

CSM Rivers. Act 1 Scene 2

MAY moves slowly into the recruiting office.

RIVERS. Yes M'am?

MAY. I should like to see the officer.

RIVERS. No officers Present m'am. Will the warrant officer do?

MAY. If you please.

RIVERS. That is myself m'am. Company Sergeant Major Rivers. Would you take a seat while I finish the remaining whiskers? Leaving them only stiffens their resistance.

*MAY is suddenly shy of him. She sits. Then she gradually gets impatient.*

MAY. It's about a young boy you've recruited today'

RIVERS. Name?

MAY. I'd rather not give it at the moment.

RIVERS. Would that be because he gave a false statement concerning his age?

MAY. No! He's very truthful! He's nineteen.

RIVERS. Some would call him a man at that age, not a boy'

MAY. He's still an articled apprentice.

RIVERS wipes his face and puts on his tunic.

RIVERS. You are related to him.

MAY. Not . . .yes. I'm his cousin. Second cousin. But his Parents are dead.

RIVERS. And you feel responsible for him. Well, that's a cold way of putting it. I'm sure that this young man is held very close in your affection.

MAY. He is an apprentice lithographic artist at Warrilows and he's thrown his future away!

RIVERS. And you keep a green grocery stall on the corner of Waterloo Street.

MAY. How did you know?

RIVERS. There's not much I've missed in this town m'am since I came. I was very impressed with your air of Competence in running it.

MAY. He helped me with it.

RIVERS. And that helped him . . . not earning much from his apprenticeship.

MAY. He's too easily swayed. He's let others talk him into this.

RIVERS. These are upsetting times for us all. I can see you're surprised, me saying that when my job here is to imbue men with the spirit of duty and service. All the same I can sympathise. I was just on the point of retirement myself. Had in mind a little business. . . not unlike your own . . .

MAY. I'm explaining his situation.

RIVERS. He signed. Took the oath.

MAY. Egged on by others!

RIVERS. Oh m'am. If you knew some of the men I've had to make soldiers of in the past. Dregs and peelings of humanity, some of them, though they stood up well enough in the end. But here . . . they're paragons. Your Mayor calls for seven hundred volunteers from Accrington, Blackburn, Burnley, Chorley and hereabouts. They came in a matter of days. . . and all in such a spirit of cheerfulness and good humour. The smallest town in these islands to raise its own battalion. It make me humble.

MAY. He was drunk. He can't take drink!

RIVERS. No m'am. We wouldn't have allowed it. I see the homes these men come from where they have loved ones and are desperately needed. None were taken in drink.

MAY. I could pay the money back . . . what he was given . . .

RIVERS. There's no machinery for that. None at all.

MAY. I could pay you! I've money I was saving towards a shop.

RIVERS. Then I advise you to put it to that use. There's great satisfaction in keeping a shop. You have no one else dependent on you but him?

*MAY Shakes her head.*

Then I will tell you what I'll do. I will make that young man my special charge. Hand your responsibility over to me and I shall not be found wanting. I shall be with him in every present danger. . . the darkest moments, you can be assured. Everything I've learned that has preserved me till now shall be at the disposal of one you feel so much towards. . .

MAY. I didn't say . . .

RIVERS. I shall be his very shadow.

MAY. But he's an artist. He's forgetful . . . he's no soldier!

RIVERS. That is my task.

MAY. He mustn't go!

RIVERS. He must. And into my care.

MAY. I want to see the officers.

RIVERS. By all means. They'll talk to you. They'll talk to you as though it was all a game . . . a sunlit meadow for bright-eyed lads to go running after honour and glory like happy footballers. But I don't talk like that to you because I believe that you and I have an understanding. I have more respect than to talk like that. Whatever I do is done with seriousness. I may say, with love. Leave him to me.

*MAY Is spent and confused by his manner. Something about him makes her unsure of herself.*

MAY. But you don't know his name.

RIVERS. I think I do. I think I do. madam.

MAY. Tom Hackford.

RIVERS. Private Hackford. Yes m'am.

*As MAY goes . . . Blackout.*