

MOTHER COUNTRY

By Joy Hinckley

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Royalty fee: no fee is payable. Permission to perform is required.

Setting

BRISBANE, AUSTRALIA / A trench in France, 1916.

Characters

HELEN BLAKE ANNIE's younger sister. A schoolteacher. Single, childless. She is accustomed to speaking with confidence, and expecting to be listened to.

ANNIE HOLDEN HELEN'S older sister. Married, a housewife who earns some money doing piecework sewing for a local clothing manufacturer. To date she has been content to see home and family as her rightful sphere.

BILL HOLDEN ANNIE'S husband. His foot was crushed in an accident at his place of work as a quarryman, so he is unable to work.

GRACE HOLDEN 13 year old daughter of ANNIE and BILL. A lively, spirited, intelligent girl.

JACK HOLDEN ANNIE and BILL's teenage son. A typical Australian working class young man.

MISS BAILEY A middle aged teacher

STEPHEN JAMES A returned soldier

HORRY A young soldier

ANT-WAR SPEAKER A female political speaker at a rally.

MRS WILSON Official of the Women's Peace Army

PROTESTANT MINISTER

MALE SPEAKER

MR STAMOS Greek Café owner

POLICEMEN

VOICES in the crowd.

SFX A VERY VOCAL CROWD IN A STREET.

SPEAKER (*ON A FAR-OFF PODIUM*) It was supposed to be over by Christmas, but here we are - 1916. We have had two years of mad slaughter - have seen our men and boys destroyed and left to rot in foreign fields, or returned to us maimed and brutalised -

MALE VOICE 1 (*CLOSE, SHOUTING*) Go home and tell your husband he wants you, 'cus we don't!

SFX JEERING LAUGHTER

MALE VOICE 2 (*CLOSE, SHOUTING*) Husband? You reckon any bloke'd want that shrieking witch of a suffragette?

SFX MORE LAUGHTER AND REMARKS, "GET OFF!", ETC

HELEN (*ANGRY*) Quiet! Let her speak!

MALE VOICE 2 Don't order me around. Who do you think you are?

HELEN I'm someone who agrees with that speaker, that's who. And there's a lot more of us. This bloody massacre has gone on long enough. Australia can't afford to lose any more of our sons and fathers - and for what? There's no victory in sight to show for it all.

MALE VOICE 1 Ooh, listen to miss righteous. You a schoolmarm, too, using a word like "bloody".

FEMALE VOICE She a schoolteacher? What would you know of husbands and fathers, you shrivelled up spinster? You should be teaching our little ones

to love our Mother Country, not siding with these rabble rousers.

MALE VOICE 1 Remember who pays your wages, missy. I've a mind to report for disloyalty to the Crown. See how long you keep your nice little job then.

MALE VOICE 2 Britain has asked us for 5000 men a week, and by God, we're not going to let her down.

HELEN Oh yes? You'll be down at the recruiting office tomorrow, will you?

MALE VOICE 2 By God I would, if it wasn't for my crook back.

HELEN And you?

MALE VOICE 1 I would - I'd sign up tomorrow if I wasn't nearly 60.

SFX **A DISURBANCE HAS ERUPTED ELSEWHERE IN THE CROWD: VARIOUS FAR-OFF CHANTS, EG, "END THE WAR!" "WHAT ABOUT THE DIGGERS? "TRAITORS!" "MURDERERS!" "SHAME!", ETC; SCUFFLES, PUNCHES THROWN, POLICE WHISTLES, POLICE HORSE HOOVES, YELLS, SCREAMS.**

SFX **SEGUES INTO SUBURBAN GARDEN SOUNDS, TEACUPS, THE CREAK OF CANE CHAIRS**

GRACE Then what did you do, Auntie Helen? Did you get into the stoush? Give 'em a bit of the old biffo?

ANNIE Language, Grace. I don't know where you get these expressions from.

HELEN It was getting too hot even for an old rabble-rouser like me, Gracie. I didn't particularly want to be knocked out cold by some of the types

around me - or by a policeman's truncheon. They don't mind who they clobber once they get started. Better to live to fight another day - anyway, I'm supposed to be a pacifist! Not to mention I'd left my hatpin at home.

GRACE Hatpin?

HELEN Of course, you're too young to remember. A few years ago - 1911 I think it was - a trade union activist called Mrs Miller was in a rally that turned nasty. The Police Commissioner himself was bearing down on her on horseback, so quick as a flash, she jabbed her hatpin into the horse's rump.

GRACE Poor horse!

HELEN Yes, and poor Police Commissioner. Went flying, and still walks with a limp to this day.

ANNIE Don't be filling the girl's head with your radical ideas, Helen. Emma Miller is not a respectable woman. Up on her soap box in the park just like a man!

GRACE I respect her - take that, copper - jab!
(LAUGHS)

ANNIE (SEVERELY) Grace, you are to remember you are a well brought up young lady. Our Jack is working all hours to support this family and keep you in school.

HELEN Sorry Annie. Don't blame Gracie when it's me who's got her gee'd up.

GRACE No, I'm old enough to know better. Sorry Mother.

HELEN Jack's grown into a fine young man and Grace is doing so well at school. You can be proud of both your children, Annie.

ANNIE Hm. Anyway, it sounds like you had a bit of a close shave there. I hope it's taught you to stay away from these rallies.

HELEN 'Fraid not. The WPA - Women's Peace Army - we've got a speaker at the next peace rally. We hope to get as many people out there as possible, especially the women.

GRACE Can I go Mother?

ANNIE No you can't. All types turn up at these political rallies and they can turn dangerous, they're no place for a girl.

HELEN Perhaps she could just come to our meetings. It's all ladies, and I'd be there to make sure she's all right. She'll no doubt get bored after one of them.

ANNIE I don't like it. But I always swore I wouldn't stand in my children's way if they wanted to do something bad enough. So perhaps -

SFX GRACE GETTING UP - SOUND OF CANE CHAIR AND RATTLING TEACUP AS SHE RUSHES TO EMBRACE HER MOTHER

GRACE Ooh I love you, I do!

ANNIE Get off me. I haven't said yes yet. Go and see if Dad needs another cuppa.

SFX GRACE GETTING UP AND GOING INTO HOUSE

ANNIE I don't want her head filling with politics, Helen. She's too young and I'm not sure I agree with your ideas anyway.

HELEN I know it's complicated -

ANNIE - and I know you think that because I left school at 13 I might be a bit simple.

HELEN Annie!

ANNIE Look, I know it's complicated but should we really stand by and do nothing while people suffer over there? Safe and smug and away from it all?

HELEN Oh, Annie, I can see all that, but I still have to make a stand. It's all hate, and destruction, and debt, and who pays the price? Not the politicians and the profiteers. The little people, that's who.

BILL *(FROM INSIDE THE HOUSE)* Annie! Annie!

SFX THE WOMEN GETTING UP FROM CHAIRS QUICKLY.

ANNIE What is it, Bill? Are you all right?

(HER VOICES RECEDES AS THEY GO INTO THE HOUSE)

HOUSE. INTERIOR.

ANNIE What is it? Is it your foot?

BILL Sorry love. Didn't mean to frighten you. No, foot's still there, what there is left of it.

SFX NEWSPAPER RUSTLE

BILL It's our damn excuse for a Prime Minister Billy Hughes. And he got himself voted in as a Labor man. Treacherous rat.

ANNIE Language, Bill, in front of the child.

GRACE Mother please! Here's your tea, Dad. What's in the paper that's got you so riled?

BILL They want to introduce conscription. Want to force the men to sign up. They're going to have a referendum on it.

ANNIE Not Jack! Since your accident we can't do without his pay. He can't get sent off to the war - he can't!

BILL He'd get an exemption, love. Says so here; blokes who have to support their families can apply for an exemption.

ANNIE You're sure?

BILL I'm sure.

(ANNIE EXHALES WITH RELIEF.)

HELEN Conscription! That's outrageous. So. The "Little Digger" wants to go down in history as a great man of war. If I wasn't a sworn pacifist I'd wring his little neck myself.
Now I know there might be conscription I'm glad Jack's got to support you. But I still think the the quarry should have paid you compensation for that accident.

BILL They gave me a week's pay; and the lads passed the hat round - by gee they're a top bunch of fellows. Always look out for each other. I'm

useless as a breadwinner now, though. Annie's right. If it wasn't for Jack's wages - and your sewing work love - we'd be sunk.

ANNIE We manage.

BILL We do, don't we? I'm not quite sure how sometimes. You and me, eh?

HELEN But it's not right. All these high flying ideals we're supposedly fighting for - King and Country and Freedom with a capital F - there are plenty of ground-bound ideals to fight for. Proper workers' compensation for a start, decent pay for folks like Annie who do piecework sewing for a pittance.

GRACE What's a referendum, Dad?

BILL Sorry Gracie, we got off the topic. A referendum is...it's a vote on a question...it's... Helen, you're the teacher... you explain it.

HELEN It's where the Government wants to change the Constitution, or bring in a big new law, and they put the question to the people in a Yes or No vote. Surely the people will vote No?

ANNIE I don't know. What about the ones who've already got men over there fighting? They can't vote No. They'll want their men to have the extra troops to help them, won't they? And what about the fellows in the trenches? Surely they'll vote to get the reinforcements they need.

BILL You may be right; but I won't be voting Yes. It's not right.

HELEN Two years and all this war's achieved is
destruction. They're bound to organise some Vote
No rallies pretty soon. We need that No message
to get out there louder and clearer than the
Yes.

GRACE Please can I go to a rally, mother? Now that
Jack might -

ANNIE Grace! You will not go to any rally. You're a
child. We should leave men's affairs to the men.

BILL Men's affairs? Are men's affairs not women's
affairs? I'm a cripple - that affects all of us,
love, not just me. I couldn't go to a rally even
if I wanted to. Since my accident I've had time
to do a lot of reading and thinking. I'm not so
certain of a lot of things that used to seem so
clear cut.

GRACE We're involved whether we want to be or not,
Mother. And I want to be. Not to mention, it
would be nice to have a *few* young men left when
it comes time for me to find a husband.

ANNIE Not the rally, love. But you can go to the
meeting.

GRACE Righto, that'll do!

BILL How about you earn the right to go by teaching
me to make scones and stuff, and which end of
the kitchen is up. That way we'll both help to
earn our keep.

GRACE I'd love that! It's true, I do make bonzer
scones.

SFX **DISTANT GARDEN GATE. WORKBOOT FOOTSTEPS UP TO HOUSE, 3 SMALL STEPS UP TO FRONT DOOR, AND DOWN HALL INTO ROOM. CANVAS BAG THROWN ONTO CHAIR.**

(JACK EXHALES DISGUSTEDLY)

SFX **SLUMP INTO CHAIR**

ANNIE Hello, Jack love, bad day?

JACK You could say that.

GRACE What's up, Jackie?

JACK Violet's gone and dumped me, that's what's up. Dumped me like a sack of - (*CATCHES HIMSELF BEFORE SAYING A VULGAR WORD IN FRONT OF HIS FAMILY*)

SFX **JACK LEAPING UP AND PACING IN HIS BOOTS.**

BILL Dumped you? Why?

JACK I picked her up on me way back from work. Was going to treat her to an ice cream before I came home, like I always do on payday. We're walking through the park and two blokes in uniform give her the glad-eye. Suddenly she goes all quiet. I was worried, thought she might be sick or somethin'. "What is it Vi," I says. "What's wrong?" Well, then it comes out. Says she can't hold her head up in public any more. Can't be sweethearts with somebody who's either a coward or too selfish to stand up for his country. Am I going to wait till the Germans are in her front yard to defend her, she wants to know.

ANNIE Did you tell her you have to work now that Dad can't? Did you explain it to her?

JACK I didn't know what to say. Because she's right. Am I going to wait till the enemy are on our doorstep and have got you and Gracie and Aunty Helen in their filthy hands? You've read what they do to French women and girls. They're animals! Why aren't I there, fighting like a true Australian for decency?

HELEN *(QUIETLY, REASONABLY)* Jack, please. We've read what the government wants us to read, remember that. Those blokes are probably just like Australian fellows, some good, some not.

JACK I'm sick of it, do you hear? I'm sick of being practically the only bloke under fifty at the quarry. I'm sick of the catcalls when I walk down the street. I'm sick of the white flamin' chicken feathers! I'm sick of my own pathetic whiny excuses why I'm needed at home more than over there.

ANNIE Jack!

JACK *(EXHALES LOUDLY A COUPLE OF TIMES AS HE STRUGGLES WITH THE COMPETING DEMANDS BATTLING WITHIN HIM. WITH FINALITY)* I'm going down to the recruiting office tomorrow.

BILL Oh Jack.

ANNIE Jack, you can't! We need you here. Here, Jack. We need you alive and in one piece, here! Jack! Please!

SFX BOOTS STRIDING FROM ROOM AND DOWN HALL. DOOR SLAM DOWN HALL. GASP FROM MOTHER. PAUSE. WOMEN'S

**SHOES DOWN HALL. AUDIO FOLLOWS. DOOR OPENING,
CLOSING.**

HELEN John Alfred Holden, go and sign up if you must, but you are wrong, wrong, to speak to your poor parents like that. Things are hard enough for them. You know that. Now if you want to be a man, go in there and apologise like a man. Make your peace with them, for God's sake. Don't go off to the Front and maybe never come back, leaving them with only harsh words. We're good mates, Jack. Have I ever steered you wrong?(*PAUSE. IN A SEMI-JOCULAR TONE*) Apologise, or I'm off to get my cane and make you.

JACK Aw cripes.

HELEN And mind your language.

**SFX JACK SIGHING AND GETTING UP SLOWLY FROM OLD
METAL SPRUNG BED. A COUPLE OF STEPS TOWARDS THE
DOOR.**

JACK (*A LAUGH, BARELY MORE THAN A BREATH*) Don't think I'm doing this apologising 'cos of the cane. I was in your class, remember? I happen to know you've got it hanging in the corner with a jester puppet tied to it. With jingly bells.

HELEN I don't need the cane because there are better ways of dealing with problems. Jack, please, think about it. Think about the things I said to you that day we talked about the war. Don't go now. At least give your parents time to get used to the idea.

JACK I have thought about it, I swear. I have to go. And I have to do it tomorrow before anyone can talk me around.

SFX DOOR OPENING, BOOTS LEAVING ROOM.

MUSICAL SEGUE: JOHN MCCORMACK, "SEND ME AWAY WITH A SMILE".

BUSY RAILWAY PLATFORM. PORTERS, PASSENGERS BUSTLING AND CALLING. ORDERS BEING SHOUTED TO MARSHALLING SOLDIERS. TRAIN WHISTLE.

JACK That's the final call.

ANNIE *Bravely* You look beaut, Jack. Real smart in your uniform. Take care, eh?

JACK I will. I'll send a postcard from Egypt on the way.

GRACE Egypt! What an adventure!

JACK Bye Gracie. Be good for Mum and Dad. Bye Dad.

BILL Good luck son. There's reports coming back of Australian blokes behaving badly in Egypt. I hope we've brought you up to behave more honourably than that.

JACK I'll never do anything to make you and Mother ashamed of me. And Violet's said she'll wait for me, so I've got someone else to be good for as well. I just feel so bad now about leaving you all in the lurch.

BILL No, son. You're following your conscience and that's what your mother and I have taught you to do. We're proud of you.

JACK Thanks Dad. Thanks Mum. I love you. Give my love to Aunty Helen too.

SFX FINAL BOARDING NOISES. TRAIN DRAWING OUT OF STATION. PEOPLE SAYING GOODBYES.

JACK Bye!

ANNIE Bye Jack (*she is crying*).

GRACE & BILL Bye bye Jack! Take care!

SFX TRAIN PICKS UP SPEED AS THE VOICES OF PASSENGERS AND THOSE THEY LEAVE BEHIND GROW FURTHER APART AND TRAIN NOISE FADES.

MUSICAL SEGUE SONG: "CHEER UP FATHER, CHEER UP MOTHER"

HEAVY WOOLLEN UNIFORM AS BODY MOVES TO TRY AND GET COMFORTABLE. SOUNDS OF MURMURING VOICES, PEOPLE MOVING QUIETLY.

JACK *Dear Mother, Dad, and Gracie. I am well and hope you are all bearing up. We've been here two weeks now and so far the most action we've seen is at the end of our shovels - now I know why they call us Diggers! The men I'm with are all good blokes, I know we make a good team and can rely on each other. Don't forget to help Mother and Dad as much as you can, Gracie. I miss you all and am sending you big hugs and kisses. Love from your son and brother, Jack*

SFX FAST FADE IN TO ROBERT CARR: "WE MUST ALL FALL IN" CHORUS.

**SEGUE TO SUBURBAN SOUNDS. FOOTSTEPS UP FRONT
PATH TO DOOR OF HOUSE.**

GRACE Mother! Dad!

BILL *(from back of house)* in the kitchen.

SFX GRACE'S LIGHT AND LIVELY STEPS THROUGH HOUSE.

GRACE I've got a job. Café Athene. I had an interview with Mr Stamos and I start Monday.

ANNIE What about school?

GRACE I'm leaving.

ANNIE But-

GRACE You know we need the money. It's better than a factory. I'm starting in the kitchen but they've said they'll try me out front when they're busy. I can still learn things even if I leave school.

BILL This is all my fault.

GRACE No more of that. Now, where's a cuppa tea for a worker?

**SFX MUSIC SEGUE "KEEP THE HOME FIRES BURNING". FADES
TO SUBURBAN AMBIENT.**

HELEN Yoo hoo! You there Annie?

**SFX FOOTSTEPS DOWN HALL FROM EITHER END AS WOMEN
MEET IN THE MIDDLE.**

ANNIE Hello Helen love. I'm out the back at the boiler doing the sheets. Less washing to do these days now I don't have half a quarry's worth of muck in the laundry basket every week.

HELEN I'll come and help you wring them out.

SFX FOOTSTEPS RETURNING THOUGH HOUSE TO BACK YARD.

AUDIO FOLLOWS. NEXT DIALOGUE OVER THIS SFX.

ANNIE That'd be great. Wringing's a lot harder now
Grace isn't around to help as much. Less awkward
with two.

HELEN I remember it used to be you and me in the old
days, after Mumma died.

SFX OUTDOOR. LID OF COPPER BOILER BEING TAKEN OFF.

ANNIE You couldn't even reach the line, shrimp. You
had to pass the pegs up to me. You've certainly
grown since then, little sister. You're so much
more comfortable with the world than me; it
sometimes feels like you're the older sister.

HELEN That's all front and bluster! You're the one
who's actually experienced life, not just read
about it.

SFX OVER WATER SLOSHING

ANNIE Did you know Grace is working Saturdays and some
nights as well? It's hard work for her but every
little helps now.

SFX OVER SHEET BEING HAULED OUT.

HELEN (*HESITATINGLY*) About that. I was thinking - just
till Jack comes home - how about I move in here
with you?

ANNIE In Jack's room?

HELEN Just till he comes home.

ANNIE What about your place at the boarding house?

**SFX OVER WATER BEING WRUNG OUT OF HEAVY WET SHEET WITH
THE OCCASIONAL GRUNT OF EFFORT.**

HELEN I shouldn't miss it at all. Old Mrs Buckley is a bit too sniffy and tutty for me anyway. And she reuses her tealeaves too many times. I know there are shortages, but she takes the cake. Well, she must, 'cos we never see it.

SFX FLAPPING OF WET SHEET BEING HUNG ON LINE.

Seriously, though, I can help out here. Not enough to let Grace go back to school - they hardly pay us women teachers enough to support one person. But enough so she doesn't have to work such long hours, and so you aren't up all night sewing.

ANNIE *(THERE'S AN ELEMENT OF SUPERSTITION IN HER REACTION AT THIS POINT. IS IT TEMPTING FATE TO LET OUT JACK'S ROOM?)* Jack's room. I don't know.

BILL *(CALLING FROM HOUSE)* Kettle's on - oh, hello Helen love. Come and have a cuppa tea. New tealeaves and I think my sponge cake's actually edible this time. Gracie told me I wasn't being patient enough beating the eggs and sugar. Gracie talking about being impatient! That's the pot calling the kettle black. *(TEMPTINGLY)* Mulberry jam in it.

ANNIE *(CALLING)* Nearly done. We'll just get these on the line and be there in a jiff.

BILL Good-o. What do you think, Helen? Me making a cake! The world IS topsy turvy! *His chuckle fades as he re-enters the house*

**SFX OVER PEGGING SHEETS WITH THE OCCASIONAL GRUNT OF
EFFORT. CLOTHES LINE PROP ADJUSTED.**

ANNIE Come and tell Bill. If he says yes, then we'll do it. It would be grand to have you here with us. Make us feel like a proper family again.

**SFX OLD RECORDING OF "I DIDN'T RAISE MY BOY TO BE A
SOLDIER" SEGUES TO A FEW FEMALE VOICES FINISHING
THE SONG "I DIDN'T RAISE MY BOY TO BE A SOLDIER"**

MRS WILSON Thank you ladies. A very suitable song to perform at the next rally indeed. Now, our next agenda item is next month's Peace Procession in Fortitude Valley. There's a lot of interest from all the anti-war and workers' groups and some have said they might mount a float for the parade. The committee was unsure whether the expenditure of money by our group on a parade float was justified when so many families need help, but ultimately it was decided that the expense would be worth it to remind people of the beauty and joy of peace in these ugly times. Mrs Olive Clarke has kindly promised to donate two pounds ten towards our parade costs.

SFX APPRECIATIVE MURMURS.

MRS WILSON If the meeting agrees, it is proposed to have an "Angel of Peace" float. Can I put it to a simple show of hands? Should we have a float at the parade?

SFX MURMURS OF AGREEMENT.

MRS WILSON Against?

SFX FEW MURMURS.

MRS WILSON A float it is! Mr Emery has kindly offered to head a construction team for the float. He has also kindly produced this sketch -

SFX **PAPER UNFOLDING**

MRS WILSON - of an idea, and I've asked Mr Emery along to speak to us about it.

MR EMERY Thank you Mrs Wilson. Good evening, ladies.
HUMOROUSLY I must say I feel a bit overwhelmed by so many determined ladies in one place.

SFX **Chuckles from the ladies**

The float. Well, it will be all white, with a large central plinth as you can see here, surrounded by these four columns draped with crepe paper garlands - let's hope it doesn't rain. I've organised with old man Perkins at the scrap yard for a loan of the horses to draw the float. Now, back to Mrs Wilson for the best bit.

MRS WILSON On the central plinth there will be a young woman dressed as the Angel of Peace, in a draped sleeveless white gown with gold sash. She will have big, beautiful white wings made of those same hated white feathers the warmongers give to our young men.
Do you like the idea so far?

SFX **CROWD APPROVAL**

MRS WILSON (*ENQUIRINGLY*) We were wondering if the Angel of Peace might be played by our newest and youngest member, Grace Holden. Grace?

GRACE Crikey! It might be at that!

SFX CROWD LAUGHS INDULGENTLY.

GRACE Aw. I'd have to ask Mother and Dad, but. They don't want me at the rallies.

MRS WILSON Of course you must ask them. You may tell them that you would be in the parade only, and would be escorted home before the rally and speeches at the end.

GRACE I can make garlands too! I think we should have loads of garlands carried by the marchers - aw, but that'd cost too much - no, I can make the flowers out of newspaper and use real gumleaves.

MRS WILSON *LAUGHING* Well, we have someone eager enough! At this point we'll adjourn for more informal discussion of the ideas over tea and those delicious looking scones, presided over by Mrs Forrest and Mrs May.

**SFX CHAIRS SCRAPING, EXCITED CHATTER, MOVEMENT TO
THE OTHER SIDE OF THE HALL.**

GRACE It doesn't seem right to be enjoying planning a parade and eating scones in a nice bright hall while the men we're here to fight for are doing it so tough.

HELEN I know.

GRACE I mean, look at old Mrs May there, being mother with a giant teapot and insisting everyone try her sultana scones. It just seems so - ordinary.

HELEN And yet - and yet those old women - all of us here - are not the joke some would make us out to be. Mrs May's only child, Cedric, died of

typhoid over in Africa during the Boer War. She didn't even get to bury him. She may be twinkling away like Mother Goose, but she's deadly serious about our cause. We all are. What we're fighting for - (*THIS THOUGHT OCCURS TO HER FOR THE FIRST TIME, CRYSTALLISING SOMETHING IMPORTANT*)- We're fighting **for** ordinary.

VOICE (*FROM ACROSS THE ROOM*) Tea Miss Blake?

HELEN Coming!

SFX QUICK FADE IN TO CHURCH CONGREGATION SINGING
"BATTLE HYMN OF THE REPUBLIC" TO ORGAN
ACCOMPANIMENT

CONGR.

As He died to make men holy, let us die to make
men free

While God is marching on.

Glory, glory, hallelujah!

Glory, glory, hallelujah!

Glory, glory, hallelujah!

While God is marching on.

SFX HYMBOOKS RUSTLING, CONGREGATION SITTING, A
COUGH.

MINISTER Brothers and sisters, as God himself did not shrink from conscripting **His** only begotten Son to die for us, so too must **we** rise to meet His example.

Now unto him that is able to keep you from falling, to the only wise God our Saviour, be glory and majesty, **dominion** and power, both now and ever.

CONGR. Amen

MINISTER You are welcome to join us for tea and biscuits
in the hall.

**SFX CONGREGATION RISING, VOICES TALKING AND GREETING
EACH OTHER.**

HELEN I'm sorry, Annie, but I'm not coming here again.
I can't listen to this awful...blackmail of these
poor people week after week to send their sons
off to the war.

ANNIE You can't stop coming to church, Helen. In your
job, it doesn't look good to have people think
you're a heathen. The neighbours are already
muttering about you enough with your politics.

HELEN I've already thought about that. I can't bring
myself to care more about what the neighbours
think than about our men and boys dying, but I
can't afford to lose my job. It's a train and a
tram ride away, but I'll go to the Quakers.
They've come out strongly against the war from
the start.

ANNIE The Quakers! Oh well, I suppose it's better than
the Catholics.

HELEN Annie!

(HELEN AND ANNIE LAUGH)

HELEN We'd better get back and make sure Gracie
remembered to put the veggies on, or whether
she's been too busy practising her debating
skills on her father. Since she's been coming to

the WPA meetings she's mad keen to discuss all kinds of issues.

SFX THE WOMEN GATHERING HER THINGS TO GET UP.

ANNIE Bill loves it. Keeps him from being too wrapped up in his pain and worry. His own Angel of Peace!

HELEN She did look lovely up there in the parade towering above all the marchers in their white dresses, with the purple and green garlands everywhere.

ANNIE Our beautiful girl. I'm glad we let her go, and we could get Bill there to see her - and get her home before the speeches and arguments. I still don't know if you're right though. Our allies need us. Our Jack is doing a noble and honourable thing. I do believe it but - I also have to believe it. Do you understand?

HELEN (*GENTLY*) Yes.

ANNIE (*PAUSE*) Before we go home-

HELEN Mm?

ANNIE The Quakers are the ones who sit in silence for their whole meeting, aren't they? It seems less like a daft idea these days with all these different shouting arguing voices everywhere. Will you sit here with me for a minute and say a silent prayer for our boy Jack to come home safe?

HELEN Give me your hand.

SFX SILENCE FOR A FEW SECONDS EXCEPT FOR THE AMBIENT SOUNDS OF THE DISTANT STREET AND HALL, AND THE SONG OF A BIRD OUTSIDE THE CHURCH.

SFX BUSY STREET CORNER. HORSE DRAWN VEHICLES, THE OCCASIONAL MOTOR VEHICLE, PEOPLE. A SMALL GROUP OF WOMEN SINGING "I DIDN'T RAISE MY BOY TO BE A SOLDIER".

HELEN We told them No once, let's tell them again! They had a referendum, we said no, they didn't like it, so they're going to keep giving us referendums till we say yes, is that how it goes? Or until they run out of taxpayer money for referendums? Stop the waste! This leaflet explains the arguments for both the Yes and No cases and why we think the No case is just as strong - no, stronger! - this time as well as last.

SFX POLICE WHISTLE. RUCKUS IN THE CROWD. VOICES OF ALARM "COPPERS!" "LET'S SCARPER" ETC. AS WELL AS THE BURLY AND AUTHORITATIVE VOICES OF POLICE.

POLICEMAN This is an unlawful gathering. Men, seize the pamphlet woman first. Make sure she doesn't offload the pamphlets. Then go for the singers.

SFX SOUNDS OF MEN GRABBING PROTESTING WOMEN, AND CROWD REACTIONS "'ERE, THAT'S A BIT MUCH", "POLICE BRUTALITY", "YOU TELL 'EM, SERGEANT", ETC

POLICEMAN 2 Here's the bitch, Sargeant.

HELEN Let me go!

POLICEMAN I am cautioning you under the War Precautions Act and the Unlawful Associations Act.

HELEN We're only handing out leaflets and singing.

POLICEMAN Under the acts these activities are deemed contrary to the national interest. If I catch you again it's jail. Understand?

HELEN *(BEAT. SHE MAKES A SMALL NOISE AS HER UPPER ARM IS JERKED BY POLICEMAN TO PROMPT HER TO ANSWER)*
I understand.

POLICEMAN Let them go - for now. Without the pamphlets, you idiots! Right. Come on lads.

SFX POLICE LEAVING. CROWD MUMURS. SOME CHEER, SOME HISS.

HELEN *(MAKES A LOUD, EXHALED NOISE OF FRUSTRATION)*

QUICK FADE IN PEERLESS QUARTET: "KEEP THE TRENCH FIRES GOING".

SEGUE TO

MURMUR OF VOICES, CLINK OF CROCKERY, GLASSES. AMBIENCE OF A WELL-TO-DO CROWD AFTER A GOOD DINNER.

MALE SPEAKER Thank you for inviting me to speak at this fine banquet here at Café Athene. I've been asked to respond to the toast to our navy and army lads who have answered so gallantly to their country's call and are serving so bravely abroad. My speech concerns those young men who have yet to rally to our dear Mother Country's call to arms. They, who are free to nightly frequent the picture-palace and the tavern rather than defend our blessed soil and our allies. Yes, free in the freest country on

earth, and we must fight to keep it so! Our women must be saved from knowing what the women of France, and Serbia, and Belgium have known. Our children's future must be protected! The young lass clearing the remains of our fine repast there, it is she we must protect! Tell us, what is your name?

GRACE Me sir? Grace.

SPEAKER Grace, as a young representative of Australian womanhood, do you not agree that Australia must send more troops to defend our Mother Country?

GRACE *(HESITATINGLY)* Well sir, I'm sorry, but I don't. Sorry. I...have to get these dishes to the kitchen. Sorry sir.

SFX DISAPPROVING MURMURS AS GRACE HURRIES TO THE KITCHEN DOOR. SWINGING DOOR SOUND, TWICE, AS TWO PEOPLE GO THROUGH IT.

STAMOS *(CLOSE UP, QUIET BUT STERN, INCREDULOUS. GREEK ACCENT)* What was that about, Grace? Word gets around fast and there are plenty more cafes ready to take patriotic customers if they decide to go elsewhere. Do you realise what a hard time this is for me as a foreigner? You're one of my best workers, but *(EXHALES)* - first and last warning, all right?

GRACE Yes Mr Stamos, sorry. It won't happen again I promise.

STAMOS It had better not. Now get those dishes dealt with. I'll apologise to these gentlemen for your...mistake.

SFX **SWINGING KITCHEN DOOR.**

SFX **FAR OFF, A GUN BATTLE STILL IN PROGRESS. CLOSER
IN, MANY MEN GROANING AND SCREAMING. MURMURS OF
COMFORTING VOICES, PLEAS FOR HELP, PRAYERS.**

JACK Hang on, Horry. I'll get you some help.

HORRY (*SPEAKING HOARSELY, BROKENLY AND FAINTLY*) No -
just stay here with me. Me guts is comin' out.
Look.

JACK Jesus.

HORRY Tell me mum - tell -tell 'er I'm sorry.

JACK I will mate. I swear.

(*HORRY'S BREATHING BECOMES MORE LABOURED.*)

HORRY (*COUGHING, WEAKER. HIS VOICE HAS BECOME MORE
CHILDLIKE*) I can't see. I'm sick Mum. Mum? Yer
there Mum? Mum.

JACK Oh mate. Come 'ere.

SFX **SOUND OF BODY BEING DRAWN CLOSE AND HELD.**

OFFICER Leave that Holden, we've got men can be saved
needing help over here. (*PAUSE*) Holden!

JACK (*DULLY*) Sir.

SFX **HORRY'S VOICE CAN BE HEARD WEAKLY SEEKING HIS
MOTHER WHILE THE SOUNDS OF THE MANY WOUNDED
CONTINUE AND THE GUN BATTLE RAGES ON.**

SFX **SONG: "HAVE YOU NEWS OF MY BOY JACK". FADES OUT
TO**

NEWSPAPER 'VOICE'

Brisbane Courier. The Roll of Honour Casualty List Number 302. 260 fresh names. 1,426 men returned to duty. Casualty list number 302 was issued from the Censor's office last evening and contained the following information.

Killed in Action. Sergeant W. L. Crofton, Dalby; C.J. Carter, Eagle Junction; J.L.Tibbut, South Brisbane. Died of Wounds: P.Sullivan, Beenleigh; J. A. Holden, Hemmant; Corporal B. Norris, Red Hill. Wounded and Missing. E. Hobson, Fairfield; J. Hawley, Nambour (*The voice fades out*)

SFX **SEGUE TO SCHOOLYARD PLAYTIME AS HEARD THROUGH AN OPEN WINDOW. BOYS PLAYING WAR, GIRLS SKIPPING, ETC. FADE DOWN TO SCISSORS CUTTING PAPER.**

MISS BAILEY (*GENTLY*) Working on your Roll of Honour, Miss Blake?

SFX **SCISSORS STOP.**

HELEN (*SIGHS*) Look Miss Bailey, yesterday's paper. Eric Mitchell. Cheeky little beggar. I used to have to try and keep a straight face when I was telling him off for his antics. Last week there was Cedric Woodhill killed and Billy Patton and Joe Richards injured. Arthur Boyle is missing.

MISS BAILEY All our babies.

HELEN All our babies.

(*PAUSE*)

MISS BAILEY How are your sister and family bearing up since Jack - since the news about Jack?

HELEN About how you'd expect. We're all putting on a brave face for each other.

SFX TEACHER MOVING CLOSER TO WINDOW.

(PAUSE)

HELEN What's up? Are the children up to something out there?

MISS BAILEY No. There's a fellow loitering by the gate. In uniform, got a walking stick. Looks a bit nervous and shifty though.

HELEN I'll go and see what he's up to.

SFX Chair Scrape, Footsteps Leaving Room. Playground Noise.

HELEN Can we help you? Are you looking for someone?

STEPHEN Yes. Um..excuse me. My name's Stephen James. I was told I might find Miss Blake here.

HELEN That's me. What can I do for you?

STEPHEN It's -

SFX LETTER BEING TAKEN FROM INSIDE POCKET OF TUNIC AND UNFOLDED.

STEPHEN It's a letter. For you. From - from your nephew Jack Holden.

HELEN (FAINTLY) A letter?

STEPHEN I was wounded...I was on the same ship as Jack. We were headed for the Soldier's Reception Hospital at Southampton. He knew even then he wasn't going to make it. Tell the truth, I don't think he wanted to by then. He had this letter in his

pocket. Asked me to make sure I got it to you if I could.

SFX LETTER BEING OPENED.

SFX PLAYGROUND NOISE SEGUES TO SOUNDS OF MURMURING VOICES, PEOPLE MOVING QUIETLY, DISTANT ARTILLERY NOISE.

JACK *Dear Aunty Helen. It's so flaming dark in this dugout I can hardly see what I'm writing. Not a line of this letter would get past the censor's wretched blue pencil anyway, so I'm not sure why I'm using a precious piece of paper on something I can't send. Maybe I'll pocket it and give it to you if I ever manage to see you again, just to let you know you were right. I wouldn't even mind if you said "I told you so", except I know you're not like that, for all you like to tell everybody how things ought to be! You would just give me one of your big Aunty hugs. I could use one now, fair dinkum I could.*

We lost a third of our men yesterday, and another third are injured. I copped a bit of shrapnel to the forehead but they patched me up and pronounced me fit. We combine with another division and make another assault on the German position tomorrow.

SFX SOUND OF JACK UNEASILY SHIFTING HIS POSITION SLIGHTLY.

JACK *Fritz's trench is only thirty yards away. When the wind is right you can actually hear them*

talking. You don't need to speak the language to know they're talking about wives and girlfriends and kids, and lice, and foot rot, and rats, and steak and egg and chips washed down with a big pot of beer.

SFX RAIN STARTING. MURMURING VOICES REACT. SOUND OF JACK HUDDLING OVER LETTER.

JACK Here's the rain again. Rain is usually something you think of as cleansing, but not here. You can't imagine the stink of the rotting corpses of men and beasts that washes into the trenches. And the mud - God, the mud. Turns your boots into lead weights, every step is - is - (EXHALES. WORDS FAIL HIM) and they expect us to run across no-man's-land in them!

Goodbye for now, my kind Aunty. Keep up your fight to end this damned war and keep any more of our fellows from this. Nephew hugs. I hope to God I see you again.

SFX DISTANT GUNFIRE: "BUDDA BUDDA BUDDA" SEGUES INTO CHILDREN PLAYING SOLDIERS WITH ONE LITTLE BOY MAKING MACHINE GUN NOISE: "BUDDA BUDDA BUDDA" OVER HELEN'S REACTION BELOW..

HELEN (BURSTS INTO TEARS. WEEPS FOR JACK AND ALL HER OTHER BOYS.)

SFX IN THE PLAYGROUND, THE CHILDREN'S NOISE FALTERS AND FALLS SILENT AS EACH LITTLE GROUP BECOMES AWARE OF HELEN'S DISTRESS. FADE INTO

SFX "THE LAST POST" WHICH FADES TO

SFX **GARDEN AND CANE CHAIRS AS BEFORE. EARLY EVENING**
NATURE SOUNDS. PAPER BEING REFOLDED.

GRACE Can I read it as well?

ANNIE (*NUMBLY*) I suppose so.

SFX **PAPER BEING HANDED OVER AND OPENED.**

BILL Come on in, my love. It's getting dark.

ANNIE (*BLEAKLY. ALL LIFE AND HOPE GONE FROM HER VOICE*)
Getting dark. Yes.

BILL (*BROKENLY*) Annie. Maybe this is the final thing
that breaks us. God knows, it's enough. We're
tough you and me, though, aren't we? We've
already changed, we've had to. We can do it
again. We can get through this. But only
together. Only together my love.

GRACE (*WEEPS QUIETLY*)

ANNIE (*QUIETLY, REFLECTIVELY*) Yes. (*BEAT*) All I ever
wanted to be was a wife and a mother. I had to
be a mother to you, Helen. I left school at
thirteen and went to work in the biscuit factory
- I wanted more than that for you, and for my
children when I had them, and I've worked so
hard and done my best to make it happen.

HELEN Darling Annie, I owe everything to you and Pa -
you both made such sacrifices for me.

ANNIE (*ALMOST NOT HEARING, LOST IN HER OWN TRAIN OF*
THOUGHT) I wanted them to have good lives, to
have choices, to be able to stay at school and
then have a good job, or be a mother like me -
whatever they wanted for their lives. Now my

Jack is dead. My Grace has had to leave school like I did, get a job to support us. I used to think that I could make a difference, but now -
(*BEAT*)

GRACE Mother?

ANNIE Grace. Come here love.

SFX GRACE MOVING TO SIT AT HER MOTHER'S FEET.

ANNIE Gracie. Are you listening to me?

GRACE Yes. Always.

ANNIE Your Mother Country needs you. The REAL Mother Country. Not some pig-headed brass bands and flags idea of governments and generals playing toy soldiers with the lives of our men.
CONTEMPTUOUSLY Mother Country! What good mother sends her children off to the slaughterhouse? Go to your rallies, Grace. Take your placards and pamphlets and defy them all that would make a blasphemy of a mother's love!

GRACE (*WORRIED*) Mother?

ANNIE (*CALMER*) Go with my blessing Grace. A mother's blessing.

SFX END MUSIC: "I DIDN'T RAISE MY BOY TO BE A SOLDIER" OPENING VERSE FEW LINES.