

John Shannon - Reservist (1914)
Jeannette Sherwin

Curtain rises on poor room. Nellie sitting by fire, reading paper. Child trying to pick out patriotic tune on piano. Nellie throws down paper impatiently.

- Nell For goodness sake Baby, be quiet. don't you know the thing yet? As if we didn't hear enough of it all day long, and what good does it do? - Only reminds us of this terrible war.
- Child Don't you want me to play. Mother?
- Nellie Why yes dear, play if you like, but not always these soldier tunes.
- Child (*Looks over her mother's shoulder*) See the soldier on the horse. It's like the picture of grandfather in your room. If he hadn't been dead, would he have gone to fight?
- Nell Yes Baby. I remember the last time he went out, though I wasn't much more than a child myself, then. My poor Mother couldn't bear to let him go, and I only thought how grand it was that he should go and fight for his country. Oh but later, when he never came back, and we waited and waited, and the telegram came at last, to say that it was no use waiting any longer - then I learnt to be afraid of this horrible thing - this war.
- Child Daddy used to be a soldier. Will he put on his uniform again, now, like he used to?
- Nell No dear, no, he may not have to - he can't have to. It would be too cruel hard, just now, when we were beginning to get on a little.
- Child (*At window*) Look mother, there's a soldier. Doesn't he look fine? I should like to see the soldiers marching, all together. Will you take me to see them one day?
- Nell Yes baby, I must take you to the park some day, and then you shall see them to your heart's content. Aren't they fine?
- Child Will Daddy be with them when we see them?
- Nell Oh my baby -- don't, don't say that. You mustn't - - you don't understand (*she comes away from the window*) I can't bear to see them, such splendid strong fellows, all going away full of life and hope, like my father, and never coming back. I can't let Jack go too.
- Child There comes the postman, mother, shall I go?
- Nell Yes dear. See if he's brought anything.

Exit child. Nellie picks up her paper again, and goes on reading.

[Start p2 – page numbers indicate original script numbering]

- Nell It's fine to read of the Victories, and it's good to belong to this country when the trouble begins. If only it didn't mean --
- Child (*Enters with letter*) Look mother, one for Daddy
- Nell What? Let me look. O. H. M. S - my God, it's come! (*reads*) "John Shannon-Corporal in H.M. Reserve - rejoin his company - on active service -" Oh, I knew it. - - "Two days from present date." Two days from present date or within twenty-four hours of receipt of this notice. That means that in a few hours time he must go, and I am to be left here alone. Oh they have so many and yet they take all that I love, and leave me alone, perhaps for always.
- Child (*Picks up envelope*) O.H.M.S. that's a funny thing - O.H.M.S
- Nell Can't I do anything -- My God, can't I do anything to stop him going? But wait a minute -- I've got the letter. He need never know they sent for him. Why should he know! Why should I make this sacrifice -- what have I done that I should have all this needless suffering? But I must get him away somewhere, so that he doesn't find out, and so that they can't find him. What can I do? Let me see: his holidays start the end of this week, that's tomorrow -- twenty four hours from now -- I must get him away with us at once, and they won't start looking for him 'till the day after we're gone. And -- yes, the child shall help me, it will come better from her. Baby, come here!
- Child Yes, mother --
- Nell Listen darling, how would you like to go to Auntie Mary's in the country?
- Child Where we went last year, with the fields and the flowers?
- Nell Yes dearie, that's it. Now when daddy comes in you must ask him to take you - to take you this week -- see Baby? We will all go away together, and we'll be so happy, won't we -- oh, we must, we must! (*Enter Jack. Nellie snatches up letter and envelope from the table and hides them in her dress, then starts up to meet him*)
- Jack Well Nellie, any news? No letters for me, I suppose?
- Nell (*Avoiding his eyes*) Oh, were you expecting any? Have you had a good day?
- Jack So-so. I suppose the postman never called here?

Nell I -- Oh, I think -- I never looked.

[Start p.3]

Jack No, there were no letters there when I came in. funny. They're mobilising as fast as they can I know. Oh well, perhaps I shan't be wanted, after all.

Nell Oh Jack I hope not, I'm sure you won't.

Child (*Trying to attract his attention*) Daddy, I say, Daddy

Jack All right, little woman. (*Exit Nellie. Jack unrolls big flag*) See what I've got for you when you know 'Rule Britannia'!

Child For me? Oh, how splendid! Why, it's 'most too big to wave.

Jack But hands off, you know, till I hear 'Rule Britannia'

Child (*Runs to piano*) Oh, I shall have it soon then (*Nellie comes in with tray, catches her, and whispers to her*)

Nell Ask him now, dearie. (*She goes out again. Child runs up to Jack, who has taken up the paper*)

Child Daddy, take me to the country - to Auntie's.

Jack That's a funny thing, kiddie. I was thinking of taking you and mother there soon, if I'm not called to the front.

Child Do you remember how we played in the hayfields last year and we tumbled all over, and got our hair full of hay. Shall we go soon?

Jack We might go as soon as my holidays start, since I'm not called in. (*Wife is listening with the door half open, she gives a sigh of relief, and closes it.*)

Child And we took a picnic in the woods, and Auntie used to read us fairy stories in the evening.

Jack But you're nearly able to read the fairy tales for yourself now, aren't you?

Child Yes, I can a little. I read today -- Daddy, what does O.H.M.S mean?

Jack O.H.M.S? Why, that means -- where have you seen it kiddie?

Child Mother got a letter, just before you came in, and it

[Start p.4]

was so funny, it had no stamp. but O.H.M.S on the outside in big letters.

Jack I don't understand - she said - look here kiddie, are you sure?

Child Yes, I read it. What does it mean?

Jack It means: "On his Majesty's Service" - It is a letter from the King.

Child From the King? Oo fancy you getting a letter from the King.

Jack It's an extraordinary thing - I can't make it out -

Nell (*Enters with tea*) Well Jack, have you settled when we are going to the country?

Jack Listen to me, Nellie. This little girl has just been asking me the meaning of the letters O.H.M.S. I wonder whether you quite understand them?

Nell O.H.M.S - I understand of course, 'On His Majesty's Service' - but why -

Jack Do you understand their significance? The meaning they should have for every English man or woman, at this time especially.

Nell What do you mean?

Jack I mean that the call "On His Majesty's Service" should always make every right thinking man lay aside his own personal interests and take up the interest of his country. But now, more than ever, when we only hold England safe from an utterly pitiless enemy by the strength of men who have left everything to defend her - I think you have something for me.

Nell No, no, what makes you think that? - why should I have anything for you.

Jack Is it possible? Nellie I can't make you out, you are surely not deceiving me. - Nellie, answer me.

Nell (*Turning away from him*) Why should I deceive you, Jack?

Jack (*Takes her head in his hands and forces her to meet his eyes*) That's not an answer.

Nell I - I - thought -- Oh, Jack, don't go!

Jack Little girl this is not right. You know it's not

[Start p5]

right. You ought to be glad that I can serve my country.

Nell Glad? -- Why should I be glad? The possibility of this has been one long nightmare for me ever since I married you. Didn't I lose my father in the same way? They've got so many, I have only you -- They'd never miss you.

Jack Every Englishman who thought as you do would make one soldier less on the field. Every Englishman must show up, when he is wanted.

Nell Oh, but we've got our youth and happiness, we're just beginning to make good, and get all the joy out of life, and now this comes. Oh it's not right, it's not right. Listen, Jack, come away as you had planned, to the country. They won't know, they can't force you to go, you would be safe, and I should have you still.

Jack What a poor thing you must think of me. But there is still such a thing as honour.

Nell No Jack - no - don't be angry with me, don't speak to me like that. Think what it will mean to me to have to let you go.

Jack But Nellie, you're not the only woman in England who is saying goodbye to the man she loves. What about the Queen, who is sending her two eldest boys? - They're sharing the chances of battle with the best and worst of us, and that's enough to remind any woman of her duty.

Nell But you can't leave me here utterly unprotected and unprovided for, and there's the child -- Oh Jack -- think.

Jack I am not afraid for that. The country I fight for knows how to look after those I leave behind me.

Nell I can't bear it, Jack, I shall kill myself -- you mustn't go.

Jack Nellie, don't you understand? There is my honour, a Briton's honour. Surely you can't expect me to give that up even for you? What would you think of me afterwards if I hung back now.

Nell I don't believe you care for me at all. You want to go -- you are tired of me.

Jack Nellie, what are you saying! You know I have to keep a brave face, for your sake, and the kiddie's, but it tears my heart to leave you, -- and I can't leave you like this.

Nell Don't touch me - leave me alone can't you? I mean what I say.

Jack No, no, listen, I'll stay with you a few days and talk it over, there's no need to be in such a hurry, my darling, listen to me --

[Start p.6]

(The Child, who has been pouring over the piano, taking no notice of the duologue gets up during the preceding speeches and tries to attract their attention, but they take no notice of her. She now breaks in)

Child Listen Daddy, I know it now

(She sings 'Rule Britannia' The parents stand petrified. At the close of the last speech Nellie thinking she has won, has let Jack take her in his arms. At the close of the song she suddenly pushes him away)

Nell No, I'm wrong, you don't belong to me, you belong to the country, -- and it took this baby to show me that. Jack, Jack, I had lost my sense, England must be kept safe and honoured, and every man counts, every man and every woman, but oh, it isn't easiest for the women.

Jack I know dear, But England will help the women, and the women must help the men, -- you almost made me waver.

Nell Forgive me, Jack, and go. You will have to make ready.

Jack When it is all over I shall come back, and we will be happy again.

Nell Supposing you don't come back?

Jack That will depend on the fortune of war. You will be brave?

Nell As brave as you are.

(The man goes to the door. The child has been playing with the flag, and has wrapped herself in it. Jack picks her up and kisses her)

Jack Kiddie, darling, run and see to mother *(Exit Jack)*

Child Where has Daddie gone, Mother?

Nell *(Sees flag and catches child in her arms)* Oh you, young English, he has gone to keep the country for you.

CURTAIN