

May and Eva. Act1 Scene 1

MAY. No. All I have against the Accrington Pals is that they've taken the best men.

EVA. They volunteered.

MAY. Why? Educated boys like Tom and Ralph. You don't need qualifications to be shot at! Let those out of work go. The work shy. Those who won't do a hand's turn. God knows there's enough of them.

EVA. Ralph was that fed up with the office.

MAY. Is that why? Oh these men . . . never happier than when they're arms round one another's necks, bawling good fellowship, in full retreat from what life's all about. Well Eva, what d'you think? (She indicates the stall.)

EVA. I should like to.

MAY. Should you? I've scarcely made ninepence this morning. It's hardly worth it . . . but you have to be here. And the girls like to pick up a bit extra to eat when they're out of the house, for they get little enough at home. All the titbits go to their fathers and the brothers get what's left. So maimed or halt you have to turn out in rain, frost or pitch black. I used to think it was mad getting up to sell apples and oranges by moonlight.

EVA. At least you've people to talk to. Putting cows in the shippin or out weeding kale on your own you go queer in the head. You get sick of being with yourself. And now Ralph won't be coming up on his bike I'm desperate to get away.

MAY. You're . . . not in any trouble?

EVA. Me? (Realises.) O h no. We were always most careful . . .

MAY gives her a look.

I mean to avoid that kind of thing.

She is not very convincing.

MAY. Dear me. I've made myself blush.

EVA. I'm just glad to be in town.

MAY. Well you can still see the fields from most of the streets, even if you can't see them from here. Accrington's a site better than where Tom comes from. Oh the Hackfords! They had such a dreadful outlook. And such habits. They can be very vile in Salford. No, these are not like the slums he knew. Not slums at all. Not this end of the street at any rate.

EVA. I always wanted to be where there was a bit of life.

MAY. Oh there's life here. Only walk up there a few yards and it's falling out of the doorways on you. There's nothing much you can do here but you're in the midst of life. You'd better know what you're coming into. It's no Garden of Eden. People are not paupers exactly, though some of them behave as if they are. Those with the newspaper up at the front windows. You can't be so poor that you can't find a bit of net somewhere. T he smell from them nauseates and their children forever runny-nosed with lice and ringworm and God knows. Oh and at the backs down the entries where Ralph lives . . . have you seen? There's a lake of water, if it is water. as black as treacle and what's in it I don't know . . . such dead things and live things. It wants a river of carbolic to wash it all away. So that's what you're coming into and you must decide. And it's only part time as you know.

EVA. You make it sound very bad.

MAY. I wish it were better.

EVA. And I know I'm a poor substitute for Tom.

MAY. What makes you say that?

EVA. Only that you must be sorry to see him go. Ralph told me how you went to the recruiting office and tried to get him off.

MAY. Did he? Tom's chosen to go. (Smiles.) Go round the back to first gate. Door's open. Put the kettle on. Wiggle the raker a bit but not too much or it'll burn away. We'll be comfortable for an hour. (Indicates hand cart.) Put that in the yard where you can see it or it will grow legs and walk.

EVA pulls the cart off.

MAY laces up the covers of the stall. Presently she turns thinking about her attempt to get TOM released.

\t

R

II