing round with your war - there's nothing in the world but war. Yes, there is.
- MARGARET: Another of his poses.

IREDALE: Look here, old man, the point is - if they beat us we're done.

CHRIS: I'm not done.

HELEN: A slave.

CHRIS: No. Suppose the worst. Suppose they beat us - overrun our country. It's possible. Face the facts.

COLONEL: They cannot beat us if we're true to ourselves.

MARGARET: If the cowards will fight.

CHRIS: Forgive me, Father. Don't run into cowardly evasions. Yes, cowardly. You all know that we may be beaten. It's been a long peace with preparations - preparations for war. And who knows whether these infernal Germans aren't far ahead of us? How can you possibly tell? Every modern war has found one side efficient and the other not. How do we know which side it is this time? We may be beaten in a month.

SIR JOHN: The man who says so is a traitor.

CHRIS: The man who won't face this is a coward.

IREDALE: D'you mean to say our navy's no good?

CHRIS: Frank, Frank, don't misunderstand. I hope we're all right. If there are many like you, we are. Don't think I want you to be beaten.

HELEN: And what's the good of all this?

CHRIS: I've more faith in the nation than you have. Let them beat us. It would be horrible, of course. D'you think I shouldn't feel it. It's my trade to feel. It's my trade to look for the truth, to face things, to reveal them.

SIR JOHN: But not to serve your country.

CHRIS: Yes. In my own way.

COLONEL: You puzzle us, my boy. There's only one kind of service that matters now.

HELEN: Under the Germans there would still be a publishing season.

CHRIS: How clever Helen is ! She can make me ludicrous. She can make my thought come out small and mean and me an ignoble fool. It's her sympathy, it's because she understands me. Margaret can't touch

me like that.

HELEN: I want you to be fine - to be noble.

CHRIS: If that ghastly accident comes - if they invade us and subdue us and govern us - d'you think I and my kind will be conquered? It would all be a hideous irrelevance. They may trample on us or kill us, but they can't enslave our minds. We'll go on living - some of us. I've my faith too, and it isn't just in guns - England! I can think of England too. Humiliation and defeat may be our salvation.

STEPHEN: God may have it so.

COLONEL: It's impious, Stephen. I've heard enough.

MARGARET: Too much. Leave them together.

CHRIS: I've a brother still. Stephen has courage. We've not always hit it off, Stephen, but we're groping out to one another now. I'll come and hear you preach.

MARGARET: We're wasting time. Dinner in ten minutes. Aunt, you're in the blue room. Come on.

*She and LADY ROMER go out, STEPHEN follows. IREDALE goes toward the door and pauses before CHRIS.*

IREDALE: I'd give a good deal, old chap, to see your point.

CHRIS: Frank, you don't know how much I like you and admire you.

IREDALE: Then, why do you try to take the shine out of the thing like this?

CHRIS: Go in and win. God bless you. Heaven help you. Rule Britannia. I mean it, I mean it, Frank.

IREDALE: D'you know what you mean?

CHRIS: Perhaps not.

IREDALE: I do know what I mean.

CHRIS: You beat me there.

IREDALE: We've been friends in a way.

CHRIS: Yes, yes, Frank.

IREDALE: Well - *[He stares at CHRIS, and then looks round at the others in a puzzled way.]* Damned if I can understand him.

*He goes out. The others have been listening. COLONEL and ROMER move together towards the door. COLONEL pauses before CHRIS very much as IREDALE did.*

COLONEL: Yes, Chris, I wish we could be all together in this. Don't let us stress any differences. I mean - I wonder - of course, there's the Territorials. I wonder if you'd like to join - home defence, you know.

CHRIS: I'll think of it, sir.

SIR JOHN: They'll be called out. You can't decline to go.

COLONEL: Chris is not a coward, John.

SIR JOHN: I can't make out what he is.

COLONEL: *[Goes towards the door and comes back]* You might write us something inspiring, Chris. Poetry, you know. I think Rudyard Kipling has done real service. We can't all be in the trenches. Just give us a hand somewhere.

CHRIS: Do you know what I'd like? I wish you could just take a birch-rod to me and make me do what you want. I wish I was a boy serving under you - fighting. I should be happy.

SIR JOHN: Well, I'm like Frank. I'm damned if I see what you're driving at.

*He takes the COLONEL'S arm and impels him from the room. The COLONEL glances back as he goes. HELEN starts up to follow them.*

CHRIS: A moment, Helen.

HELEN: *[Hesitating by the door]* What's the good?

CHRIS: You'd like to think afterwards that you gave me every chance.

HELEN: I shall try not to think of you.

CHRIS: Pardon me - then we've broken? It's off?

HELEN: Yes.

CHRIS: What are your terms?

HELEN: Terms?

CHRIS: What must I do to be saved?

HELEN: You mean?

CHRIS: If I go to the wars you'll marry me?

HELEN: What's the good of talking about it?

CHRIS: You would? Or have I dished myself already?

HELEN: Would you go?

CHRIS: I don't say that.

HELEN: Oh! how exasperating you are! How you talk! You torture me. You care nothing for me.

CHRIS: It seems that we must torture one another. All the time I've been listening for what you would say. You've just been trying to sting me and hurt me. The others speak, and I hear them, and answer, but I can't think because you're bursting to speak again. And what you say is nothing. It's just following them. Let me hear you now. Talk to me. Give me a bit of your mind.

HELEN: You know it.

CHRIS: I thought I did. You could sympathise with me. You could understand me. But you've just got into the stream with the others. You parrot after them. By God! it's a baseness to leave me. You're cowardly. Margaret's all right; that's her line. But you!

HELEN: What is it, Chris? What do you want?

CHRIS: What do I want?

HELEN: Really, I don't know.

CHRIS: I've to put it so that twelve jurymen would understand?

HELEN: I want to understand.

CHRIS: I suppose I want to possess my own soul.

HELEN: How can you if a shell bursts on the roof? We're all together.

CHRIS: Yes - yes. That's it. Call for the plumber. Let's all be plumbers.

HELEN: Oh! I'm different from you. I've fancied myself aloof and superior to it all, and I've thought how fine to be apart. I've wanted to be like you, and have a corner of my own in the world. And now I see that all the great things must be felt and suffered together. Frank and Margaret are a part of me - and your father. How can you desert your father? You talk of your own individual soul. A traitor may have that.

CHRIS: What is a traitor?

HELEN: Simple people know.

CHRIS: Yes. Those that we call traitors may be the heroes - the men of conscience and ideals. It's my work to look into men's souls. It's truth I want, not this blatant simplicity. We are to be all one way now. What a time! The day of the cheap patriot has come.

HELEN: Not so cheap if he gives his life.

CHRIS: Ah, Frank's a hero! I delight in him. I love him. He doesn't know how much.

HELEN: I like to hear you say that.

CHRIS: He is kinder to me than you are. Did you see just now how he refrained from cursing me? I thought it was coming. I dreaded it. Yes, but he doubted; he was just.

HELEN: And I am not?

CHRIS: Oh! I'm an egoist, no doubt. I revolt against anything so big as this. I hate to be swept away. And yet I think I might love it. It's useless to talk to you. You've become simple. We want all to be to a pattern now or we shall be stoned. Don't you see, Helen, that the only thing that makes life worth while is to be ready to go off at a tangent anywhere? Not to be compelled - to be free.

HELEN: It's freedom we fight for.

CHRIS: Oh, yes! I know.

HELEN: And freedom for others.

CHRIS: I daresay.

HELEN: I want you to read something.

CHRIS: Read? Now?

HELEN: Yes.

*She looks hastily among some illustrated papers and selects one. She indicates a place and he takes it from her.*

*They quote it here.*

CHRIS: "On the refusal of aid between nations" - Rossetti's sonnet. [*He looks at her and begins to read*]

*Not that the earth is changing, O my God!  
Not that the seasons totter in their walk, -*

Yes, it's splendid. I'm glad you showed me that.

HELEN: You'll go if the poets lead?

CHRIS: There are German poets too.

HELEN: But you're not a German.

*CHRIS turns over the pages of the paper and pauses.*

What are you looking at? *[He shows her]* The Kaiser! Take it away.

CHRIS: He looks the part. Yes, you can see that he's a fine fellow.

HELEN: You make me hate you.

CHRIS: *[Staring at the picture]* Rather a stupid man but exalted. There's a sort of nobility about him.

HELEN: Oh! I hate you.

CHRIS: And yet you'd have me like that. Here's your ideal. Here's the concentrated essence of the patriot. Here's my country, right or wrong.

*HELEN snatches the paper from him and dashes it to the ground. Then her anger fades away and she looks at him sorrowfully.*

HELEN: I never thought it would end like this.

CHRIS: End? End?

HELEN: We are thousands of miles apart.

CHRIS: Because we know one another a little better.

HELEN: Good-bye.

CHRIS: Good-bye, Helen.

*DAKIN appears at the door.*

DAKIN: I beg your pardon, madam. Dinner is served.

HELEN: Thank you.

*DAKIN withdraws.*

CHRIS: Well, the ritual of life will go on. I cling to Dakin. There's one

thing the war can't touch.

HELEN:           You have the lackeys on your side.

CHRIS:           *[Sadly]* We must be magnanimous to one another now.

*He follows her out, and the stage is empty for a few moments. DAKIN appears and strides forward, looking about him. He snatches up the newspaper which COLONEL ROKEBY brought and shakes it out ; he concentrates upon it. Standing at the front of the stage he is young, eager, excited. He lowers the paper and stares into vacancy. He throws it down, and is hurrying out when he sees the sword. He stops, takes it up, and slowly draws it from its sheath. He holds it out, gazing along the blade, as the curtain falls.*



## Act Two

*The same scene a month or two later. It is a morning in late September. In the latter part of the act a military band can be heard occasionally in the distance playing popular and martial airs. A desk has been brought into the hall and stands to the left of the spectator but well away from the wall. Anyone sitting at it faces the door to the right through which, as the scene opens, COLONEL ROKEBY, in khaki, emerges, walks briskly to the desk, and sits down. He is followed by SIR JOHN ROMER, who is carrying his hat in his hand.*

SIR JOHN: Anything I can do to help you, my dear fellow - only too glad. Now let me do something or I shall feel I'm in the way. It was Janet's idea to come down. She wanted to see how you're getting on, and she wouldn't let me wire.

COLONEL: Where is she?

SIR JOHN: We met Margaret at the post office as we came through the village - they'll be here presently.

COLONEL: Well, John, I'm as busy as I can be.

SIR JOHN: Best thing for you.

COLONEL: I'm drilling all the men for miles round - all kinds. And I get 'em to enlist wholesale - those that can. I'm in touch with Manders, you know.

SIR JOHN: Fine. I wish we had more like you.

COLONEL: Don't say that. There isn't a man in the service but's as keen as I am. And the nation's roused. It's tremendous, John. *[He stands up]* I'm proud of 'em. It's given me fresh life.

SIR JOHN: What's Chris doing?

COLONEL: *[He sits again, but does not betray any emotion]* Chris? Oh! nothing particular.

SIR JOHN: And Stephen?

COLONEL: Poor Stephen! He's a plucky beggar, John. He stood up in his pulpit here and preached against the war. You heard that?

SIR JOHN: You're too easy, Henry.

COLONEL: Well, I like a fellow with pluck and conscience. Dreadful to-do, of

course. Nearly had a riot in church. Then the vicar sacked him. Quite right, too.

SIR JOHN: He's here?

COLONEL: For the present. Yes.

SIR JOHN: And Chris goes on writing stories and such like?

COLONEL: He's very restless. Poor lad, I wish I could help him.

SIR JOHN: Now, it's not good enough, Henry. You know it isn't.

COLONEL: I can't understand him.

SIR JOHN: No, and you're as soft to him as if he was a well-behaved baby.

COLONEL: I suppose you think I ought to curse him and kick him out.

SIR JOHN: Yes, I do.

COLONEL: But he's very unhappy.

SIR JOHN: So he ought to be.

COLONEL: I'm a plain soldier, John, and I see my own duty. He knows all that I know and more. He's different from me. I can't drag him or drive him. He sees things that I don't see. When I talk to him he's my master.

SIR JOHN: You're too humble.

COLONEL: I can't bully him. It's impossible to explain to you, John, how I feel to Chris. I'm altogether his inferior.

ROMER : What nonsense! You're worth ten of him.

COLONEL: Don't think he's a coward. He's not that. But things are different now from what they were when we were young. Oh! I'm miserable about it, of course.

SIR JOHN: It doesn't matter what he is if he acts like a coward. But I don't come here to worry you, Henry. Let me help you. Give me something to do.

COLONEL: Helen's helping me - Helen Thorburn.

SIR JOHN: She's here?

COLONEL: She came to be with Margaret when we heard about Frank.

SIR JOHN: Any more news?

COLONEL: No; they've got him in Germany somewhere, I suppose. You know, it hurts Margaret's pride - his being a prisoner. One doesn't like to hear of all these prisoners, Henry. I know, I know. Modern warfare's different. When they're surrounded it's no use trying to fight it out. Frank's as brave as a lion. Well, John, you'll excuse me. It's a big day for me. We've recruiting going on here today. Just down the lane - by the post office. We're going to do a record. We bring 'em up in motors. It's like an election, and we'll poll our last man. Will you wait here? I'll be back directly.

SIR JOHN: Give me a bit of clerking or something. I want to think I'm helping.

COLONEL: Here! copy this list. I shall want a copy. Follow me over there if you like. But I must be off now.

*He claps ROMER on the back and hurries out. ROMER is settling to his work when CHRIS and STEPHEN lounge in, from different directions. Seeing one another, they stop.*

CHRIS: Damn you, Stephen! I wish you'd keep out of my way.

STEPHEN: I shan't be in it long.

CHRIS: What?

SIR JOHN: *[Looking up]* You're a nice pair.

CHRIS: Hullo! Who's this?

STEPHEN: You, Uncle John?

SIR JOHN: Doing a bit of work for your father. His sons might do that at least.

CHRIS: Come, come, Uncle John, you're only playing at it. Don't let's have any nagging. Call down the wrath of God and be done.

SIR JOHN: You know what I think of you.

CHRIS: It must be jolly always to know what you think.

SIR JOHN: No parish duties, Stephen?

CHRIS: He's got nothing to do but avoid half bricks. Stephen's dished himself. If it wasn't for my father he might be another martyr Stephen. But they only throw small stones here.

ROMER : Yes, I've heard of that. You're a fine pair of sons for such a father.

CHRIS: Let's grant that I'm a bad case, but leave Stephen alone. D'you think

it's fun to do what he's doing?

SIR JOHN: Well, I'm not going to argue with you. If you two are remaining here I'll be off to join your father.

STEPHEN: That's severe, uncle.

SIR JOHN: I don't mind that. *[He goes]*

CHRIS: The way they lump us together is so stupid. Only two kinds in the world. The man who goes to the war and the man who doesn't. I'm tired of seeing you hanging about. Two's too many.

STEPHEN: I'm off.

CHRIS: What! Where to?

STEPHEN: France.

CHRIS: You are? What to do? Are you going to stand between the hosts and raise a cross?

STEPHEN: The Red Cross.

CHRIS: What d'you mean?

STEPHEN: I've got a job as ambulance man. What do they call it? - Orderly. I can't stay here.

CHRIS: You're deserting me.

STEPHEN: You said two's too many.

CHRIS: Yes, but one's too few. Great Heavens, it's got hold of Stephen!

STEPHEN: How - got hold of me? What?

CHRIS: The war!

STEPHEN: I hate the war.

CHRIS: But it's got you. You can't resist.

STEPHEN: I want to help.

CHRIS: Oh! I know. You think it's that, but it's the war you want. It's the neighing steed and the shrill trump. It's the call. It's to follow where the men are going. You won't kill anybody, of course. Nobody wants to kill. It's a compelling force. It's the great adventure. You can't escape it. Be honest; it's the war.

STEPHEN: Chris, are you right?

CHRIS: Perhaps not. You're a good man. You're an honest man.

STEPHEN: I've felt something of what you say. I'm not bloodless. And yet I've wanted to serve Christ. I wish I could talk to you, Chris. I haven't a friend. Not one but Him. And now they want to take Him from me. He was a man, you know; saying things clearly and meaning them. Now, Christianity has to conform to common sense. It's rational and liberal, and there's quite a nice infusion of Christ in it. You understand. You're a good brother. You say strange, heartening things to me, but you're not my friend. You can see with me, but you're outside it all. Am I running away like a coward? Ought I to stay?

CHRIS: I'd like to be your comrade, Stephen. I'd like to be a simple warrior such as the old man. Anything but myself. You know, there's something too angelic in the way he leaves us alone. I try to fancy that he's reproaching us in his mind, but he isn't. He's horribly cut up, but there's no reproach in him. He isn't cunning enough to see that it's the way to get us.

STEPHEN: What are you going to do?

*HELEN enters.*

HELEN: Where's the Colonel? *[She crosses to the desk and takes up paper]* Who's been bothering here?

CHRIS: Please, it's not me.

STEPHEN: Sir John.

HELEN: Oh! I thought perhaps -

CHRIS: That we were making ourselves useful? No. *[She makes to go]* But, Helen, stay and chat with us a bit. Pity the poor lost souls.

HELEN: *[Dryly]* What shall we talk about?

CHRIS: Stephen. He's going to the war.

HELEN: Stephen!

STEPHEN: Ambulance. I've got a Red Cross job.

CHRIS: But he'll smell the powder. He'll see and hear. See and hear ! The senses weren't given for war. Blasts that split the drum of your ear ! Sights that make your eyes a curse!

HELEN: What do you know of war?

CHRIS: As much as the correspondents faking up their stories from gossip in the towns. And here I am reading their wretched stuff and re-reading it down to the most petty, futile paragraph. I read the rubbish and scorn it. I can't do my work. I go to and fro like an uneasy spirit.

HELEN: Do you read the letters home?

CHRIS: Yes, and I could write them. They're what we expect; they're a kind of literary convention. You read a story in the paper one day, and a week afterwards some poor wounded devil tells the same story. He had to tell something because his friends clamoured for experiences. They must all have their tales to tell.

HELEN: Don't - don't speak of them so.

CHRIS: I've said no harm of them. I have not. You wait to catch me - you patriots. I will not confuse my values. I haven't two ways of looking at things. You want me to look at these Germans as a patriot. I don't know how. I can only look at them as a man. You say they're savages, and if it is so it's extremely interesting. Of course as a man I'm horrified when I hear of their atrocities - that is, when I believe in them. But if we discovered that the Germans were all cannibals it would be very interesting indeed. *[STEPHEN is going]* Hullo! Stephen, don't go - poor Stephen's had too much of this kind of thing. Stay and protect me from her, Stephen.

*STEPHEN shakes his head and goes out.*

HELEN: You are facetious.

CHRIS: Yes. Why? Why does one play the fool so? I was speaking seriously, and then, as you say, I became facetious. Between you and me it's intensely serious - nearly tragical. Yes, Helen. And I can only relieve myself by this clumsy facetiousness. One gets talking. We ought to be kinder, tenderer.

HELEN: We made a compact, didn't we, to be magnanimous with one another? But I can think of nothing but the war.

CHRIS: The war! The war! How to escape from it! There's only one way.

HELEN: What's that?

CHRIS: I know something of war. I've read Tolstoy and Stephen Crane. The psychology of it. And there's a ghastly Russian who piles up the

corpses and gives you stench and putrefaction. They say the shells overhead make a noise like ripping calico - homely if you're a draper. War is cold and heat, hunger and thirst, an awful exhaustion, a hideous ennui, skulking, shrieking, chatter and chaff and silence. There's a tremendous menace over it. That gives it dignity. Life would be no good without death.

HELEN: It's no good if you won't brave death.

CHRIS: We have to brave it sooner or later.

HELEN: Sooner, then.

CHRIS: Honour before life. Ah, yes! And there was no refusal of aid between nations. Look at Belgium. Where is Belgium?

HELEN: It's a light for all the ages.

CHRIS: You'll think it awfully base of me, Helen, but I keep wondering whether if I had been a Belgian and knew what was coming I wouldn't have said, "Walk through" when the Germans came.

HELEN: Yes, it's base.

CHRIS: And yet when you think and think and earnestly desire to do what's right, not what's easy -

HELEN: Easy!

CHRIS: You pray if you're a praying man, you humble yourself anyway: you try after the best in you and to forget what others would applaud. You may make a mistake, but is it base?

HELEN: The Belgians are glorious.

CHRIS: Yes. I feel that. So are we glorious. It's that one begins to doubt glory. Where's Stephen? He understands this. I want to talk to him.

HELEN: Stephen doesn't count now.

CHRIS: You must be wrong if you think Stephen doesn't count. He's simply a Christian. And that's tremendously interesting now when Christianity is just making itself agreeable to everybody.

HELEN: I don't know what you mean. I'm a Christian.

CHRIS: Then you must think of two things - of Christ and of the poor. Are these what you go to war for?

HELEN: I haven't patience - I haven't time -

CHRIS: No. Forgive me. I drift to and fro. I've always thought we make too much of human lives. Belgium! The poets are with you - with us. Do you know, Helen, I can't write a line of any sort? This war has taken hold of me. I might as well be there.

HELEN: That's the escape from it you meant?

CHRIS: I want to escape from myself. Ah, but what if I found myself! Could I do it? Could I face it? I wonder - I wonder - By God! I'm missing something.

HELEN: Chris, I'm going.

CHRIS: To the war?

HELEN: To train first. In three months or so I may be ready. Lady Wyfold will give me a place in her hospital. She's setting up somewhere in France.

CHRIS: You, too? The world's going to the war.

HELEN: All but you.

CHRIS: How strange it would be if I were wounded, in hospital, and looked up to see you !

HELEN: How could you be wounded?

CHRIS: Imagine it.

HELEN: You're better at that than I am. If you don't go to the war you can't be wounded.

CHRIS: In a play, in a novel, it happens so. If you're a nurse and I'm a soldier it's sure to happen so - in the novel. But all these things belong to us through our imagination. I am a wounded soldier, I open my eyes and there's my sweetheart.

HELEN: I might imagine my part in it but not yours.

CHRIS: Another man there?

HELEN: No - no. I didn't mean that.

CHRIS: What did you mean? You are there. Who's the wounded man?

HELEN: How could it be you?



CHRIS: I may play with the idea surely. It's my trade to play with ideas. It's better than going to the war. We shouldn't meet if we both went there. But now we've the spirit of it. Do you see what we artists are for? We give you the spirit.

HELEN: Oh, write your story! Go and play!

CHRIS: Why not? If only I could! Isn't it better than shooting a few German peasants?

HELEN: I'm weary of it.

CHRIS: Yes - yes. We keep repeating ourselves. That's the nuisance. Repetitions - nagging. You attack me with supreme eloquence - good, magnificent. You go on doing it, and it's merely nagging. A bursting shell is terrific, appalling. Go on with it all day and it's nagging.

HELEN: I've really got something to do. Excuse me.

CHRIS: But what am I to do? How must I pass the time? *[He pursues her to the door.]*

HELEN: Lady Romer and Margaret will be here directly.

CHRIS: Oh Heavens!

*She goes out. A moment afterwards DAKIN enters.*

DAKIN: I beg your pardon, sir. I thought the Colonel was here.

CHRIS: I think he went across to the recruiting place.

DAKIN: Do you think I might follow him, sir? I was intending to ask his permission to go there.

CHRIS: To go where?

DAKIN: To the recruiting station, sir.

CHRIS: For what purpose?

DAKIN: The fact is, sir, that I have made up my mind to enlist.

CHRIS: You!

DAKIN: You are surprised at that, sir?

CHRIS: I didn't think you were that kind.

DAKIN: It's every kind now, sir.

CHRIS: Not quite, Dakin. I haven't gone yet.

DAKIN: No, Sir.

CHRIS: What do you think of me?

DAKIN: Sir!

CHRIS: Come! What do you think of me?

DAKIN: It is not for me to think anything about you, sir.

CHRIS: That won't do. Speak up like a man. You are a man now. You've seen me hanging about the place doing nothing, and others are going to the war - you are going to the war. What do you think of it?

DAKIN: I do not think of it, sir.

CHRIS: But you servants talk about us, surely. You know all about our affairs. You don't keep that respectful face in your own quarters.

DAKIN: I am not in my own quarters now.

CHRIS: That's better. Well?

DAKIN: I have nothing to say, sir.

CHRIS: Am I the talk of the kitchen?

DAKIN: Is that quite fair, sir?

CHRIS: No, and it's damned undignified. I beg your pardon for swearing. Dakin, why are you going to enlist? You're comfortable here?

DAKIN: Not in my mind.

CHRIS: Why not? How does it work? Tell me something about it.

DAKIN: Well, I think - I see all the good men going one way. I must go too.

CHRIS: Then it's not you yourself? You wouldn't go alone? If you were strong enough to resist -

DAKIN: It's my country calling me, sir.

CHRIS: That's just a catchword. I want to know what you think - what's at the back of your own mind.

DAKIN: We've got to beat the Germans, Sir.

CHRIS: Yes, yes. Dakin, are you a better man than I?

DAKIN: Sir!

CHRIS: I wonder if you're stronger? Who's got the pluck? The tenacity? Let's wrestle. See if you can throw me.

*CHRIS thrusts back chairs to make a space. He takes his coat off and throws it on the floor.*

Off with your coat. Ju-jitsu, catch-as-catch-can, anything.

DAKIN: *[Horried]* It's impossible, sir. I cannot do it.

CHRIS: I want to try my manhood. Come on.

DAKIN: I cannot, I cannot, indeed.

CHRIS: Damn you. Come on. I shall strike you if you don't.

DAKIN: It's not fair. I couldn't put forth my strength against you.

CHRIS: But I beg you to. As a comrade - as a friend. We are two young men together. You're my equal now. Nay, you're the better - in the mind - in the mind. Come, Dakin, honour me so far.

DAKIN: I would if I could - but I can't.

CHRIS: Why not?

DAKIN: You said - friend.

CHRIS: I meant it.

DAKIN: You can't change that all in a moment.

CHRIS: But if we fought in the trenches, side by side?

DAKIN: You'd be an officer.

CHRIS: I don't know that. But the same wind would blow on us, and the bullets wouldn't choose. Well, go and enlist.

DAKIN: *[Going]* Perhaps, sir, you would mention to the Colonel if you see him that I have gone across - but he was aware of my intention, and approved of it.

CHRIS: Stop! Do you know what you're doing?

DAKIN: I do not understand you, sir.

CHRIS: Listen! What's that?

DAKIN: I believe a band is playing at the recruiting station, sir.

CHRIS: Yes, the band is playing and the flags are flying, and you think that's war. You agree to the terms, you make the bargain. But it's a swindle. Look forward, and there you are in a wet ditch with a bullet in your head, your eyes, your belly. Did you agree to that?

DAKIN: I take my chance with the rest.

CHRIS: Lying there in your agony with no friend near you but death, does it seem a good bargain that you made when the band was playing?

DAKIN: You'd make a poor recruiting sergeant, sir.

CHRIS: Don't you think people should know what they are doing?

DAKIN: *[Sternly]* I think you are talking like a coward, sir.

CHRIS: There are several kinds of cowards. One will not look at the thing, another looks and goes back.

DAKIN: We must do the best we can.

CHRIS: *[Seated and following his own thoughts]* Good luck to you !

*As DAKIN stands near the door looking at him, MARGARET and LADY ROMER enter dressed in outdoor things. ROMER follows them. DAKIN stands by the door and goes out when they have entered.*

MARGARET: Whatever are you doing without your coat?

CHRIS: How are you, Aunt Janet? Will you still shake hands with me? Ah! you used to kiss me.

LADY ROM: How are you, Chris? *[They shake hands]* Kisses are for good boys. Well, you've got your coat off. Are you going to fight?

CHRIS: I forgot it. *[He puts on his coat]* I wanted Dakin to wrestle.

MARGARET: Dakin!

CHRIS: He's gone to enlist. I wanted to have a bout with him.

SIR JOHN: But, my boy -

CHRIS: Oh! we needn't go into it. The interest of it was really psychological. Now that's something in this war's favour. It breaks the surfaces. I got to know more about Dakin in ten minutes than I've known in five years. Quite an interesting fellow.

LADY ROM: Where's Stephen?

SIR JOHN: He was here just now.

CHRIS: He's off to the war, too. Stephen's going, Dakin's going, and Helen's going.

LADY ROM: Stephen going!

MARGARET: The Red Cross.

CHRIS: He told you before he told me?

MARGARET: Helen's going to train as a nurse.

CHRIS: Poor Stephen thinks it's all up with the Churches. He's going to start Christianity again with just the handful that believe in it.

LADY ROM: You're incorrigible.

CHRIS: By the by, Aunt Janet, I heard an amusing thing about the war. You remember Harriby - the exquisite Harriby? He's fairly in it, you know. His wife sends him out a clean pocket-handkerchief every week. One.

SIR JOHN: Dakin, by Jove -

CHRIS: Yes, he seemed less likely than me, didn't he?

LADY ROM: Well, Dakin has served you; now you'll let him defend you.

CHRIS: As cutting as ever, isn't she? Does it occur to any of you that I've been wonderfully goodnatured over all this?

LADY ROM: *[Turning away from him]* Margaret, John had an idea about trying to hear about Frank. He's writing to a man in Germany through Stockholm. I hope they won't open his letter and think he's a spy. This man should be able to get to know something. He's - what, John?

SIR JOHN: I'll tell Margaret all about it. *[ROMER strays out]*

CHRIS: Margaret, would you like to hear that Frank's wounded?

MARGARET: Why do you ask me that?

CHRIS: Because you are unjust to him in your thoughts. He's a prisoner. It's ignominious to be a prisoner. You're a Roman mother. Has he his wounds in front?

MARGARET: I know he couldn't help it. I do not doubt him. Modern war's different.

CHRIS: I think nobody cared more for Frank than I did. No man, Margaret. I don't know why. We hadn't much to say to one another. But I couldn't bear this war if it wasn't for Frank. It's thinking of him that will make me - Look here, Margaret [*he approaches her and handles her dress thoughtfully*] - if - suppose - it's hard to think of him - but if once - just once - he faltered - if, for a moment, he became human and the pressure was too great. A gallant soldier - yes. Always. But there's a breaking point.

MARGARET: What do you mean?

CHRIS: If he came to you and said, "I wasn't just made of steel as you thought. It was more than I could bear. I - well - I ran away"?

MARGARET [*Breaking away from him*] You shall not insult him. You are a coward with a coward's thoughts.

CHRIS: You daren't face that.

LADY ROM: You have no right to say such things.

CHRIS: No. But I'm sensitive about Frank. I see her going about and nursing resentments. She would always have him where the winds are blowing and the flags flying! Yes, and the blood flowing. For Margaret there are only two things - glory and the grave.

LADY ROM: Margaret is a soldier's daughter and a soldier's wife.

CHRIS: I know. She's a woman too.

MARGARET: Do you want me to doubt him?

CHRIS: I want you to see that the world's not made of iron.

MARGARET: You'd have him fall to your level.

CHRIS: If he did -

LADY ROM: We've had enough of this.

CHRIS: But these things interest me. I must do something. How can you love a stiff figure that never goes wrong?

MARGARET: You try to torture me.

CHRIS: No - no. I think I want to help you. I am resentful too. She's too military, isn't she, Aunt Janet? Margaret and I were once great friends.

*MARGARET turns away. HELEN, COLONEL ROKEBY and SIR JOHN ROMER come in. Greetings between LADY ROMER and HELEN and ROKEBY.*

LADY ROM: Well, Henry, I'm glad they've found you something to do. Why! Helen, I hear you're going to a hospital?

HELEN: Yes, Lady Romer.

*STEPHEN enters slowly, and is greeted by LADY ROMER.*

LADY ROM: And Stephen, too

CHRIS: Another unquiet spirit at rest.

COLONEL: We met Dakin as we were coming in -

CHRIS: Ah! that reminds me -

*He goes out hastily.*

LADY ROM: Is it true that Dakin has enlisted?

COLONEL: He's on the way now. He spoke to me about it the other day.

LADY ROM: Wonderful!

SIR JOHN: How are your men coming in, Henry?

COLONEL: My own men? On the estate? Excellent. These agricultural labourers are hard to move, though.

STEPHEN: They're planted in the earth.

LADY ROM: Well, Stephen, I'm glad to hear you've found some work to do.

STEPHEN: Thank you.

LADY ROM: I'm sure it will be congenial to you.

STEPHEN: *[With a short laugh]* Congenial? You think I like to see people in pain?

SIR JOHN: Come, come, Stephen. That's not what it means.

HELEN: It's natural for Stephen to look after people in distress.

STEPHEN: I might find something of that nearer home.

HELEN: Well, Sir John, haven't you any gossip for us?

SIR JOHN: Gossip, my dear?

HELEN: Even gossip's big now. But what's happening?

LADY ROM: When do you set off, Stephen?

STEPHEN: If I go -

MARGARET: If!

COLONEL: But, my boy, I thought -

STEPHEN: Yes, I suppose I shall go. But I've been unsettled. Chris - I've been thinking about it.

HELEN: Chris?

STEPHEN: Can it be true that I want to go?

MARGARET: What has Chris said to you?

STEPHEN: It's true that this war has an awful, compelling power. We're all very much alike. Yes, it was Chris who made me see that when I thought I was just doing right there was something else.

MARGARET: It's shameful of him.

HELEN: What did he say?

STEPHEN: Here am I pretending that it's a call to me as a Christian, and now I know that I want to be in the battle, I want the excitement of it. I'm not thinking of Christ at all. Yes, sometimes, but I cheat myself.

SIR JOHN: And all the better. We honour you for it.

STEPHEN: Honour!

COLONEL: Do what's right, my boy. Don't think about it too much.

HELEN: Yes, Stephen, that's it.

STEPHEN: You are right, sir, but till one gets something to do there's nothing but thinking, thinking.

MARGARET: You must avoid Chris like poison.

STEPHEN: No. We need him. We all need him.

MARGARET: Kitchener needs him.

STEPHEN: I don't think you know how much Chris is wanted now. I wish he could speak and preach and write so that we should understand better.



SIR JOHN: Nonsense! By the by, Henry -

HELEN: What do you mean?

STEPHEN: You don't listen to what Chris says now, but he talks to me. You see this war and all the incidents of it like a foolish play - a melodrama. Yes, these storytellers and play-writers have falsified things to you.

LADY ROM: But he's one himself.

STEPHEN: That's it. He's one. You don't make distinctions.

HELEN: Explain, Stephen. We don't understand.

STEPHEN: We accept all that happens just like those silly incidents in the play. The man's a traitor or he is not. Here are fiends torturing children; to the devil with them. There's a boy taking twenty prisoners and driving them before him with a pea-shooter. Your heroes have no qualms; your generals are confident. It's melodrama. There are seventy million people opposed to you, and it satisfies you to say that they are wrong. Simply wrong, nay - that they're all criminals.

HELEN: They are criminals.

LADY ROM: It might be Chris talking.

STEPHEN: Yes, Chris infects me. I know that. His scepticism. No, it's his noble candour. His beautiful sincerity. I mustn't listen to Chris. I'm a stiff, rigid figure, and it's my only safety. My religion? Why! it's shaking and quivering. There are times when I see it impossible - opposed to common sense. Of course it's absurd to let these damned Germans trample over us. I see that. I'm not a fool. Yet it's blasphemy. Blasphemy! Whichever way I turn. I denounced the war, and I thought it was honest and courageous. I think it was to stifle my doubts I can't be honest like Chris.

HELEN: We must close our minds against him.

STEPHEN: I don't say whether Chris does right or not. He sees and he makes me see.

HELEN: It's not the time to see.

STEPHEN: That's boldly said, Helen. It's not the time to be just, to be honest, to know yourself.

SIR JOHN: Well, well - don't let's go into that.

STEPHEN: No. Don't let us go into anything.

LADY ROM: Now, Stephen, don't get vexed with us. We're just ordinary people seeing things in an ordinary way. You and Chris are very wonderful, I'm sure. You make yourselves miserable and everybody else. You do nothing but talk, and when we've beaten the Germans you'll go on talking. You'll want us to coddle them and be Christian to them and so on. We won't.

SIR JOHN: That is to say -

LADY ROM: No, John. Don't make any concessions to them. It's really all Chris's fault.

STEPHEN: You won't even allow me a will of my own.

LADY ROM: Chris is the villain of the piece.

MARGARET: Yes, and we go on tolerating him. Father, you should turn him out of the house.

COLONEL: No.

HELEN: *[To MARGARET]* Don't make it too hard for your father.

SIR JOHN: Well now - to change the subject -

*CHRIS'S voice is heard outside before he enters rapidly and gaily.*

CHRIS: Helen! Helen! Where are you? I've enlisted. Helen! St. George, Richmond, and Victory! A thousand hearts are great within my bosom. Ah! you're all here. Helen! I've enlisted. Margaret! *[He goes to his father, and they join hands]* I've done it, sir.

COLONEL: Thank God! Thank you, my boy.

CHRIS: We're a united family. The incredible has happened. Ah! but Stephen - Stephen, have I deserted you? Remember, you went first. You didn't enlist, but it was the same thing.

LADY ROM: But have you enlisted?

SIR JOHN: Why? We could have got you a commission.

MARGARET: You've not had time. When did you do it?

CHRIS: Now, this moment, I've run all the way. What a relief! Helen, I'm happy.

HELEN: You make me happy.

COLONEL: It's magnificent, my boy, but we must get you a commission.

CHRIS: No, let me go the whole hog.

MARGARET: But you were here ten minutes ago - talking.

CHRIS: Talking. Yes. I've started doing now. You see? I can talk just as you do. It's quite easy to go over to the other side. That is, if you're a simple and sincere person, as I am. Everybody's right. I've changed.

MARGARET: He's fooling us.

HELEN: No, Margaret.

SIR JOHN: Do you mean to say you've just been out and enlisted now?

CHRIS: I do.

SIR JOHN: Wonderful!

CHRIS: I did it to get away from the war, I think. It's the only way. And I'm a romantic. And my father was always calling to me - and Frank too. I should never have gone for you, Helen. Oh! and there was Dakin. And a thousand other things that I don't remember.

HELEN: Dakin!

CHRIS: Dakin intrigued me. It was a queer notion I had that, after all, he was a better man than I.

STEPHEN: It was pride, then?

CHRIS: It was many things. I was extremely curious about Dakin. You'll hardly believe it, but I followed him. I wanted to see him enlist. I hadn't made up my mind about anything. And then - yonder - I came on those fellows waiting their turn. They were standing in a queue - Dobson, Pettigrew, that sturdy little fellow at the forge, some I didn't know. They were not very formidable to look at. The might of Germany wouldn't think much of them. Dakin fell in at the back, and that somehow - affected me. They all looked so humble and faithful. They seemed to be gazing at something a long way off and not thinking of themselves at all. And then it came upon me that there had never been anything in the world like this, that in all my life nothing had ever mattered so much, that I should never be happy again if I held back now. You don't blame me, Stephen?

STEPHEN: No.

LADY ROM: Blame you! You're a hero.

MARGARET: Frank must know.

- CHRIS: Yes. It's jolly to think of Frank knowing. I think I must go over to Germany to tell him. I'd like to go and rescue him, as you do in a boy's game.
- COLONEL: Remember, this isn't a boy's game.
- CHRIS: I've got that all right at the back of my mind, Father.
- SIR JOHN: You've passed the doctor?
- CHRIS: Oh! that's all right, but I've passed nothing. D'you know, I didn't behave very nicely. I shoved in before all those fellows who were waiting. I wanted to get it done. I wanted to commit myself. They were rather surprised to see me when I got inside. I'm afraid I made the thing a bit spectacular. I ought to have lined up behind Dakin. But there - it's my last burst of aristocratic privilege. The doctor? I'm to see him this afternoon. It's only Warburton. I'd punch his damned head if he talked of not passing me. Excuse me, Aunt Janet, but I must swear now I'm a trooper.
- LADY ROM: It does me good to hear you.
- CHRIS: Don't begrudge me my bit of limelight, Stephen.
- STEPHEN: I can't help being glad.
- CHRIS: And have I done right?
- STEPHEN: You've followed your instincts. You've done what you must.
- CHRIS: Instincts? Yes, but - Ah ! don't let's argue. I'm like a hesitating Ritualist that's joined the Mother Church. No more doubts. No more hesitations. Not in public.
- SIR JOHN: The next thing is to get you a commission.
- COLONEL: I'll write to Mainwaring at once.
- CHRIS: No, no. I tell you I'm going the whole hog.
- SIR JOHN: You don't know what it is.
- COLONEL: I think you hardly realise, my boy -
- CHRIS: I must do it my own way.
- MARGARET: You make it a personal matter. You must do what's best for the country.
- CHRIS: That's very much to the point, but I should make a very poor

General.

MARGARET: You take it too lightly.

HELEN : No, Margaret, he doesn't.

ROMER : Some of those Tommies you know – well -

CHRIS: These are trifles. I'm ready to descend into Hell.

HELEN: You said you were happy.

CHRIS: Yes. And how gloriously happy I must be to forget about Hell.

HELEN: You're too serious and you're not serious enough.

CHRIS: That's the way with us.

*DAKIN enters with a telegram on a tray.*

DAKIN: *[To COL. ROKEBY]* A telegram, Sir.

CHRIS: Hullo! Dakin! Got it over? Seen the doctor?

DAKIN: I have not yet, sir -

*CHRIS intercepts him, clutches, him and the tray and telegram fall to the ground.*

CHRIS: Come on! We're equals now. I must have a tussle with you.

DAKIN: Impossible, Sir. I cannot, indeed. I beg of you – really, sir - take care, take care - oh, hang it all! - confound you – damn!

*They wrestle together, and CHRIS is thrown. He gets up laughing. MARGARET has picked up the telegram and tries to get COL. ROKEBY'S attention.*

CHRIS: Two out of three. It wasn't fair for you to say "damn". It made me laugh.

DAKIN: I beg pardon, I'm sure. I'm extremely sorry. It slipped out, somehow.

CHRIS: Of course it did. All sorts of things will slip out now. Now then - Ready?

DAKIN: *[Picking up the tray]* I really cannot, sir.

MARGARET: Stop this fooling, Chris. Father, the telegram.

*COL. ROKEBY takes it. DAKIN goes out.*

CHRIS: I'll have it out with you, mind.

LADY ROM: Well, I don't know what to make of you.

SIR JOHN: Not very dignified, my boy.

CHRIS: Hadn't I better get my dignity down a peg or two?

*MARGARET stands beside COL. ROKEBY as he opens the telegram. He looks at it for some time with a perfectly impassive face after having instinctively turned it away from her. She snatches it from him.*

SIR JOHN: What's this, Henry?

*They all stand looking at MARGARET. CHRIS goes to her, puts his arm round her shoulders, and looks at the telegram.*

CHRIS: Died of wounds.

*MARGARET offers the telegram vaguely. ROMER takes it, and the others crowd round to read. The COLONEL stands as if at attention. CHRIS and MARGARET stand together, his arm still about her.*

MARGARET: *[To CHRIS]* You shall avenge him.

CHRIS: *[Breaking from her]* No, no, no. How can you say that?

HELEN: Come, Margaret.

LADY ROM: Come, my dear.

MARGARET: Avenge him! Avenge him, Chris.

CHRIS: How can you talk these abominable stupidities now?

HELEN: Hush ! Hush!

CHRIS: Follow him, die with him, if you like. What has revenge got to do with him? Ah! it's a great thing, this war. It's taken Frank.

MARGARET: You were wrong, you see.

CHRIS: Wrong?

MARGARET: You thought he was a coward. You doubted him.

CHRIS: See how proud she is !

MARGARET: Haven't I cause? Who can be prouder than I today?

CHRIS: Margaret, you shall be proud of me, too.

*She goes out as the Curtain falls.*

## Act Three

*A barn in the North of France. There is a door in the middle of the wall facing the spectator, and to the left of it and above the level of a man's head a small window. A little to the left of the middle of the stage are two wooden boxes, a large and a small one, in such relation that they can be used as stool and desk. There are several heaps of straw round the walls, but no other furniture. When the curtain rises the stage is almost completely dark, and even the objects enumerated above cannot be discerned until the door opens. From time to time there are slight illuminations at the window, and distant boomings are heard; then two or three rifle shots in middle distance. Exclamations and a little scuffling are heard outside. The door opens, and two men are thrust into the barn. Behind them and by the light of a lantern are seen several German soldiers. The two prisoners, for this is what they are, are CHRIS and another English soldier. CHRIS wears a tattered German overcoat, and both are dirty, dishevelled and exhausted. They shamble and stumble forward, foul the boxes, and sink down presently towards the right on the straw.*

GER. SOL: Wenn Sie entfliehen versuchen, werden Sie geschossen. Verstehe? -  
Vat you call shot - Hein ?

CHRIS: I say - something to eat – bread - das brod.

ENG. SOL: Water.

CHRIS: Das Wasser. Not much to ask.

GER. SOL: *[Closing the door as he goes out]* Halt die Maule !

CHRIS: *[After a silence]* Who are you?

ENG. SOL: Haven't a card with me.

CHRIS: I beg your pardon. My name's Rokeby. I'm a corporal in the 3rd Wessex.

ENG SOL: Oh!

CHRIS: You?

ENG. SOL: The Belters. My name is Megson. Gentleman ranker.

CHRIS: Oh! Well, we're in a damned awkward mess, Mr. Megson.

MEGSON: We're safer here than we were outside.

CHRIS: Perhaps. We've lost our liberty.

MEGSON: I don't think much of the sort of liberty I've had these last few days.

CHRIS: Think of your ideals, Mr. Megson.

MEGSON: Ideals! I wish I'd never come.

CHRIS: But what foul brutes you and I are now without 'em! What filth and misery and terror and humiliation -

MEGSON: Speak for yourself.

CHRIS: Oh! You keeping the public school spirit quite intact, Mr. Megson?

MEGSON: It was a high-class private school I went to.

CHRIS: Really? Gymnasium, bracing situation, home from home?

MEGSON: Certainly.

CHRIS: Modern languages?

MEGSON: Here! what d'y' mean?

CHRIS: You'll have a chance to rub up your German.

MEGSON: D'y say you're a corp'ral?

CHRIS: I am.

MEGSON: You're a gentleman, too, aren't you?

CHRIS: Mr. Megson, you have your ideals still.

MEGSON: What d'y' mean?

CHRIS: Blood's the thing.

MEGSON: Blood?

CHRIS: A gentleman should have good blood in him.

MEGSON: What are you talking about?

CHRIS: About blood. Family, you know. When a man's lying in the trenches with a gash in him it must be a comfort to know it's good blood he's shedding.

MEGSON: Are y'a bit light-headed? You're not wounded?

CHRIS: Only in the spirit, Mr. Megson. And I'm hungry.

MEGSON: Why, what's the matter?

CHRIS: Oh! my dear fellow, I'm talking like a fool. Let's be friends. We're



suffering the last humiliation together. We're prisoners. And what's gone before? I was a lost dog in a world of enemies. You find out things about yourself - not nice things. I say, Megson, can you keep your form? Do you care whether you're a gentleman or not? I admire you. Honestly, I do.

MEGSON: What have you been doing?

CHRIS: Much the same as you, I daresay. I've marched and marched. I've fought and I've run away. I've been brave - excited, at least - and I've been afraid - dreadfully, horribly afraid. I've admitted to myself things that no man has a right to admit. I've been cruel and vindictive, and I've shed silly, sentimental tears. Oh! the dirt and the confusion and the noise! Megson, did you ever bayonet a man? Ugh! He nearly got me. What a relief! And yet I knew I should never be happy again.

MEGSON: It has to be done.

CHRIS: As you say, it has to be done. The man who's squeamish is a fool. And yet how are you to keep human?

MEGSON: You say a great deal too much.

CHRIS: No doubt. For instance?

MEGSON: Keep things dark, man. Make the best of it.

CHRIS: No, Megson. It's no use keeping things dark. Let the sun shine on them - let it illuminate - what's that?

MEGSON: What?

CHRIS: What are you doing? Are you eating?

MEGSON: No. That is - What d'you mean?

CHRIS: I heard your jaws going. You've got something. Damn it, man, share out.

MEGSON: I'd a crust. What's that to you? Mind y'r own business.

CHRIS: You hound! You sneak! Give me my share.

MEGSON: You're a nice one to talk. You admit you've been a coward.

CHRIS: I'm not a coward when I'm starving. Come! Throw me a bit and I won't ask what you keep.

MEGSON : I've none to spare. Keep off.

CHRIS:        *[Crawling to him]* Where's your throat?

*They struggle together on the ground, grunting and exclaiming.*

MEGSON:    You blackguard! You're murdering me.

CHRIS:        Sneak!

*The door of the barn opens, and a PRUSSIAN OFFICER enters, followed by several soldiers, one of whom carries a lantern.*

PRUSSIAN:   Ach! Herr Je! What are you Englishmen doing?

*He speaks English correctly in a foreign way. They rise discomfited.*

Why did you fight?

CHRIS:        We were wrestling to keep ourselves warm.

PRUSSIAN:   Ach ! Very likely. Geben Sie hier das Licht.

*He takes the lantern and holds it up to examine them.*

Where did you get that coat?

CHRIS:        I must apologise. I was freezing. I found it.

PRUSSIAN:   You stole it?

CHRIS:        He was dead.

PRUSSIAN:   Indeed! What is your regiment?

CHRIS:        The 3rd Wessex infantry.

PRUSSIAN:   Ach! You are in General Rigby's division?

CHRIS:        Yes.

PRUSSIAN:   And how did you get apart from your regiment? You were appointed to spy? What?

CHRIS:        Spy! No, no. We were scattered. I was lost. I've been wandering about.

PRUSSIAN:   Take off that coat. *[CHRIS drops it to the ground]* A corporal. You are a man of intelligence - what? One suitable to be sent on a little mission?

CHRIS:        I have not been sent on any mission.

PRUSSIAN:   *[Turns the lantern on MEGSON]* Another lost sheep?

MEGSON: My name is Megson. I belong to what we call the Belters.

PRUSSIAN: Belters? What's that? *[He turns the lantern on to MEGSON'S shoulder strap]* Ach! *[He sits]* Nehme jenen Mann hinaus. Alles hinaus and mache die Thüre zu.

*The soldier and MEGSON go out, and the door is shut.*

Now, sir, a word with you. You are not what is called a common soldier.

CHRIS: I enlisted like anybody else.

PRUSSIAN: General Rigby's division. He is wounded - what?

CHRIS: I've not heard that.

PRUSSIAN: Let me see. He is operating with - What is the division on his left?

CHRIS: On his left?

PRUSSIAN: Exactly.

CHRIS: But ought I to tell you that?

PRUSSIAN: Why not?

CHRIS: Pardon me, sir, but as a fellow soldier -

PRUSSIAN: What!

CHRIS: We are both soldiers. You are an officer, of course -

PRUSSIAN: You have the impudence to speak to me as to an equal? On your knees.

CHRIS: But -

PRUSSIAN *[Drawing a revolver]* On your knees.

CHRIS *[Collapses suddenly and kneels]* You might have spared me that.

PRUSSIAN: What did you say is the division on General Rigby's left? And remember I know something. You had better not make a mistake.

CHRIS: My father is a colonel in the British Army. I am a gentleman. I appeal to you -

PRUSSIAN: Stand up! *[CHRIS stands up]* Two paces back, please. *[He takes them]* You make a mistake. I only ask for information such as any prisoner lets out in gossip. A matter of curiosity. I have one or two little wagers

with comrades. Your answers may decide them. Now!

CHRIS: For God's sake, don't press me.

PRUSSIAN: Are you tired of your life?

CHRIS: No, no. Stop! You are a German officer and a gentleman. You don't shoot prisoners.

PRUSSIAN: You are not an ordinary prisoner. You are a spy.

CHRIS: I am not indeed. I assure you on my honour -

PRUSSIAN: Let us not talk of honour. You are caught here behind our lines and wearing our uniform. *[He points to the coat on the floor.]*

CHRIS: But I was cold, I was freezing, and the coat was there. And, besides, here's my uniform underneath. I've lost my cap. I can't talk German. How could I be a spy?

PRUSSIAN: I did not say you were an efficient one.

CHRIS: You have humiliated me enough.

PRUSSIAN: Perhaps you will now answer my questions.

CHRIS: I can't know anything that would be of value to you.

PRUSSIAN: You may speak freely, then.

CHRIS: But think of me! Think what it means to me!

PRUSSIAN: You are a pawn in the game.

CHRIS: We are here alone. Save me!

PRUSSIAN: Save you?

CHRIS: You see what a coward I am. I might do what you ask. It would be terrible. Don't you see that? Can you bear it? You! What are you made of?

PRUSSIAN: We are not sentimentalists. A shivering fool will not turn me from my purpose.

CHRIS: It would be murder.

PRUSSIAN: You cannot murder a spy.

CHRIS: You know I'm not a spy.

PRUSSIAN: What does it matter? A carcase is a carcase.

CHRIS: I entreat you to spare me. Anything but that. I'll kneel again. I'll lick your boots. Don't make me - don't make me -

PRUSSIAN: Come, come!

CHRIS: But it's monstrous. It's shameful. You can't treat a man like that.

PRUSSIAN *[Raps on the box with the butt of the revolver]* Your time is up.

CHRIS: Shoot, you devil.

PRUSSIAN *[After a pause]* So!

CHRIS: Quickly, quickly.

PRUSSIAN *[Thoughtfully]* Very interesting. Perhaps you'll change your mind.

CHRIS: No. I'm at the bottom now.

PRUSSIAN: Your fear has gone?

CHRIS: I can't stand.

*He staggers towards the wall at the right and falls on the straw.*

PRUSSIAN: Very curious. *[Lighting a cigar]* By the by, I shall not shoot you.

*He smokes in silence for a time. Two or three shots are heard in the distance. He starts up and makes for the door as it is opened by a German soldier.*

Was ist's?

SOLDIER: Sic Kommen.

*Confused exclamations outside are heard. They rush out. More shots are fired. Shouts die away. The shots become more distant. MEGSON enters cautiously.*

MEGSON *[Whispering]* Hullo! Are you there?

*He takes the lantern and finds CHRIS lying in the straw with his face to the wall.*

I say, there's a chance to be off. Are you hurt? What's up?

CHRIS *[Slowly sitting up]* Who are you?

MEGSON: You know. Megson.

CHRIS: You were here just now, weren't you? It seems a long time ago.

MEGSON: What's happened to you?

CHRIS: Dreadful, dreadful things. I've been seeing ghosts.

MEGSON: I thought you were light-headed. Come on. I think our chaps are attacking away on the right there. We may get to them.

CHRIS: I'm as weak as water.

MEGSON: Here's that bit of bread. I say, I've been sorry about that. I was thinking about it outside there. You see - well, I can't explain.

CHRIS: Thank you. *[He takes the bread and breaks it in two]* Here - halves.

MEGSON: No, no. Take the lot.

*CHRIS bursts into sobs.*

I say ! I say !

*Curtain*

## Act Four

*The hall at COLONEL ROKEBY'S again. Many months have passed. The disposition of the furniture is very much what it was in the first act. SIR JOHN and LADY ROMER, in motor coats, etc., enter from outside, followed by an old footman and then by CHRIS. He is muffled, and his face is hardly seen. A bent, shambling figure, he passes across the hall at once and goes out to the right.*

FOOTMAN: *[Staring after him]* I beg your pardon, Sir John - who is that? Where is he going?

SIR JOHN: That is Mr. Christopher, of course.

FOOTMAN: Mr. Christopher?

LADY ROM. He has gone to his room. You may ask him presently if he wants anything.

*SIR JOHN says a word to her apart.*

No; just leave him alone for the present.

FOOTMAN: I'm afraid, my lady, that they'll all be disappointed.

LADY ROM. You mean the Colonel and Mrs. Iredale? Well, they'll be back directly, I suppose.

FOOTMAN: Yes, my lady, and Miss Thorburn too. But all the people thought he was coming by the train. Quite a crowd went to meet him.

SIR JOHN: A crowd?

FOOTMAN: Yes, Sir John, and a band.

SIR JOHN: A band!

LADY ROM: Good heavens!

FOOTMAN: We're all very much excited about his coming home.

LADY ROM: What an escape!

SIR JOHN: You see - what is your name?

FOOTMAN: Perkins, sir.

SIR JOHN: You see, Perkins, Mr. Christopher wishes to be quiet. He is a good deal shaken and wants rest.

FOOTMAN: Is he wounded, sir?

ROMER : I don't know that he's wounded – but –

LADY ROM: Oh! the hardships, the privations of that terrible war, Perkins! Illness kills more than wounds.

FOOTMAN: It's been dreadful, my lady.

LADY ROM: So you'll understand that Mr. Christopher wants to be very quiet and - no fuss, you know. He doesn't want to be talked about.

FOOTMAN: Quite so, my lady.

*HELEN and MARGARET enter.*

MARGARET: Oh! here you are. Where's Chris?

HELEN: How have we missed you? When did you come?

MARGARET: Where's Chris?

LADY ROM: He's gone to his room. Tired. We decided to come in the car.

MARGARET: Well, but –

SIR JOHN: Chris decided.

HELEN: How is he?

LADY ROM: Oh! well, you know - *[Taking off her coat]* Just take these things, Perkins.

FOOTMAN: Yes, my lady.

*He gathers various wraps and goes out.*

MARGARET: It makes rather a mess of the preparations.

LADY ROM: Where's your father?

MARGARET: He stopped to send a wire. He'll be here directly. But there's a band and a triumphal arch. I suppose you missed it all. You came by the low road?

LADY ROM: Yes.

MARGARET: Is anything wrong?

SIR JOHN: Not exactly wrong, but it's hardly a case for triumphal arches.

LADY ROM: The poor boy is very much changed.

HELEN: In what way?

LADY ROM: Oh! don't misunderstand me. There's nothing really wrong with him - except that everything is wrong. But you must judge for yourselves. I may be giving you quite a wrong idea.

MARGARET: Do you say he wouldn't come by the train?

LADY ROM: I think he must have scented that band.

MARGARET: Father was disappointed. He would have gone to Dover - Oh! here he is.

*The COLONEL enters rather briskly. He is not in khaki now, but ordinary country clothes. He is older and greyer.*

COLONEL: I heard you'd come. Where's Chris? Well, Janet, how are you? I envy you the first greeting of him. Hah! John. But why didn't you keep to the arrangement? Where's Chris?

LADY ROM: Better go and fetch him, John.

SIR JOHN: Yes. He's a bit run down, you know, Henry.

MARGARET: Do let's see him.

SIR JOHN: All right in a few days, of course. *[He goes out]*

MARGARET: What is it? He's not hurt?

LADY ROM: He went straight off to bed last night. And he hardly spoke on the



way down.

COLONEL: Did he tell you anything about his adventures?

LADY ROM: Nothing. Dreadfully reticent, poor boy. He's washed out, Henry. He wants a good rest and feeding up. And you must get his mind away from it all. Helen, you must look after him.

HELEN: Will he let me?

LADY ROM: Oh, my dear, don't wait till he asks you.

*ROMER enters, looking back for CHRIS, who follows slowly. CHRIS is dressed in dark civilian clothes. He is pallid, shrunk, a little bent, prematurely aged. As a rule he speaks rather listlessly, but he is shaken by gusts of nervous excitement. He hangs back a little, and ROMER urges him on. HELEN is nearest to the door, and he passes her hurriedly with averted eyes. He sees his father, and advances to him. COLONEL ROKEBY stands looking at him, and then steps forward to meet him.*

CHRIS: *[In rather a high-pitched, protesting voice]* I did my best, sir.

COLONEL: Yes, yes, I know. Welcome, my boy. Well done.

*He takes CHRIS into his arms. CHRIS yields for a moment and then repulses him.*

CHRIS: None of that. I can't stand that.

*He turns away greatly agitated and encounters HELEN. He recovers and speaks casually, shaking hands with her and MARGARET.*

How d'you do, Helen? Hullo! Margaret.

COLONEL: Well, my boy, you don't look first-rate.

CHRIS: Uncle John was kind enough - his motor. Hope you don't mind.

COLONEL: Yes, yes. All right. But the people were disappointed.

MARGARET: They had prepared a reception for you.

CHRIS: Horrible. Horrible. What's that?

*The distant strains of "See the Conquering Hero comes" are heard.*

MARGARET: It's the band. They've found you out.

CHRIS: But it's impossible. It's indecent. Don't they know that Stephen's dead? He is dead? Someone told me so.

MARGARET: Yes, Chris.

*The band is a little nearer.*

CHRIS: Let them play a funeral march, then. The best men have gone. But I wanted to see Stephen. I wanted to talk to him about all this. What did he say? Are there any letters?

HELEN: Your father has some.

CHRIS: Oh! but he would have talked to me. Stephen dead! Why! that's intolerable.

*The old Footman enters.*

Who's that? Where's Dakin?

COLONEL: Dakin was killed in action.

CHRIS: Dakin! *[He laughs incredulously ; the laugh dies down quickly.]* Dakin dead, Stephen dead, Frank dead. How strange it is that I should be alive! Am I alive? I've been looking in the glass. What does it matter?

FOOTMAN: If you please, sir, the people are all over the lawn. I think they want to see Mr. Christopher.

CHRIS: See me! Impossible. No, no.

MARGARET: Why shouldn't you show yourself?

COLONEL: Yes. Come out with me. Perkins, tell them we're coming.

FOOTMAN Yes, Sir. *[He goes out.]*

CHRIS: No, no. I couldn't do that. That's absurd. Isn't it, Helen? Of course you don't understand.

MARGARET: Chris, you've done nothing to be ashamed of?

HELEN: Margaret!

COLONEL: You must not say that, Margaret.

CHRIS: Ashamed?

MARGARET: What is wrong?

CHRIS: Oh! you have these romantic notions.

MARGARET: What do you mean?

COLONEL: He will tell us his adventures presently.

CHRIS: My adventures? But it's all different from what you think. Don't make me pretend to be what I am not. You know, sir, what war is.

COLONEL: You remember that I have never been in action.

CHRIS: How strange that is! Then you don't know - you don't know yourself? Ah, but you're different from me. Forgive me, sir. You're a soldier. You're a hero.

MARGARET: Are you not?

CHRIS: One ebbs and flows. To and fro, to and fro.

HELEN: Speak plainly. We can forgive.

CHRIS: *[Haughtily]* What have you to forgive?

COLONEL: Come, Chris! you must go for a moment. I'll go with you. Just for a moment. Stand up. Look your best.

CHRIS: Oh! but I can't. I'm not a hero. I hate it all. I'm a miserable, drifting man. And yet why not? Nobody knows me but myself. Don't you fear, Margaret. There's nothing against me. I can make a case for the heroic with anyone. In my heart? In my soul? Oh! never mind.

COLONEL: Will you come? Must I explain that you're not well?

*Shouts outside are heard.*

CHRIS: *[Fascinated and hesitating]* Shall I? I'm as good as the rest. And I had dreams of this once. No, no, sir; it's stupid and impossible.

HELEN: Don't let him go.

*Another shout outside.*

CHRIS: Yes, I'll take the call, as the actors say. Come on, sir. I did my best. You can't do more.

*He goes out with COLONEL ROKEBY. There is a shout of greeting. ROMER follows the others out. The three women stare at each other.*

MARGARET: What's happened to him?

LADY ROM: Helen, if you love him, you may help him now.

HELEN: I loved him. I'm afraid of him now, I think. Oh, no! that can't be.

MARGARET: You must make him tell you everything.

HELEN: How can I do that? And it's not the things that happens he cares about. It's what he thinks and feels.

MARGARET: He must tell you what he has done or not done.

HELEN: What is it you suspect?

MARGARET: Some horrible cowardice.

HELEN: No, no.

LADY ROM: Nonsense, Margaret.

MARGARET: We must know.

*COL. ROKEBY and CHRIS return. The band strikes up again, and its sound grows fainter as the people march away.*

COLONEL: There! Soon over. That's better. I wish you could have said a few words, too.

CHRIS: What an absurdity! What folly! Why did I go? I'm sorry, sir, but this isn't in my line.

MARGARET: Now tell us what you've been doing. Sit down and talk.

COLONEL: Of course we want to know, but give the poor lad time to rest.

MARGARET: Why have you not written? Where have you been?

CHRIS: Margaret, you're a Grand Inquisitor.

MARGARET: When you went away you told me I should be proud of you. Well?

CHRIS: I remember. I remember.

MARGARET: Well?

CHRIS: What does it matter? It's not really important - except to myself.

LADY ROM: Chris, you talk so strangely you make us all afraid. You know Margaret -you know what it means to her. And your father - think of him.

CHRIS: What a curious, ironical thing it is - he's never been in action.

MARGARET: He is a brave soldier, nevertheless.

COLONEL: Chris does not doubt me.

CHRIS: No, no, sir. Not for a moment. You and Frank -

COLONEL: And you, my boy?

CHRIS: I have not disgraced you, sir.

*There is visible relief. He sits down and continues in a low voice, though he must know that the others hear him.*

Now, why did I say that? I had to say it.

MARGARET: But it's true?

CHRIS: Yes, I suppose so. I don't know. Yes, yes. But I'm speaking your language, not my own.

HELEN: Oh! Chris. Don't torture us.

CHRIS: Father, I think on the whole I came out pretty well. Of course I had my moments of funk like most people. I was complimented once or twice. I ought to have got my commission, but I was in hospital so long. Nerves, breakdown - that sort of thing. Quite common. It doesn't always mean funk. I got lost and had a horrible time wandering about. Don't ask me to talk about that. Not that. May I blot out a few hours, a few minutes? I was very low. To become a sergeant isn't so bad. No, I haven't disgraced you.

MARGARET: Oh! Chris, I'm so glad.

COLONEL: You must tell us all about it.

CHRIS: Ask me any questions you like?

SIR JOHN: Did you see anything of these atrocities?

CHRIS: Atrocities? It's all atrocities.

SIR JOHN: Well, but I mean - you know what I mean.

CHRIS: You trouble yourselves about such trifles.

SIR JOHN: Trifles!

LADY ROM: Did you fraternise with the Germans on Christmas Day?

CHRIS: *[Wearily]* What does it matter? I beg your pardon, Aunt, but you ask such funny questions.

HELEN: Why are they funny?

CHRIS: You'll be wanting me to give a lecture on the war with magic lantern.

LADY ROM: And why not?

CHRIS: Jolly fellows in the trenches singing the National Anthem. Quite true, they did. Trifles.

MARGARET: And what is not a trifle?

CHRIS: How could I tell you? It's what a man carries in his heart. The Germans? I had impulses of affection for them. Decent folk. But it's no use charging with the bayonet unless you become a wild beast. I like the way they write about it in the newspapers. Nice, hearty sport. Oh, hell! Oh, hell!

COLONEL: Well, my boy, you're glad to get home.

CHRIS: *[He looks round at them all, and to their consternation begins to sob. He recovers himself]* Devil take it. That's what I'm like now.

COLONEL: It'll pass off. It'll be all right.

CHRIS: The sort of thing to keep out of the newspapers.

*LADY ROMER nods to her husband, and they go out together quietly.*

MARGARET: Chris, I will be proud of you if you'll let me.

CHRIS: Thanks, Margaret.

COLONEL: Just settle down here, my boy, and have a quiet nap. You'll be all right then.

CHRIS: Good idea.

*MARGARET and COL. ROKEBY go out, and HELEN is following, when she pauses and then comes back to CHRIS, who is lying back in an easy chair. He looks at her without moving.*

HELEN: I think you've done nobly - beautifully. It was harder for you than for others. Oh, Chris!

*She holds out her hands as she stands before him. CHRIS moves uneasily in his chair but does not rise.*

CHRIS: Thank you very much, Helen.

HELEN: *[Discomfited]* You are dreadfully knocked up, I'm afraid.

CHRIS: Yes, I don't seem to have much life left in me.

HELEN: You must tell me all about it some day. I want to know all you've

thought and done.

CHRIS: Do you, Helen?

HELEN: Yes, I'm not afraid. I want to share it all with you. The bad and the good.

CHRIS: Oh! but how can I? How can I? Our language – words - are made for peace. I can't tell you about war.

HELEN: You're not sincere.

CHRIS: No. We're all shamming and posing. Sincere! We must keep decent. The stoics, you know - the stoics were rather a canny lot. They never talked in their sleep.

HELEN: Chris ! what have you done?

CHRIS: *[Sharply]* There's nothing against me. I'm telling you the truth. That is to say - it's the truth as far as the world has any business with it. Of course if we're going into the awful things that might have been - what right have you to pry into my mind? Oh, Helen! I've suffered the agonies of death.

HELEN: Chris - you weren't wounded?

CHRIS: My skin's whole, and it's the skin that counts. You treat us all alike. The world's justice. Of course a few poor devils are cashiered and publicly disgraced. They may be no worse than the rest. But we come home to brass bands, and there are secrets in our hearts. We're different; every man is different, but you give us the same tune. The brass band is ridiculous now. It was right when we went out. We were heroes then; we'd taken the plunge and we were all alike. I think I was never so happy as when I first marched to it.

HELEN: You are a hero now.

CHRIS: That's my business.

HELEN: You make me miserable.

CHRIS: Oh! I'm sorry, Helen. I tell you I've behaved like a hero - several times. Yes, and I've been in hell – cowed – degraded - brutish. These are only words. I've got things that I can't share. I must be alone now. And what I've seen. Horrible! Horrible! Good lads, my comrades - beside me – shattered - crying out to me - *[He puts up his hands before his face and is shaken by sobs]* We come back to glowing welcomes, to take up the old, pleasant life again. No.

HELEN: *[After a pause]* There's your work?

CHRIS: What work?

HELEN: Your writing.

CHRIS: Yes, yes. Certainly. Some day, I suppose. *[He rises]*

HELEN: There is something else, Chris - surely.

CHRIS: *[He looks at her in fear]* You mean -

HELEN: There's me.

CHRIS: *[Muttering]* Thank you, thank you, Helen. *[He turns away]* Just let me think a moment.

HELEN: Think!

CHRIS: You're very kind. You're very generous. We might make a mistake.

HELEN: Chris, my dear - if we love one another -

CHRIS: I want rest. I want warmth. I want food. The blood has gone out of my body.

HELEN: Oh! my poor boy!

CHRIS: I'm changed; I'm weak and broken. I want to be alone. You're immaculate.

HELEN: It's only that I've not been tried.

CHRIS: Yes, you're generous. If you had been - if you had been - if I could have picked you from the gutter - a prostitute from the streets - forgive me.

HELEN: Chris! we have done wrong. We should not have let you go.

CHRIS: You mustn't judge things by their results. It was right to go. I have no regrets. How could I stay while Frank and Stephen and all the rest were dying there? How could I see my father every day? And deep down in me - yes, deep - I'm an Englishman - all the old voices and the old tunes were calling.

HELEN: In time, Chris - in time, all may be well.

CHRIS: Yes, the world's broken, but it will mend. I'm broken, and I suppose I shall mend. I can see things when I don't feel them. I can see that you're beautiful and generous.



HELEN:       Some day - some day -

CHRIS:       No, Helen. You must look for a better man.

HELEN:       There isn't a better.

CHRIS:       Yes; the great man isn't crushed by war, not even by what I've gone through. If I'd been stronger - if I'd been better - it's very hard on men like me. This war is very hard on men like me.

HELEN:       I've been blind.

*COLONEL ROKEBY enters.*

COLONEL:    Now, you've talked to him long enough. Let him have his rest.

*HELEN goes out sadly.*

CHRIS:       Good idea, sir. A sleep will refresh me.

COLONEL:    Yes. Chris, it is a strange thing, isn't it, that I've never had any fighting? It's not for want of trying. I envy you.

CHRIS:       *[Puts his arm round his father's neck]* You're an old innocent, you know!

COLONEL:    What !

CHRIS:       We've both done our best, Daddy.

*He begins to cry, and his father leads him to the arm-chair.*

COLONEL:    You want rest, my boy - rest.

*CHRIS sinks into the chair and lies back in it, staring before him. His father hesitates and then goes quietly out.*

CURTAIN