

MILADY DOES HER BIT

E L Prentice

CHARACTERS

LOUISE	Lady Poppleton Popple
COLONEL ALFRED HEATON	A Dugout
ANNETTE	Her Ladyship's confidential French maid
BERT	A lonely soldier

MILADY DOES HER BIT

SCENE – Her Flower Boudoir in Maymarket Court, Mayfair. Deep Persian blue walls. Quantities of yellow daisies in copper jars. Big window L. Divan left centre, covered in purple with cushions in black and gold and eastern blues and copper. Tiger skin with head lying in front. Piano down R. open with music. Double door opening into hall; front door beyond.

(ANNETTE, very smart in manner, is chasing small Pekinese puppy)

ANNETTE Come, Monsieur Chang! (catches him) Ah! got you! Little monkey from China. I 'ave to you ze command given three times already – on zat cushion! (Puts him in the middle of cushion). You are to seat yourself – and zere shall you remain. If not, zis monster from ze jungles will keep you quiet for always and ever inside of his petite mouth. (She wriggles head of tiger and imitates roar). It is impossible to work wis you always everywhere, mon bijou. (Nods at him and pretends to straighten papers, work, music on piano, photos. Takes up one). Anozzer and a new lonely soldier of milady's, and a verra nice to look at boy, too! (Kisses photo). Ah, la guerre!

LOUISA (LADY POPPLETON POPPLE enters) Annette! Annette!

ANNETTE Yes, milady!

LOUISE Where are those letter from my soldiers that came this morning?

ANNETTE Here, milady, on your writing table.

(LADY POPPLETON POPPLE very smart in a teagown. She carries three bags stuffed full of letters, some of which are tumbling out, they are so full.)

LOUISA Ah! so they are. Been hunting everywhere. I wish that person would stop strumming on the piano, it gets on my nerves. I am really quite exhausted with arranging these beautiful human document from my lonely soldiers in the trenches, according to their tone. What a gift, Annette, is sympathy! First they write quite simply, almost like schoolboys, (hands white silk bag to ANNETTE) then as more of my letters reach them they become quite friendly, (hands pale pink bag) – almost lovingly – until no longer able to ignore the call of sex – (looks with emotion at last bag which is flame coloured changing to blood purple) H'm! These I felt required a bag of flame. (Clasps bag).

(ANNETTE holds out hands eagerly).

It is the deep ocean of sex, calling, calling. A problem

ANNETTE (With a look) It is indeed, Milady – how to satisfy (comprehensive glance at bags) so numerous a demand.

LOUISA You might to-night write letters for me to these (indicating white and pink bags).

 (ANNETTE looks bored).

ANNETTE And not to these? (Indicating flame bag).

LOUISA No. (Looking her up and down). You are unmarried. I, being the widow of a Mayor can better understand the sort of answers such letters require. That is all. You may go. Oh! Put on your hat and take these parcels round to the post office – smokes for the dear brave boys.

 (ANNETTE takes parcel off table).

ANNETTE But what if anyone should call? Does Milady remember it's Mary's afternoon out – and William's day for pretending to be a policeman?

LOUISA Pretending? Nothing of the sort, Annette! I never feel really safe except on the days William is guarding London.

ANNETTE Milady would be all alone.

LOUISA Dear, dear! I had quite forgotten. But no matter. These parcels must catch the five o'clock post. But you won't be long. Take the key. If anyone should call, I must answer the door myself. It is war time, and we must all do our bit.

 (ELECTRIC BELL rings)

 There is someone. The Colonel, I expect.

 (ANNETTE goes to front door).

 (LOUISA takes letters off desk, gives little laugh as she glance over one).

 (ANNETTE re-enters – announces)

ANNETTEE Monsieur le Colonel Heaton.

 (Takes up parcels and exits)

COLONEL Ah, my very dear little lady, and how are you today? H'm! eh? Lookin' like a rose – like a rose! (Kisses her hand).

LOUISA Oh, I'm very fit, thank you, Alfred; only worked to pieces.

COLONEL Over that infernal letter-writin', I suppose. H'm! hah! Of course it's all dooced well, writin' to our splendid fellows, but they're not – er- not all as lonely as some of them would make us believe. At least, so I'm told.

LOUISA I don't believe a word of it, Alfred, and surely I ought to know. (Clasping flame bag). They are starving, poor dear lonely things – absolutely starving for female –

COLONEL Companionship? Rot, my dear Louisa! Tommy rot!

LOUISA No, not for female companionship, as you know – as we all must know – it is quite unobtainable whilst they are in Flanders and France (She eyes the COLONEL aggressively).

COLONEL Oh, of course, my love, quite unobtainable!

LOUISA All they ask for is an expression of feminine sympathy. Nothing more.

COLONEL Well, well, my dear, no doubt you know best, but don't blame me if you get a devil of a surprise one fine day. And, talkin' of sympathy, what about me? H'm! hah! What about me? When are we goin' to have our little war wedding, eh, Milady?

LOUISA As soon as I have a little time to myself. As it is I haven't a moment to spare to buy any wedding rags. Why, I'm writing all the day and half the night! But as soon as there's a lull, I'll let you know – Alfred (starts counting socks).

COLONEL H'm! hah! Sounds all very unsettled and in the air. Now, come, my dear, you had better let me give you a hand. Here, I'll answer some of these for you. (Lays hand on flame bag).

LOUISA (Clinging to bag) No, certainly not! You simply couldn't.

(Letter falls from bag. They both pick it up together).

COLONEL (Reads) "Well, dear old cosy corner..." Old cosy corner! (Jams eyeglass in eye) Of all the damned impertinent ...! (Eyeglass falls out).

LOUISA Nonsense Alfred! (Takes letter) I knew you couldn't understand. This letter is one of the most vivid – a real nature cry.

COLONEL Pah! Nature cry! Now what the....! H'm! (coughs) Louisa, what do you mean by a nature cry?

LOUISA I mean ... Oh, you could never comprehend what I mean! But this is a beautiful human document right from the heart of things ... If taken in the proper spirit (Reads letter) "Well, old cosy corner!"

COLONEL Now what have you said in your letters to this infernal chap that makes him address you by this extraordinary name?

LOUISA I – I don't remember. I suppose I wrote to him in a homely comfortable way.

(COLONEL snorts).

(Reads) "This has been a bl....time." When the dear thing uses this apparently essential war adjective I'll just slap – this blood – red cushion – or Ching Chang – or something. (Reads) "This has been the hell of a (slaps) day, but h'all those as h'are well h'are (slaps) well, which is something. You must be from your nice (slap) letters, a bit of something warm and comforting.

(Snort from COLONEL)

There, Alfred, I know he must have a good reason for calling me a cosy corner! (Reads) "When I gits back to (slap) old Blighty we'll 'ave a hell of a (slaps dog who we hope will resent it) beano, you and me. So long little cosy comfort! You see, Alfred, how he harps on that idea of being comfortable.

(COLONEL purple)

(Reads) "And I 'opes as you keeps in (slap) good 'health as this leaves me. No more at present from your lonely soldier, Egbert".

COLONEL Well, I'm damned! That you permit anyone to write to you in such a manner is amazin'! And I am pained, Louisa, very pained.

LOUISA Oh, rubbish, Alfred! Your objections are narrow and unpatriotic. After all, we must all do our bit.

COLONEL Very well, milady, I'll do my bit. I am told among the W.A.A.C.s are some doocid attractive girls. I haven't heard they suffer from loneliness, but I've no doubt with a judicious distribution of hampers from Gunter's I'll be able to commandeer a heavy – a whackin' – post-bag and one that I shall not allow you to tamper with. Good morning. Milady! (Goes toward exit).

LOUISA How absurd you are Alfred! Just as if those brave, splendid girls would ever dream of entering into a correspondence. No matter what you sent them from Gunter's. Heaven that you should get a letter that at all resembles those I receive from my lonely soldiers –

COLONEL Well, milady, and if I do?

LOUISA Why, I fancy there'll be one war wedding the less! (Starts counting shirts).

(COLONEL furious, snorts and exits, banging front door).

(To PEKINESE) There's a nasty temper, isn't it, my precious bit of concentrated Chinese sweetness? This is one of our dear Colonel's high explosive days. But he'll blow himself back again soon and be very penitent. Smart young W.A.A.C.s and lonely soldiers are a long, long way from Tipperary – I mean from one another. Chang! I believe you winked – bad dog! (Puts him down) Now I come to think of it you may be right. Oh, but no! the War Office is, as we all know, so very discreet and particular in such matters; and quite right too. (Catching sight of letter, smiles and reads) "When I comes 'ome to (slaps) old

Blighty, we'll 'ave a hell of a (slaps) beano." It is indeed nature untouched – untrammelled. I wonder my pet, what a "beano" is. Some sort of dish made of French or broad beans that the dear brave creature likes. How interested I shall be to meet them. Of course, when they see me and realise who and what I am - a Lord Mayor's widow – they'll be very surprised; some of them, I fear, Chang, will be oh, so sad! – for so many of them hope and expect that the romance of their letters is only the beginning of – of – other things.

(Electric bell)

Oh, dear! The front door bell and no one in to answer it. How tiresome!

(Bell keeps ringing)

Whoever it is, means it shall be answered. Oh! Well, we must all do our bit. (Goes towards door rather nervously; comes back and takes up dog) You had better come with me, Chang. These are such curious days.

(Opens front door and BERT is seen straight from the trenches; he is hung about with every sort of thing, including three Prussian helmets, several iron crosses, etc).

Oh! What – I mean, who are you?

BERT Well, didn't you say 'as 'ow you wanted to see me?

LOUISA Did I?

BERT Did yer? Aren't you glad to see me?

LOUISA Of course, delighted. So good of you to call.

BERT I'm lonely Bertie.

LOUISA Oh! One of my lonely soldiers? Come in! Oh, do come in!

BERT Yus, old dear; and judgin' from your letters, I shan't be lonely long.

LOUISA I hope not, indeed.

BERT So we knows just 'ow and where we stands – wot, wot!

LOUISA What? Yes, I am sure I do hope we do.

BERT Some of these letters of yours fair lit h'up h'our dugh'out. We called 'em missives from 'ell, by Miss V. C.

LOUISA You dear soldier men have such curious quaint ways of saying things. Missives from L. Of course my name begins with L – Louisa; and from Miss V C. I haven't really done anything to deserve such a splendid name.

BERT It's not everyone's name. Shouldn't fancy it for myself – Miss Victoria Cross.

LOUISA (Stiffens) You can't mean to suggest that my letters resemble in tone the novels of that celebrated authoress? Oh, that's impossible!

BERT Impossible?

LOUISA Quite. Why, I am the widow of a Mayor.

BERT Go on! Go on! Well, I'm a bit of a liar myself.

LOUISA Oh, no, no! No lonely soldier could ever be that.

 (BERT gives her a look).

 But won't you sit down? I want to hear all about all the splendid brave things you've been doing and how you got these and how you won your medals. Where are your medals?

BERT The General's a-'oldin' of 'em.

LOUISA The General is holding them?

BERT Yus, (gloomily) 'oldin' of 'em back.

LOUISA Oh, he mustn't do that. I'll go first thing tomorrow and talk to an old and dear friend of mind – somewhere in Whitehall. Tell me how many there should be.

BERT (Counts on his fingers) Abaht eight.

LOUISA Oh!!! What splendid things you must have done! Do sit down. You must be worn out.

BERT Yus, I think I will. (Sinks in cushions. Gives a great sigh and grunt of satisfaction) Some 'ole, I calls it! (Pats cushion on divan). Come along, old dear!

 (LOUISA hesitates)

 Come on and let's 'ave a bally old 'eart to 'earter.

 (LOUISA, looking distinctly timorous, sits gingerly on edge of divan).

 (Stretches himself) Yus, this is what I calls Post! A fair cosy corner. (Discovers Chang) What-O! Your watch-dog won't spring any rear attacks, will he?

LOUISA Of course not. Chang would not hurt a soldier.

BERT No, now I come to see 'im I don't suppose 'as 'ow 'e h'ever will. (Looks about him) This dug of yours is, I should si, the litest top-'ole

‘igh art. Reminds me somethink of what in h’official langwidge is called plum – matches some of them letters of yours wot you wrote to me.

LOUISA I don’t know what you mean. Something must have gone very wrong with the light when they were read.

BERT Something did. It grew fint. You’re lookin’ a bit that way yourself, little lidy.

LOUISA You’re quite mistaken. I’m enjoying your visit so much.

BERT I thought as ‘ow you might be. I mean yer to. (Looking at her closely). You’re not afraid of me?

LOUISA (Sickly laugh) How absurd! How could I be afraid of a lonely soldier?

BERT Shouldn’t count too much on that. We’re not h’all Josephs.

LOUISA It’s not to be expected and Joseph was never one of my Biblical heroes, even as a girl.

(BERT’s face suddenly grows very serious and he very slowly raises himself by arching his back. Louisa eyes him in growing terror and slowly rises. He carefully draws out from underneath a Hun helmet).

BERT Do you ‘ear h’anythink?

(A low humming sound is heard).

LOUISA A sort of a hum - - Why, what could possibly hum?

BERT (With extreme caution brings round one of the helmets of the Death’s Head Hussars). This!

LOUISA Why – oh, why does it make that curious sound?

BERT Carn’t si. We’ve examined h’it as much h’as we dares. H’it’s a mystery ‘elmet. Me and my mites ‘as ‘ad many a worrithin’ toime wif ‘im. ‘E starts that ‘orrible ‘ummin’ – and why, we don’t knowyet. I alls ‘im the bally will it.

LOUISA Will it what?

BERT Explode

LOUISA Explode! Oh!

BERT At h’any instand. I’ve allus ‘eld as ‘ow there’s Toluol ‘hidden in them crossbones.

LOUISA Oh, how dreadful! Do take it away somewhere. Go and drop it in the bath.

BERT Drop it! I wouldn't care to risk that. The spirit of the 'Un wot wore 'im would 'ate a barf worse than he did losin' of 'is 'elmet. Oh, there 'e's quietened down again. Let sleepin' Toluol liewhen it feels so disposed. That's been my motter whenever ... possible.

LOUISA For how long does this fololderolol – I mean tuloldiolol helmet generally refrain from humming?

BERT Carn't never be sure. Might be days, might be minutes. But don't let's waste our time talkin' abaht toluol; it's a beastly stuff at the best. Sit down, little lidy, sit down.

 (She sits)

 You seem fond of yaller disies.

LOUISA Yes, I love them – so decorative.

BERT They reminds me of what a girl in Flanders told me.

LOUISA But there are no girls in Flanders.

BERT Oh, ain't there! It depends 'ow hard you looks for 'em. This little lot wot I stumbled on in hidin', told me wot they means in Flemish.

LOUISA And what do they mean?

BERT (moving closer) Come, sprinkle my eyes with kisses.

LOUISA Ah! charmingly symbolical!

BERT I don't know much abaht symbolical. But them disies knows wot, I'm thinkin'. I'd never 'ave believed as 'ow disies 'ad so much 'orse sense. Are we alone?

LOUISA No! there are numerous servants about.

BERT (with a wink) That's what I gathered when you opened the door to me yourself!

LOUISA I always open the door in war time – it's safer. But you haven't yet told me how you spend your time in those quaint dug-outs, and how you amuse yourselves in the evenings – and then those sun helmets – I mean Hun helmets. How did you procure them? And what did the Huns do when they lost them? I expect they said things in German. But I feel sure you were so splendid and brave, you just ignored them.

BERT (Sulkily) Now I'm bally well fed h'up wif 'Uns. I'm a lonely soldier 'ome on leave, and I've somethink else in my mind. So we'll give them 'Uns the go by. If her don't mind. My dear, (coming nearer) when we lonely soldiers comes back to Blighty, we 'oo 'as been encouraged by the sort of come-cuddle-me letters as wot you've been and written of to me, we expects – well – not to be disappointed.

LOUISA I should be the last person to wish to disappoint any lonely soldier.

BERT Now you're talkin'! You see wot with the war and wot with other things, the worst women—'aters amongs us lonely chaps gits h'odd at times – very h'odd – and a sort of kiss-me-quick-and-don't-you-be-long-abah-t-it-neither spirit seems to tike 'old of us – as it's a-took 'old of me now.

LOUISA Making every allowance for the unexpected effects of war upon the nervous system, I must really ask you to remember that, after all, I am the widow of a Mayor.

(Piano organ outside window playing "Come and cuddle me".)

BERT After them letters, wot's the use of tikin' cover be'ind the Corporation? (Hums air absently) "Come and cuddle me". Some song that, ain't it? A great favourite with us lonely chaps!.

LOUISA Is it?

BERT Yus. You look as h'if you could sing h'it h'as h'it ought to be sung.

LOUISA (Fearfully) How ought it to be sung?

BERT With all the h'inside h'out, h'as you might si.

(LOUISA shudders)

We h'often sings h'it like that – over there.

LOUISA Yes, possibly. But here it is so different.

BERT I si, little lady, wot's wrong abaht singin' it now?

LOUISA Wrong? Oh, nothing! But perhaps I have other songs you would prefer. (Moves towards piano) "Love me but leave me" is a nice song and Tosti's "Good-bye" or would you like a Night in Bohemia?

BERT Wot's the use of a night? (Looking fierce). I wants "Come and cuddle me" and when we lonely soldiers wants h'anythink we wants h'it and there's no more to h'it. And now I remember you wrote as 'ow you 'ad played it at the orspitals.

LOUISA That is quite another thing. The matron was there.

BERT And very much there if I knows my thing about her. So tune up, old dear, I'm a nailer at the chorus.

LOUISA We must all do our bit. (LOUISA always the Mayor's widow, starts to sing. BERT follows her about, doing a two-step, she pretending to enjoy it but divided between a fearful joy and modesty. He finishes by catching her and they two step together. He releases her, she nearly sinks on helmet but manages to get to divan, panting. In the end he climbs over, catches her and they both sing at one another, she

entering into the spirit of the song then they tango. When suddenly he releases her and she reels, without seeing him, into the arms of the –

(COLONEL has entered, let in my ANNETTE)

LOUISA Alfred!!!

COLONEL What the fury does all this mean?

LOUISA Only one of my lonely soldiers arrived unexpectedly. I was just doing my bit.

COLONEL Damn it all, Milady, there are limits! And you, sir, what the devil do you mean by coming in that filthy state into Lady Poppleton Popple's boudoir?

BERT In Lidy Poppleton Popple's boudoir? There's some mistake. Isn't this No. 3, Maymarket Court?

COLONEL Yes, sir, it is No. 3

BERT Aren't you Mrs Newton?

LOUISA No, I am Louisa, Lady Poppleton Popple. Mrs Newton took my flat for a time, but she gave it up last week, fortunately.

BERT Blimey! I beg pardon, milady. You see, it was like this. Me and my mate wot h'are knock-abaht artists when not engaged in slaughterin' 'Uns, agreed as we'd give this Mrs Newton a bit of a fright first time we gets 'ome on leave. She's by wi of bein' engaged to our Major, and 'e's a wise man; so we mided up h'our minds we'd teach 'er a lesson not to write the sort of tosh she do to soldiers. No matter 'ow lonely they pertends as 'ow they h'are. Maybe she don't mean no 'arm milidy, only silly. So you see 'ow it is, and I'm sorry, I'm sure.

LOUISA It's quite all right. You thought I was the person who had written those dreadful letters. Nothing she could have written would surprise me. But you're quite forgiven. Don't give the matter another thought. Only what shall I do with this? (Eyeing helmet fearfully).

BERT (Goes to pick it up) I'll take it.

LOUISA (Stops him) No, no! you shall not touch it! If it is going to explode, I'll attend to it, or this gentleman. You shan't have anything to do with bombs in Blighty if I can prevent it.

BERT You're a plucked 'un. Thank you, milidy. But – (takes it up) it's only a toy given me by a French girl.

(COLONEL coughs)

And I apologise for frightenin' you, milidy.

LOUISA Oh I wasn't so frightened!

BERT No? I'm glad of that.

ANNETTE Milady?

LOUISA Ah, Annette! You're back again? You would like, I know, to have the latest news from France. Will you go and have tea with her?

 (ANNETTE looks joyful. BERT gives her the glad eye)

BERT Will I? !!

 (BERT and ANETTE go off talking French).

COLONEL Well, milady, I hope you're satisfied. (Snorts).

LOUISA Yes, quite; and perhaps I had better take a few days off and buy some wedding rags – for if many more of these dear lonely things come to call, you had better, Alfred, be about somewhere in the flat at home.

 (Organ starts in distance "Come and cuddle me". She sways slightly)

COLONEL My dear, I'm delighted! So we'll have our little war wedding after all!

LOUISA But remember, Alfred, war wedding or no war wedding, I shall always be at home to all my lonely soldiers.

C U R T A I N