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Bertrand Davis, *A Call to Arms*, 1914

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Script Source: Transcription

This script is a transcription from a manuscript which is part of their Lord Chamberlain's collection at the British Library. The script has been transcribed by a volunteer on the Great War Theatre project and we are grateful for the time and effort they have given to make this text available.

A Call to Arms
Bertrand Davis

Scene: A Village Green, Church and house scene on backcloth nestling in hollow [...] villagers grouped around - some seated, some standing, some lying on the green. Lights go up slowly. Young woman at door of cottage rocking a cradle. Cricketer with stumps and bat LC talking to girl. Curate RC listening with others to Grouser down R, astride a rough bench, with papers in his hand, laying down the law.

Grouser And all you've got to do ... All you've got to do is to send two million Japanese over to take Berlin while the Russians attack the Kaiser in the rear.

Chorus of Admirers Hear! Hear!

Grou If there's fighting to be done, let them do it as likes it. That's what I say!

(The rattle of drum and fife heard. All start and turn. Some run and look ff LUE, as the music rises to crescendo and a gaily-uniformed Recruiting Sergeant enters singing, and immediately taking stage. the others all applaud him, the girls nearest in a group)

Song Come my lads and be a soldier.

(After 1st verse and chorus)

Sergeant Well, my friends. Who wants to serve his King and country.

(The girls shrink away, the men turn their backs on him and laugh contemptuously; the boy tries to rush to him but is held back by his father down R)

[Start p.2 – page numbers are from original licensed script]

Serg. Come along now. Here's Britain fighting half Europe, and the enemy's only eighty miles away from the cliffs of Dover.

Grou We Know all about that. 'Ave a drink?

Serg We shall have you bye and bye you know. Better enlist like me than be driven like sheep.

Grou We ain't a lot of German sausages on a string. We're men, we are

(Enter Boy Scout, comes to Sergeant, salutes smartly and exits where he entered)

Serg I see, you're men. And you're letting the kids set you an example

(2nd verse and chorus)

Serg You remember what the great Drake said - 'The battle of Waterloo was won on the playing fields of etc' *(to Cricketer talking to his girl)* that concerns you, sir. Where are you going?

Harry I'm going to play cricket.

Serg Why don't' you play the game? Is it to be the cricket bat or the rifle?

Harry Now look here, dash it all. I'm doing very well in business. I'm going to get married shortly. If I chose to play cricket after my day's work I'm fully entitled to do so. I wish you every success and I assure you I take great interest in the European situation. *(stalks conceitedly over to Girl)* It didn't take me long to make up my mind.

Girl *(putting her arms around him)* Oh, Harry! I knew you'd never lag behind! I didn't want you to go, but oh! I'm so proud of you.

Harry *(taken aback)* What do you mean? I'm not going. I've just told him off.

Girl Oh Harry. I thought you were a man. *(crosses to sergeant)* you don't' want a Red Cross girl, do you?

[Start p.3]

Serg That's the style, my dear. If he won't' stick to his country he wouldn't stick to you. *(Puts his arm around her)*

Harry It's like this. Here, leave my girl alone.

Girl Run away and play. Kiss me sergeant.

(Sergeant does so. Harry tries to pull her away)

Girl Fancy you not going with the nice kind sergeant.

Serg Don't worry about him, my dear. I know his sort, full of patriotism. He likes to watch the soldiers go by.

Duet (aimed at Harry)

WATCHING THE SOLDIERS GO BY

Now when we come to war's alarms a fellow always feels
He'd like to irritate his country's foe
but I understand the fighting very seldom stops for meals
And you have to keep on marching to and fro
if a little motor' bus
to the battle carried us
if they stood us lunch before the fight began
then perhaps we'd join the lancers
or some other set of dancers
for at present we are doing all we can.

Chorus

We're watching the soldiers go by
we're waiving our straw hats on high
we've read all that's written
about dear old Britain
we're watching the soldier go by

Gussie has informed me that he doesn't mean to fight
he's not that sort of sentimental chap
there's plenty other fellows who can do it quite all right
and he's got to play his billiard handicap
his girl would let him go
and his mother won't say no
but Gussie says the war is tommy rot
it's time to start the fighting
when the game gets more exciting
and the enemy is nearer to the spot

[Start p.4]

Chorus

When he's watching the soldiers go by
when he daren't fire a gun or he'd die
when Gussie brave fellah
lies deep in a cellar
watching those Germans tramp by

Harry

Here comes Jim Baxter. See what he's got to say. He's only been married about a year.

(Jim Baxter enters. A tall serious looking man in his shirt sleeves; he carries a spade. Drum and fife heard off)

Serg *(stepping up to Jim Baxter)* Sir, your country needs you.

Jim I know *(crosses, while all watch him, to his young wife, at the cradle L. She stands up, they face one another, looking in each other's eyes)* Mary you've got to look after the garden now. *(Gives her the spade, she takes it slowly. Jim bends down, kisses her, kisses the baby in the cradle - crosses to sergeant, softly, whistling 'The Girl I Left Behind Me')* Put me down, sergeant. *(Harry's girl crosses to the young wife and puts her arm around her waist. Harry looks at her, goes up to sergeant, puts out his hand for the shilling)*

Girl *(Running to Harry and flinging her arms around him)* I knew you would

Serg So did I, Miss. *(Others crowd round the sergeant)*

Grou Hear, I say, wait a bit. This has got to be put a stop to.

serg What do you want to join. You must wait your turn.

Grou Me, no fear. The war'll be over in no time.

[Start p.5]

Serg Yes, the fire goes out after the house is burnt down. Stand aside if you won't fight, keep your mouth shut till it's time to start squealing for mercy.

Grou Now look here, I'm a mechanic. I've got to look after my job

Serg Yes, my boy, that's it. Your job is to defend your country

1st man No, the army does that

Serg It can't if it isn't big enough.

1st man Then make it bigger

Serg That's the idea, come along then

1st man No, I don't mean myself

Serg Oh, I see, somebody else is to do your job.

1st man I don't want to be a soldier

Serg Yes, that's why the Germans think they'll win.

1st man D' you mean that?

Serg The Kaiser never thought we'd fight. The German nation is fighting the British army. What's the British nation going to do?

1st man Yes, but I might get killed?

Serg I'll tell you a secret. You won't live forever under any circumstances. If you are killed you won't worry about it. If you are not killed you'll be jolly pleased. Anyway you'll be a hero instead of a coward.

1st man I'm no coward. I'll fight when the time comes.

Serg Can you handle a rifle?

1st man No

Serg You'll be useful, won't you?

1st man I can learn

Serg Don't forget to ask the enemy to wait. Do you understand drill? Do you know how to take cover?

[Start p.6]

1st man No

Serg Why you wouldn't know enough to keep yourself alive, leave alone defend anybody else.

1st man I tell you I'm not a professional soldier. When the time comes to defend my home I'll do it.

Serg When the time comes you won't be allowed to, understand if a non-combatant fires only once on the enemy it means that he'll be taken out and shot like a dog. Let me tell you this young man. The army is not fighting for such as you. It's not to assist able-bodied men. It's to defend the weak and the old and the helpless the little children who are to be the men and women of tomorrow. It's to uphold the name and fame of one of the greatest nations the world has ever seen. It's to prove that a man must be true to his friend and keep his word of honour, even if it's only written on a scrap of paper. When you shelter yourself behind your fighting countrymen you're really only mumping on better men than yourself.

1st man I say, you're not half rubbing it in.

Serg You wait 'til your girl beings to think it over, then you will get it

1st man I tell you there's plenty of men without me

Serg *(Enter boy calling 'extra special')* Listen to this *(takes paper)* The enemy has called out his reserves. The old men of Germany and Austria have marched out to fight, to kill and to die. Russia, Servia, France have emptied their cities, all their sons are in the field. Are the young men of England content to watch football matches at home?

1st man It's not fair. We've recruited a hundred thousand men already.

Serg Europe is talking in millions today. This is not a war, it is a crusade. And never in all the long history of these islands was a sword drawn in a cause so just. Come my lad, what are you? A man or a mechanic?

1st man Give us the bob anyway.

(Bugle call)

[Start p.7]

(Repeat 'come, my lads'. Chorus)

Serg *(To audience)* Gentlemen, I am asked by the Authorities to state that a Recruiting Officer is in attendance in the vestibule of the building. Is there any man here tonight who can and will help his country in her hour of need?

Chorus

CURTAIN