

The Broken Token

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by

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Unhappy is the land where heroes are needed.

Bertolt Brecht



. . . He was in stature tall,
A foot above man's common measure tall,
And lank, and upright. There was in his form
A meagre stiffness. You might almost think
That his bones wounded him. His legs were long,
So long and shapeless that I looked at them
Forgetful of the body they sustained.
His arms were long and lean; his hands were bare;
His visage, wasted though it seemed, was large
In feature; his cheeks sunken; and his mouth
Shewed ghastly in the moonlight. From behind
A mile-stone propped him, and his figure seemed
Half-sitting and half standing. I could mark
That he was clad in military garb,
Though faded yet entire. His face was turned

Towards the road, yet not as if he sought
For any living thing. He appeared
Forlorn and desolate, a man cut off
From all his kind, and more than half detached
From his own nature.

(Wordsworth, *The Discharged Soldier*)

July 13th, 1806. A remarkable suicide took place at Yarmouth. 'Two servant women tied themselves together with ribbon, walked into the sea, and were drowned.' They were the wives of privates in the Shropshire Militia. 'Their husbands had come to see them the previous day, and, refusing to permit them to return with them, they committed the rash act.'

Norfolk Annals, Volume 1, 1801-1850.

CHARACTERS

JACK, 28

ANN, 29

Time: October, 1815. England.

We are in a backstage area, of a rough country theatre, October 1815.

ANN, an actress, is at her dressing-table applying make-up.

She leaves.

JACK enters. He looks around the dressing-room area. Sees Ann's mirror, chair and dressing-table – bits of costume and make-up scattered about.

He might gingerly touch them.

He moves away, sits and opens his bag – draws out a rectangular box, about a foot long, and ten inches wide and deep.

He sets the box carefully down.

He is holding a wooden decorated elephant.

ANN enters, bringing a teapot. She is startled to find JACK there.

ANN: I had rather have had the place to myself.

'Twould be more seemly given all.

I say.

I say, fellow!

I say that I would rather have had the place to myself.

JACK: Beg pardon?

ANN: Who let you in? Did Mr Brunton send you here?

JACK: Mr Brunton?

ANN: Yes, the manager, Mr Brunton, was it he that bid you carry the tools in here?
And the creature?

JACK: The elephant.

ANN: I see 'tis an elephant but my question to you was –

JACK: It were Mrs Brunton.

ANN: Mrs Brunton?

She has done it a-purpose to be vexatious.

One wonders - is there no other corner about the place could serve as a workshop for whatever surgery must needs be done? On elephants or any other beasts of burden?

Other than where the artists are mustering themselves?

JACK: Mrs Brunton says -

ANN: Heaven pity us -

JACK: The leg at the back's gone awry. Come away Friday. One of the crew walked on it, when the procession come off stage left. Had some hot words with him all right. Needs a new – the dowel pin's broke right through, so Mr Brunton says to begin afresh and give it a new –

ANN: Never mind the dowel pin, dear boy, my point is rather whether the thing must be mended here where artists, where ladies, are dressing –

Could you not go beneath the stage?

JACK: Light's not good enough. 'Tis fiddlesome.

ANN: So Mrs Brunton in her wisdom sends you to the place of all places where principal performers are studying for their entrances -

JACK: Mrs Brunton said here was most littlest used. Said it was only yourself, miss.

ANN: Only myself, yes of course –

JACK: And Nelly Minor being needed so particular quick for act one of your afterpiece, Mrs B said I'd concentrate better with less noise and bustle.

She insisted. She wanted it fixed quick, she said, do it in there. I'm heartily sorry Miss.

ANN: Well then. I shall try not to bustle nor be too noisy. Lest I distract you. And cause further damage to Nelly Minor.

JACK: Thank you Miss.

ANN: If you will excuse me.

JACK: I will.

ANN returns to her make up table and sings.

ANN: Have I seen you somewhere before?

JACK: I don't know.

ANN: Have you been long engaged?

JACK: Three weeks a-gone. Mr Brunton took me on as machinist, herald-trumpeter and walking gentleman. At Cambridge.

ANN: Ah, Cambridge.

Lord, I forget where we are now?

JACK: We are at Bury, Miss.

ANN: Of course. Bury. And those wretched cathedral bells!

You are a fine musician then, sir herald trumpeter?

JACK: Tolerable.

ANN: Tolerable. You put me in mind of –

No matter -

JACK: I can blow a trumpet. And beat a drum.

ANN: Who cannot, these days? I am sure you are very excellent.

Egad, but would we were back at Cambridge. What a glittering crowd one garners at Cambridge in September. Do not you think? Once the horse-fair has gone, I mean.

JACK: Can't say as I noticed special like.

ANN: Well let me tell you 'tis an altogether different kettle at Cambridge. Such brilliant and crowded houses! His Lord Mayor kissed my hand. And her Worship was most condescending. And then there's the Baronet this, and the Honourable that. . . and so many Officers of the Regiment . . . one feels one's endeavours at least fall on comprehending ears.

But here amongst the bumpkins of Bury one'ud hardly know what go in or not. The songs do please'em – give'em Roast Beef of old England, and they are wild with delight, they love their baubles! but try 'em with Otway or Rowe or Farquhar or Shakespeare – One concludes they have scarce seen a play before.

At the Barnwell I gave Beatrice. I couldn't have been happier when it was called!

Mr Coleridge once praised my Beatrice. Do you know Mr Coleridge? The author? I met him, was it '99? No, later, maybe eighteen and five. He was a flattering creature - He said no body in the kingdom, dressed Beatrice as well as I. What humour. Yet he is such a fine judge of dramatic poetry. There's a gentleman with feeling.

Did you see my Beatrice?

JACK: No Miss. Apologies.

ANN: No matter. A trifle.

Dear, merry Beatrice! How I do miss her.

At Cambridge they have a stomach for the Bard but at Bury we are back to Bluebeard and elephants and the keys to the forbidden chamber!

I didn't mind so when I gave Irene, which at least is a part of some gayness and vivacity, more suited to me, I was always better in a witty heroine, everybody do say so – and in the Tower scene, with the handkerchief, I tore their hearts to tatters, I know I did – but Fatima! I could have cried when Brunton called the parts! A gentle bovine sort of a heroine, far from my natural temper –

A bell rings.

Is that for me? It can't be my entrance so soon -

Oh no, of course it's not! Silly me. Must be for Mr Townsend.

Where was I? – Fatima – yes - but now that Mr Brunton has his new Miss Sophie scarce past eighteen, well, she gets Irene and I am sister Fatima, of course, the dull and heavy Fatima - and I'm sorry to say it, for I am one as can find entertainment everywhere, so I don't say this lightly, but in Fatima, so mortal lumpish as she is, with her keys and her moralizing and her prohibitions – well, I find it a tedious piece.

But they do guzzle it down in these provincial towns quicker'un a gallon of ale at harvest.

I think we shall be Blue-bearding to the end of the century!

Ah me! We players are so in thrall to this capricious mistress of the stage! To strut and fret our little piece whilst we may for the benefit of souls we do not know, but in the hope that a little joy or comfort may be vouchsafed 'em.

'Til time, the great leveller, cuts down all. And drops the final curtain.

JACK: Aye.

ANN: How goes the dowel pin?

JACK: Tidy.

ANN: Strange I have not seen you before this.

Was you walking from Cambridge?

JACK: Aye.

ANN: You poor devil. I remember it well! The chaise is a veritable bone-rattler but at least it saves the leg-ache. Lawks and the mud! As Mrs B. would say. Churned to pure liquid by the turn-pikes is it not? And with the October rains we have had!

JACK: Fierce muddy, aye.

ANN: Though at least 'tis not the trudge from Yarmouth – now there's a torment! Would you not agree? Yarmouth to Cambridge, the eighty-six mile of pure unleavened misery – never again! I done it in my youth, too many times, and I swore the minute I got my benefit, well that was back in eighteen and four? Five? – well, I says to Mr B, I says, oh Mr Brunton, with my last ha'pporth I shall engage a chaise now rather than stroll as I useter! I told Mr Brunton then I'd do it no more, and no more'n I have, not in seven year! I don't know how many years 'twas I kept telling him, afore my benefit come in at last, how it cost us dear, how if I can't hold onto them, 'twas most like the stress and strain of the strolling – there's the reason I lost so many, told him often enough -

But you say you strolled from Cambridge?

JACK: Well as it happens, we docked Yarmouth, 'twas July then – nigh August. So I made for Cambridge, knowing the circuit, like. Went to Cambridge knowing September and the horse fair could mean there'd likely be engagements, even just crew or carpenters. And I'm handy – I says to Mr Brunton, herald trumpeter, walking-gentleman, carpentry – I'll do it all.

Low comedian. Hornpipes. I don't mind.

ANN: My dear sir! So you are a comedian! Welcome to the family! We are finally acquainted. Heavens, and you on Shanks's pony all the way from Cambridge, God save your shoe-leather – I am quite mortified to have complained about the chaise.

JACK: Makes no matter. I'd rather be walking in Albion than lying on feather beds in Belgium or India.

ANN: India . . . ?

Aha. I knew it!

Do I spy a redcoat?

JACK: As once was.

ANN: O my prophetic soul! So, you have been for a soldier?

JACK: Aye.

ANN: But there's nothing more to my taste! I knew a boy once went for a soldier – he was – well, not in a million years would I – that was many years gone. Thank the Lord, for the peace that is come, eh? Oh but I long to hear more! Tis what I long to hear. Let me squeeze you for juice! Paint me a portrait of how it was, out on the battlefield! But –

Where are we in the main-piece? Act three?

JACK: Mr Collins's entrance was five, ten, minutes' ago -

ANN: An age then! Time for tea and a tale! (*She organises tea and cups*) You'll take some tea, won't you, Mister. . . . ?

JACK: Jones. Jack Jones.

ANN: Mister Jones! Dear Jack, let us find you a cup – try the trunk. Now! (*she pours tea*) Mister Jack Jones, I consider myself, you must know, as a student of human behaviour. I do not deny that the principal purpose of the Stage is to instruct, and to promulgate virtue - as everybody knows and I would not quarrel with that! – Oh do take a seat, Mr Jones - And in times of crisis, such as we have known during these piping times of war, to rally the nation against the Boneyes of this world, and to support our brave boys

Sugar, Mr Jones?

JACK: Aye.

There!

(*He goes to drink; she interrupts him*)

Let us never forget we are His Majesty's Servants in this company of comedians!

(He goes to drink again; she interrupts him)

And your health!

But you who must have travelled so deep in human affairs - into such extremities of passion - Tell all - I cannot help but ask. You mention Belgium. Was you at Waterloo?

Don't tell me you was there!

JACK: I was.

ANN: Good Heavens! What a deal you must have to say about it!

Jack?

JACK: Yes.

ANN: I must not probe you. I must not push you whence you will not go.

Yet I spy a chance to glimpse, to tease out, to understand perhaps, something noble, nay even, transcendent in the human impulse.

I have merely played at fear and mortal danger – but you -! You have lived it!

To sacrifice, to risk all, to face death – as you must have done – looked death full in the face – your own –

Or – yet – grim still, and grimmer! Oh my imagination! To have *dealt* death – yay, to others in your path – knowing, saying to yourself, well as God wills it must be he or me - then leaping to the chance, to seize the sword and strike, by God to strike, though yet the tear of pity starts at thine eye, and saltwater by the pailful courses down your cheeks, and yet, and yet - hard path! - duty drives each nerve and sinew, by George, in the name of King and country, and gathering all your power, hand on sword and heart in mouth, you invoke the aid of angels, or Britannia, yay, the very green hills of England! to steel your nerve, and by that hand there – by that very hand –

Bring death – the ghastly shroud of death – ‘pon th’unlucky soul who stands before you –

And see him - sway – and fall – thence plunge - to meet his Maker – to join the hosts of shadows – amongst the French – in darkened realms of hell or purgatory –

Do I paint somewhat aright?

JACK: Yes. Somewhat.

ANN: I have a raring fancy.

I long to know!

Have you killed a man?

WILL: Of course.

ANN: How many have you killed?

The curse of curiosity!

Forgive me.

JACK: I have seen some things. You would not wish -

ANN: Mr Jones?

JACK: I could not tell you. Would not.

ANN: What?

What things?

JACK: I - I -

I lost my boots, see, an' I -

I'd lost my boots -

There was a young lad - this young lad kept on and on and on

I'd lost my boots see

So when I- I- I -

ANN: No matter. I shall not pry.

I am minded that I have a little carraway cake! An indulgence after my benefit - well, it was marvellously well-attended, thank God!

(She gets cake and cuts it)

Now you mustn't tell or I'll be mobbed by the multitude!

A bell rings.

ANN: Not for me. An age yet till I am on. You?

JACK: I'm to fly in the scene-drop for your after-piece.

ANN: An age then. *(They eat cake).*

You bring someone so to mind.

JACK: Who then?

ANN: A fellow I knew - a long-gone soul, no doubt. He took off and went for a soldier these twelve years gone.

JACK: Twelve years is a powerful time.

ANN: It is.

He ran away to the barracks at Colchester, three days shy of his sixteenth birthday. I never saw him more.

I doubt he's walking still. Save around my . . . May I replenish your tea?

JACK: Aye.

JACK: Who was he then? This long-gone soul.

ANN: Oh, nobody. Just a young fellow – hanging around the company. A cockney lad latched on at Lynn, I believe? Or Ipswich? No matter. He had no mother or father and Brunton, for once, took pity on him – gave him odd jobs. Groom, carpenter, walking gentleman when needed. Just like you, just like a dozen others.

But we were – we made a little childish pact – this was years back - he thought me sweet, and I him –

JACK: So you were lovers?

ANN: Of sorts. We swore an oath of allegiance. We said that when we both had shares in the company, we'd have some sort of – future together – We were a little alike, I think.

JACK: Alike how?

ANN: Well, this boy, you see, Will – his name was Will - he fancied himself an actor. He'd got himself some fencing classes, and some fine clothes and shoes - stolen no doubt, and he begged and begged Brunton to let him on the stage - to play the hero, was his grand scheme -

But poor Will, he wasn't right for any parts. Too small, too young, too thin, too weak in the throat. He had no voice – no stature.

He would never have been able to -

And I too, you see – back then it seemed impossible I could be upon the stage - all a-cause of my infirmity –

JACK: What infirmity?

ANN: Then I laboured under this - my same old trouble, what I'd had since a child – a stutter – stopped me in mid-flow, no reason to it – dreadful curse!

JACK: Ah. I had not -

ANN: In my youth, it promised to thwart all –I worshipped, you must know, since a very young girl at the Temple of Thespis, I had such a passion for the stage – same as Will – but in my early days I simply could not master it -

I remember my very first try with Mr Brunton, here it was, at Bury - Lord the shame! He'd took me on, you see, as wig girl, but never let me near a part – till finally – after an age of asking, there I was - well at fifteen, filled out some, I suppose - And Brunton having taken a glass or two and being the saucy fellow as we all know, he's of a mind to try me. "Now then Miss Pert, let's hear you give a piece – what do you have by heart, madam?" –

And I says, all a-tremble, A little speech of Portia, sir – and I got it out, then, you see, that word, Portia, and I thought – fool me! – oh it will not strike me now, I'm home – for I had practised so before the mirror and got my mouth in my control – so I thought -

So I starts –

"The quality of mercy is not strained –

And every word it comes so clear and easy I'm thinking, Lord be praised I have it bet!

It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place be – be –be –be - be – be –

And my tongue won't move, I'm stuck, I can't - I think – push – just push it out –

Be – be – be –

And the more I push, the more I can't!

–and the seconds tick by, it's agony–

I go back and try again – "It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven upon the place be –

Be – be – be –

No matter how I try I can't get past.

Though now you see – upon the place beneath, beneath, beneath, beneath – I could trill it fifty time, or fifty times fifty!

But by now Brunton gives up, heaves to his feet and says Madam, the pity of it is, you might dress very prettily as Portia but I fear the audience would not have patience enough to let you get through it. Mend your stutter, my dear, or seek a trade elsewhere!

Not unkind, he said it. Reasonable, really.

And I blubbed a-course for days. Hopes dashed, heart broke into a thousand pieces!

Next day, I'm still weeping and inconsolable outside the coach-house, nigh Colchester it were, and of a sudden this lad is there - Will, there's Will the groom, and he says - those words I never will forget – he says, be of good heart, Ann. Be of good heart. I know some ways might help you with your trouble.

And I says how, and don't believe him for tis years since I been so afflicted and tried every remedy I have – an onion round the neck and pinching my arm, and clapping, and a ribbon about the tongue, and a stone in my shoe –

Everything, I'd tried it all and all to no avail.

But Will insisted he could do it. Give me three months he said, and I will cure you of your trouble.

And bless me but so he did!

Sweet Will. He did it. Turned out the cure was something simple.

JACK: What was it, the cure?

ANN: He learned all the words of every part with me and we spoke 'em all together, or sang' em through - all the parts – Rosalind and Jane Shore. Leticia Hardy – Beatrice! – he talked with me in unison, or we sang it – and turned out, the curiosity of it was that when I had a voice along of mine to speak with, to talk along to, I had no trouble and could get the words out pat –

We did them all together – he knew every part the same as me! And spoke 'em with me -

And then, and bit by bit, he'd go right quiet down, and quieter still till at the end he was hardly muttering under his breath, but in my ear you see, I heard him always – Will's voice alongside mine, leading me along, along the path of words, his voice with mine –

Until it came that if I could simply see him whisper in my eye-line, then I'd keep the thread,
I'd not fall down or stumble –

Then came the day he'd only need to mouth it – from out the front – and as long as I could
see him mouthing along of me, or thought I saw, his mouth move in the crowd and hear him
in my head – I never stumbled!

'The quality of mercy is not strained –

It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven

Upon the place beneath; tis twice blessed –'

And on I'd go, and on, and on, and sailing through! And to this day – you see - I hear his
voice alongside mine, onstage, and that's why I never stutter in a part - not since that first
disastrous day with Brunton! 'Twas Will that cured me.

His gift to me, you see.

JACK: So how came you to part from him?

ANN: Oh, the usual story! We had a quarrel. Lovers' tiff.

He just ran off - next morning, not a word, nor sign, just disappeared. I was frantic asking
and searching - had anybody seen him? And there were some said they'd seen him on the
road headed to the barracks, and that he'd enlisted for a redcoat.

Stupid boy. Not yet sixteen. And no word since. Most likely he's been food for worms for
years.

JACK: If he could see you now!

ANN: He wouldn't know me! First Tragedy Lady – and First Comedy Lady too! And I
care not what Miss Sophie's set her heart on! She can wait her turn.

How true it is. When mercy drops -

Like sweet soft rain.

JACK: Aye.

ANN: I expect you have a lost love too, eh, Jack?

JACK: Don't everybody?

ANN: These terrible times.

But over now, thank God.

And now I must study my part lest my poor memory undo me as it has done, I regret, too many times and my lines desert me! And then Brunton will certainly part me from my share as he has threatened oft to do in latter days –

Oh dear-oh-dear-oh-lor, but that Miss Sophie throws me off with her mincing manner! In Irene, I mean – how she simpers! You know the line where I, in Fatima, do say – ‘This Key, sister, sparkling with diamonds, opens a door within the blue apartment – the one room, my Irene, we are forbidden to enter’ – well, have you seen her extraordinary grimacing and waving her hands thus and her head thus, all out to the gallery – whilst I am speaking?

Like the lowest comedian in a country fair you ever saw in your life!

Quite throws me from my purpose.

Oh but the key – I need it for my pocket? The Key to the Blue Apartment – the forbidden chamber –

Where has that wretched girl popped it? The wig girl, Mary Diddly-aye, Gad, but she’s a slatternly critter, she makes such piles about the place and one can’t find a thing -

Or did I put it in the trunk. . . ?

JACK: So what say your husband to your playacting?

ANN: What –

JACK: Or don’t you have none?

ANN: Now who’s curious?

JACK: You wear no ring.

ANN: I’m about to make my entrance, I’m in costume -

JACK: I mean, ever. To my notice. What’s that signify?

ANN: Nothing and I haven’t time -

JACK: You’ve a clear two-act to go. At least three-quarter of an hour I’d say – more if Mr Goodbody will dance the hornpipe.

ANN: Indubitably he will, they want it always in the country.

JACK: Then there’s time. It’s just I wondered were you married?

ANN: Pish-posh impertinence, Mister Jones!

JACK: Were you ever? Or did he die, or . . . ?

ANN: You forget yourself.

JACK: I forget nothing. My memory is perfect. 'Tis my curse.

ANN: Then I pity you.

Curious question!

PAUSE

Lud, where is that wretched key?

I have to go on with it in my pocket, so I may draw out –

JACK: I'll search the trunk.

ANN: Thank you, Jack.

Quite several times that hopeless girl - mistress of the wigs! – has forgot to slip it in my bodice before my Act Two entrance - So now I make sure I have it the wretched key in my pocket from the very overture or the play is utterly ruined.

Oh God oh God, 'tis lost, what have I done with it?

Between Miss Sophie's simpering eye-rolling, and Mr Brunton near tearing my hair out by the roots, and the scraping of his scimitar along my neck (for no matter how they blunt the edge, it chafes like a cheese-grater!) – well, mercy, I shall be altogether glad when something else but Bluebeard is called.

Oh for Rosalind or Beatrice! Or Jane Shore! Or Isabinda! There's company! There's dramatic poetry!

(She puts on her Oriental shoes for playing Fatima)

Gad that we were back at Cambridge! Of all spots on the circuit 'tis my very favourite.

At Colchester, you know, Jack, we are so plagued by you fellows! Red-coats, and tars of all persuasions - . Last year we had a throng of tars came in to see Blue-beard – the naval officers had requested it – and there was one giant of a fellow sitting in the slips who hollered throughout the entire second act, "I'll save yer Miss Fatima! I'll save yer as I'm

Bosun's mate of her Majesty's Navy! I'll bust that Turk's head for 'im, scimitar or no!' My hero of a tar!

And so when Mr Brunton had the scimitar at my throat, there were, I swear, seven or eight of his fellow sailors, holding him back or he'd have rushed the stage! So Mr Brunton, had enough and he stops to address the crowd - "My dear Mr Bosun's Mate, you are a hero of the British nation, and I do not doubt your mettle and your courage, but remember this is but an imitation, and I assure you Miss Goddard is in no real danger whatsoever! 'Tis a work of fancy for your pleasure and amusement, nothing more! 'Tis you and your brave crew have encountered perils true and plenty, for which we salute you warmly! -" and the crowd do leap to its feet and the cheering and whistling and hats flying! So Mr Brunton gets the band to strike up Rule Britannia, and it took three singings to quieten the house before we could resume play.

And then the fellow, my poor romantic Bosun's mate, comes rushing back after and gets on one knee on the floor of the green room!

But by then the crowd had gone home. So Brunton just has him thrown out. Heartless devil. The cant and the Britannia was all for show. My poor plucky Jack Tar! Though he looked a little soft, I thought, or simple like. I pitied him.

JACK: It's here. *(He has found the key in the props trunk)*

ANN: Ah Mister Jones – I thank you!

Shall I tell you a secret?

One time – years back in my youth – I stole just such a key!

Look –

(She draws out her necklace from under her costume, and shows him the half-key dangling on a chain, hidden under her clothes)

See? I was only sixteen and wilder then. I stole it and – Mrs Brunton never knew -

We had no ring, you see, me and Will, so I steals it from the trunk – then Will gets a hammer and smashes it in half

We broke it between us, swore we'd wear half each– a sign between us like –

Till come the day he disappeared -

Well I could never bring myself to take it off. Even when my hopes were – I just kept thinking if I did would I lose that voice of his in my head, the one that helps me get my words out. What would I do then? What'ud become of me?

So I wears the half.

But where the other half lies now – I'd be curious to know.

JACK: Aye, that'ud be a tale indeed.

ANN: Perchance some muddy field in Portugal or Prussia. Or deep-buried in that blood-stained plain of Belgium.

JACK: 'Twould be a history worth hearing.

ANN: Foolish sentimental Ann! There's superstition! 'Tis a token merely. You see now I have no trouble talking. I am quite cured of my affliction. *(She tucks away the key)*

Well, Jack, you are a wonder of a walking gentleman – and all in all your company has been most stimulating – and please - take this for your pains -

JACK: A ha'ppoth?

ANN: 'Twill not suffice?

Satisfy my curiosity about your soldiering a little further some time and perhaps there'll be more, Jack Jones! It's been a pleasure. I have a fancy to watch the remainder of the main-piece from the wings.

JACK: What about my curiosity?

ANN: What?

JACK: What say you satisfy mine first?

ANN: What?

JACK: My curiosity.

ANN: Surely. In what time remains. What would you know?

JACK: I wondered if -

Given you are - unattached – or so you seem - I wondered –

And if so – I wondered –

I seen you on the stage –

I seen you and I thought – there's a girl!

So I wondered if you would consider

Such a proposal

From the likes of me

ANN: La, my very dear sir, this is so sudden!

JACK: What say you?

ANN: What can I say, sir, but thank you kindly!!

JACK: May I hope –

ANN: And let us live in a cottage forever and grow roses round the door, while a pack of merry childer are romping by the fire!

JACK: Miss Goddard I came to ask -

ANN: Heavens, do you -? You're not –

You are jesting? Mr Jones?

JACK: No.

I came to ask you if you might–

If you might consent to be buried with my people.

ANN: Buried with - ?

Oh dear.

Oh dear, I am so mortified.

JACK: Or perhaps the memory of the boy you lost prevents you.

ANN: The memory of - ? . . . This proposal – is so kind, Jack – too kind indeed - but you must see there isn't any possibility that I – that you and I – that there could be such an engagement between us – I mean it simply wouldn't –

JACK: Wouldn't what?

ANN: Well – given our stations and our expectations – I am First Tragedy Lady.

And you are -

JACK: I am strong. I have served my King and country. I have done my duty. Twelve years in the 44th Regiment - one of the Little Fighting Fours! Not even Boney could finish me off. I walked away, a standing man. There on the field - Waterloo. This June, the eighteenth day, I got to it, I was there, the eighteenth day, when it was ended - all splashed in blood, but standing, up, like a poppy in the aftermath. I thought, I'm like the poppy after harvest.

Like some mighty scythe passed over. The angel of death – passed over - spared me - to finish what got started - 'Tis my belief -

ANN: To stroll out your shoe leather in the horse dung of the provinces.

JACK: Mine's honest work at least.

ANN: Forgive me. I hear my cue approaching. This is, I say, so kind – so very kind – but you must see it is perfectly impossible.

A lady – an artist – with my prospects –

The Lord Mayor at Cambridge – kissed my hand –

Mr Coleridge praised my Beatrice – why had he been unattached who knows what might have been? 'Tis not beyond my hopes one day to whirl amongst the London literati – Drury Lane! – Mr Kemble, and - La Siddons! And persons of distinction -

I am deeply moved by this sincere enquiry – but my answer must be no. And as I say – my cue is just around the corner – you must forgive me – if I am late on again, Mr Brunton might just slice off my head for real with that grating scimitar!

JACK: Mr Brunton . . .

ANN: Yes, Mr Brunton, in Abomelique is really quite the brute!

(She goes to go -)

JACK: That's not all I've heard of Brunton.

There's powerful gossip in the green room –

ANN: What gossip?

JACK: The midnight walks. Yourself and Mr Brunton. Different places, over the years. About the spade they found all wet with earth and dirt. About the four small mounds – in fields along the circuit. The buried sheets. There's talk about the green room. They say that you and Brunton – they say in Cambridge, and in Bury, and in Ipswich and in Lynn – you lost 'em all, one after the other -. All the burdens you were carrying.

And they say there are traces of 'em. Little beds around the fields, each little mound, so long, by so wide, no longer'an a cradle. Several of them, there's talk of it amongst the crew. Miss Jane Molloy declares she's seen 'em fly, their souls, crying for holy water, to ease their passage.

Swears blind you put 'em in the ground unblest and at night she hears 'em crying. From their little beds.

'Tis that what puts a bar between us, maybe.

If it's true –

ANN: Of course it's not! Backstage gossip – mardle! Nothing more. Miss Jane can mind her -. Fevered imaginations. It's a hazard of the trade. It's filthy talk.

Now get out, and mind your business!

JACK: I heard that they were yours and Brunton's, that he hid 'em from his wife, and that's why a priest were never called – hence why they never rest -

ANN: Wash your mouth out, filthy animal! What business is it of yours even if one word of it were true? Which it is not.

JACK: All this afore Miss Sophie came. Afore Miss Sophie naturally. Miss Sophie scarce eighteen. Now dressing Miss Irene. The younger sister. They say Brunton gave her all your clothes.

He gave her all your dresses. All your parts.

All the parts you used to play.

ANN: I am the First Tragedy Lady as befits my years in the company – yay, and First Comedy Lady too!

Get out!

You beast!

Move!

Why don't you go?

Who are you? Who are you to question me?

Why are you even in here?

JACK: I came because I –

I wanted to say –

ANN: I care not what you would say - get out -

JACK: No.

ANN: Be gone!

JACK: No. I'm not like them. I pity you. I heard it, but I don't need to know –

I'd take you as you are, I'd take you for life, and never ask a thing. If you'd have me.

You wouldn't never need to tell me. You'd never need to tell me more. We could bury it deep. Whatever it were. We'd lock it away and we'd never look.

ANN: So now I see your purpose. You planned it all – all this - An ambush!

Did Mrs Brunton even send you here -?

There's naught amiss with that ridiculous elephant is there! Dowel pin my ankle!

JACK: We've all had trouble. Along the years, it's war, it's what it's done, it's, all of us. . . I know that.

I'm sorry even that I spoke of things - I won't speak of it again.

ANN: Then our interview is at an end. Please excuse me -

JACK: Save that - I would have your answer – to my enquiry.

ANN: Your enquiry!

Well my answer is this.

Do you think, Mr Jones, that I would ever throw myself upon a creature so degraded?

Parts missing like a scarecrow? One-eyed Jack? And very like your brain softened by the blows you have received?

That must be it. That must be how you have the audacity to ask me. A blow to the head!

How you even dare to speak of such – green room venom – fit for dogs – filth -

Be off you half a man. I doubt you've even half left! Marry! Most soldiers that I've met have lost it all, or what is left won't work! Think that would do me, do you, think I'm low as that in my hopes?

Or they're gone simple with the explosions, it's turned their brain to soup.

Get out. Get out and rot -

You half-formed hero! You less than a man!

And don't come near me again!

JACK goes to go – leaving the box behind.

ANN: Is that yours? The box?

JACK: Yes.

ANN: Then please don't leave it here.

He goes and picks up the box.

JACK: It's for you.

ANN: I don't want it.

JACK: I brought it for you.

ANN: And I told you, I don't want it.

JACK: Please yourself.

(He sets it down on the floor and goes to go.)

ANN: I shall throw it away unopened.

JACK: I would advise you did the same.

(He goes to go again).

ANN: Mister Jones –

I must ask you one question.

Before you go.

What did you say was your regiment?

JACK: My regiment?

ANN: Yes. Your regiment.

JACK: The two fours.

ANN: The 44th I thought so. And you were camped at Colchester in eighteen and three?

JACK: Aye.

ANN: Did you ever come across the boy I mentioned – Will?

William Petrie was his name.

He enlisted at that time at Colchester. The 44th I'm sure. June oh-three.

JACK: Petrie?

ANN: William Petrie. Known as Will.

JACK: What sort of a man? I mean what was his appearance?

ANN: Dark hair, blue eyes. Slight figure. Somewhat sallow in the cheek. Not much to look at. Back then, twelve years ago. When he enlisted. Three days shy of his sixteenth birthday it were.

I just wondered if you might perchance have heard – some news -

JACK: William Petrie of the 44th?

ANN: Yes –

JACK: I mind him now.

ANN: Truly?

JACK: Will Petrie – a scar across his shoulder there – the left?

ANN: Yes -

JACK: I know the man. I know Will Petrie.

Or should I say - I knew him. He's dead.

ANN: Oh.

JACK: He died. I saw him fall. I remember most particular like.

ANN: How did he die?

JACK: A soldier's death.

ANN: A hero's death –

JACK: Oh yes.

ANN: To die for one's country – pro patria mori!

JACK: It were quick. I saw him go. A ball entered between his eyes. He dropped like a stone. He knew nothing of it, I would say.

Sorry for your trouble.

ANN: No trouble.

She draws out the half-key made of iron, hanging from a chain around her neck.

He always longed to play the hero. And now he's got his dream at last.

He must have made some fine soldier - to have lived twelve years. And met his match at Waterloo.

JACK: I heard tell there was some woman broke his heart.

ANN: No – he chose –

JACK: 'Tis no great wonder - most oftentimes, a woman's taunt turns men to redcoats – That, or some grave disappointment or betrayal makes 'em long to lose themselves in battle – 'tis common cause –

ANN: No – there was no – I couldn't have -

JACK: Else why would living breathing healthy men turn soldier? Walking dead until some six-pounder rips their head or legs off? Lose all they've got – to furnish out some wrinkled old dandy with a brand new set of Waterloo teeth? – Can only be some woman drove 'em with her faithless heart and easy virtue – a thousand wretched stories, and for each tale, a corpse.

ANN: No! No, not like that – you men start wars and -

JACK: - you women goads ‘em on and feeds ‘em -

ANN: No - It weren’t – Not betray – I didn’t –

Well, I’ll admit that I were thick with Mr Brunton by that time – or anyways, he was dazzled some by me, fool man, I had held him off for months, sighed and denied him –till he panted on my every word, and had fixed on me for Desdemona to his Othello – my first proper part! Oh I had Brunton wound around my finger!

But it was all for us! For Will and me! To improve our chances! He wanted to be leading man, did Will, and play the hero. Harry Five or Romeo! And nothing else would do, not light comedian, nothing –

And so I thought -

I dropped some hints to Mr B. – I sowed the seed - why not give poor Will Petrie a chance – he’d make a handsome Cassio, would he not? Till at last he breaks and says, very well my boy, five minutes on the stage and let’s see what you have got as a comedian!

So Will puts on a borrowed red-coat from the costume trunk – and there were quite a crowd had gathered – company folk, I mean, the wig girl, the crew, the stage hands and carpenters, Mr Decamp from the ticket office, and a handful of the other players, their wives, what-have-you, all curious to see what Will was made of.

And Will begins a bit of Harry Five -

“But when the blast of War blows in our ears’ - and he was off, galloping to the very end – ‘the game’s afoot – follow your spirit and upon this charge -

WILL: Cry God for Harry, England and St George!

ANN: And I’d swear the applause was heard from Lynn to Ipswich – the ladies fanning themselves and all a-fluster, and the gentlemen threw their caps and called Huzzah, and young Davey had his fife and struck up Drink old England Dry, and – well, our little company crowd was all a-fire with his passion...

I was so proud!

My Will!

I thought well, after that, now surely he’d find favour and be elevated to Cassio or Harry Thunder – First Light Comedian at least I thought – I dreamed – a benefit a-piece – the years ahead -

Then the whole place goes quiet as the company looks to Brunton for the verdict!

Up gets Brunton - stomps across the stage –

And shakes Will by the hand! – “My dear boy, what would you have me say?”

And Will, buoyed up by the general admiration, thinking all is well, pipes up, well sir, I wondered, when you give Othello, might I try my hand in Cassio?

And Mr Brunton laughs and looks to me and says –

‘What says my new little Desdemona to that?’

And stupid fool of seventeen that I am I say, says I, He might make a very pretty Cassio would he not, Mr Brunton?

And I smile my sweetest wheedling smile at Brunton but no doubt I give myself away with my face and eyes. Which are all for Will in his borrowed red coat.

For Brunton flashes thunder from his eyes, then drawls, quite slow, “The soldier Cassio? Why, I would as soon believe you could fly to the moon as wear a red coat – Dear boy - you have a genius for declamation and for pretty attitudes, but there’s no hint of Nature in it! Conquer in a set-to with the Frogs? Pah! The soldiering hero part is not for you!”

Then Will, quite goaded to the soul, he throws all caution to the winds and cries, he’d be as fit for Cassio or any other hero as Brunton passed his way, and as for soldiering, he’d warrant he’d wear the red coat and serve the king as true and fine as any man standing in the county, nay the country too, or Empire –

And Brunton turned to me and I would rather not –

A thousand times I would it were not true –

He turns to me—‘Miss Goddard here will back me up. Do not you agree, Miss Goddard – Mr Petrie must try soldiering in life before he tries the imitation?’

And in front of the entire company I – well, my old trouble it returns again and out it came –

‘You are k- k –k –k k – quite right, Mr B –B –B –Brunton. And in the general laughter Brunton hisses at me, sideways like but I hear him loud and clear - ‘Be more assertive, Annie; a stuttering half-hearted Desdemona will not do us!’

So I gather myself and what I say next raps out as true as any bell, ‘Yes, let him play the part in life, before he venture imitation on the stage! Don the redcoat - fight for king and country – and prove yourself a hero!!

How may I do that? whispers Will to me, and I see him – his eyes meet mine -

But – was I borne along by the gasping of the crowd, or what? - but my voice flings out with joyous fluency ‘Bring me back the hand or heart of a Frenchman hewn from the field of battle - and then we’ll say you are a hero!

And til that day – adieu!’

And Brunton spins me round and there are kisses and the crowd unleashes cheers and Rule Britannia, and midst all the jubilation Brunton crows, She has set you your task, Mr Petrie: a hand or heart! God grant we see you succeed, or die in the attempt?

And in all the laughter, poor Will he turns upon his heel and leaves, all a-tremble and a-fire.

And that was the night that Brunton – he and I -

I gave him all he wanted.

I went to Will’s lodging next day and knocked - but he was gone.

It was the night before I first gave Desdemona so I went in Mr Brunton’s chaise to Yarmouth and when at last I was again at Colchester the regiment had disappeared.

I never saw Will Petrie more, that day to this.

(Looking at her half key on the chain)

Though I worn the token - kept it on me. Half a hope, I s’pose.

‘Til now.

And now I see that it were his, my heart – all through the years, my heart was in his hands – I see that now, no matter how I buried it.

(She looks at the half key in her hands)

Where shall I bury you – poor half deformed thing?

Along of all the poor sad broken things that never will be mended.

Sad truth it is in life how all news comes too late.

But –

Mercy though – it drops – like soft rain falling -

Still in my ear – his voice – Keeps me going straight along the words. It ain’t snuffed out – not yet. Keep hold of that I will though nothing else be left.

I’ll bury it with the others.

Must fetch the spade.

JACK pulls out his half of the key.

She stares.

JACK: Annie. I am that same Will Petrie.

She stares.

She goes to him, and pulls away his shirt to see the scar on his left shoulder.

She pulls away the bandage from his eye – it unwinds – it unwinds further and faster –

There is no wound.

JACK: I am that same Will Petrie!

(They hug, they cry, they embrace, they make whatever noises they have to -)

ANN: But – why? Why did you – why this, why now/why didn't you tell me. . . why make me wait, I thought you were – I thought you'd died – the years and years -

JACK: Forgive me, Annie, but I had to find you - see your face, find out if you still – if you'd forgot me - found another, I dunno - I couldn't do it all at once, I thought, if you were wedded to another then I thought – no harm done – just see your face and walk away – but when you said – your heart – your heart was still -

ANN: But Will - they, all the little ones, everything I've done – they fly - they slipped away and all of what you heard –all, every word, it's true - Brunton, me, we took the spade, we dug - we hid them – all about the place, we dug and dug - tamped down the earth but – we had no priest, we couldn't – had to put them in the ground unblest, unfit for passage -

JACK: No, don't – ssshhh – sshhh - ssh – no – no – don't

ANN: - and now they don't, they won't, we can't – they don't lie down, they fly – like little birds – they're all around, I hear them – and the whispers never – always buzzing – And all the time – I knew that it was me – it was me – that set the task! I set the task and made you go!

JACK: Don't – don't – don't – sshh -

It's over now. It's finished.

I did what you asked – it's done. I said I would and I did and now let's start again.

I'll be a low comedian. Hornpipes. I'll sing Rule Britannias and play Gravedigger and Apothecary and -

ANN: A soldier all this time! And no word at all!

JACK: I'll play the Friar, and I'll groom the horses and I'll be herald trumpeter and chief carpenter, to the end of my days -

ANN: Twelve years - Will!

You are as fine a hero as any man in England!

The finest!

JACK: That's done, it's over -

I saw the heroes Annie. I saw them all, French, Russian, English, Turk.

Every one a hero. And all the same. And now I say, an end to heroes. Let there be no more!

I brought it, what you asked of me, I did it, and it's done.

ANN: What? Brought what?

JACK: I had to.

Because you said it, so I did.

ANN: Brought what?

JACK: - what you asked me and I did it, I was half-mad, that day, but when I thought of what everyone had done done it helped me, and I got my knife and I -

ANN: The hand or heart of a -

JACK: I done as you asked and brung it. So that's over, is it not, we're settled?

ANN: Where is it?

(Their eyes both fall on the box)

JACK: I lugged it 'cross the Channel. And in my pack the eighty-six miles I traipsed from Yarmouth to Cambridge -

Each time -

I get so full – I close my eyes so tight but still -

- all the things –

When I took my knife and cut it out...

I'd lost my boots and -

The things – the birds, the crows -

The crows, they flock, they gather round –

come down and peck, feast - clean out the sockets, perch amongst their spilling bowels

The ones still living, that's worse, the slowly dying – maman, that's French for mother, mutti that's the Prussian, and the English –

all the heroes – and they sometimes move an arm an inch to beat away the birds – and you think should I finish them off for mercy's sake –

And the women glean among the dead for trifles and for spoils, coins, pocket watches, silver, teeth and hair –

So I took my knife and I hushed one, he were only a boy

You said it so I did it

It was the time -

That time I lost my boots, see – and the ground hurt – such agony at every step, each stone - it felt like broken glass so when we came to places where we walked on bodies, on the corpses, I gave thanks

Because the flesh was soft

The flesh felt soft

Beneath my feet

It hurt me less

I –

I –

Birds –

Sky of birds -

I got you it – got what you asked for

ANN: Let's bury it – like you said.
With all them other things.
We've all had trouble. Down the years -
JACK: It's war, it gets inside, it don't lie down -
ANN: We'll bury it unopened.
JACK: Yes. Yes. That's what we'll do.
ANN: Bury it, locked up, and never look.
JACK: We won't. We'll never look.
ANN: I promise.
JACK: Don't look inside.
ANN: I won't.

It's gone.

It's over now.

They kiss and are interrupted by...

Bell

JACK: 'Tis time. My cue. I have to go - I have to fly in the scene drop for your after-piece.

ANN: Oh this capricious mistress of the stage!

JACK leaves.

ANN makes final preparations for her entrance in Blue-beard.

ANN: *(she checks that she has the Blue-beard key in her bodice and practises her line, with an attitude)* This Key, sister, sparkling with diamonds, opens a door within the blue apartment – the one room, my Irene, we are forbidden to enter –

(And one more time, with slight change of emphasis and attitude) This Key, sister, sparkling with diamonds, opens a door within the blue apartment – the one room, my Irene, we are forbidden to enter -

She glances at the box.

She looks inside.

A bell rings, signalling her entrance.

She shuts the box and puts it down.

She practises her line once more.

ANN: This Key, sister, sparkling with diamonds, opens a door within the b-b-b-b-b-b-

This key sparkling with diamonds opens a door within the b –b-b- b- b- b-

Door within the b – b- b b- b- b- b- b b-

The bell rings again insistently.

(She clasps her hand over her mouth, and runs out).

Blackout

END

Appendix.

The song that the play is based on is called **The Plains of Waterloo.**

*Now as I was a-walking one fine summer's morning
Down by the gay banks of some clear purling stream
There I heard a pretty maid making sad lamentation
So I drew meself in ambush for to hear her sad refrain*

*Through the woods she marched along caused the valleys to ring-o
And the fine feathered songsters around her head they flew
Saying the war it is over and peace it is returned again
But still my Willy's not returning from the plains of Waterloo.*

*I stepped out to this fair maid and said, my fond creature
Oh it's dare I make enquiry as to what's your true love's name?
For I have been in battle where the cannon loud do rattle
And it's by your description I might have known the same.*

*Willy Smith's my true love's name, and he's a hero of great fame
But now he has left me in sorrow it is true
And no man shall me enjoy but my own darling boy
But still my Willy's not returning from the plains of Waterloo.*

*If Willy Smith's your true love's name then he's a hero of great fame
He and I have fought together through many's the long campaign*

*Through Italy and Russia, through Germany and Prussia
He was my loyal comrade in France and in Spain.*

*Till at length by the French we were surrounded
But like heroes of old we did them subdue
For three days we fought them till at length we did defeat him
Bad bold Napoleon Boney on the plains of Waterloo*

*On the 18th day of June it is ended the battle
Leaving many's the proud hero in sorrow to complain
Where the war-drums do beat and the cannon loud do rattle
All by a French soldier your Willy he was slain*

*And as I passed by the place he lay a-bleeding
I scarcely had time for to bid him adieu
In a faint faltering voice these words he kept repeating
Fare thee well my lovely Annie, you are far from Waterloo*

*Now when this fair maid heard his sad acclamation
Her red rosy cheeks turned pale into wan
And when this young man saw this sad lamentation
He says, my lovely Annie, I am that very one!*

*For here is the ring that between us was broken
In the midst of all danger, love, to remind me of you!
And when she saw the token she fell into his arms
Saying you are welcome lovely Willy from the plains of Waterloo.*