

The Usher's Ball

Script and Lyrics by Fengar Gael Music composed by Dennis McCarthy

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*“To die upon the field of battle in the hour of victory
has always been esteemed a crowning good fortune.”*

Henry Ward Beecher

CHARACTERS

(an ensemble of eight actors: five men; three women)

THE AMERICAN

EDGAR ASHBOURNE, an ancient usher who also plays younger British characters

THE BRITISH

ANNABELLE LEE SNOWDEN, an organist and composer; late twenties

DOCTOR GERALD SNOWDEN, Annabelle's father, a surgeon; mid-fifties

HELEN SNOWDEN, Annabelle's mother, a nurse and amateur photographer; fifty

MAVIS MERYL PALEY, Annabelle's aunt, a pacifist and suffragette; late forties

CAPTAIN WILFRED BLACKSTONE, a teacher and soldier; late twenties

DOCTOR RUPERT WHITEHALL, an Irish born surgeon; mid-sixties

DOCTOR SYDNEY PEARLMAN, a psychiatrist; mid-thirties

PROFESSOR THEODORE GRIMMEL, a headmaster; mid-forties

LIEUTENANT CHARLES MOORINGS, a soldier; early twenties

PRIVATE GODFREY GLUMMER, a soldier; early twenties

REVEREND RODERICK CHALKIN, a minister; seventies

SERGEANT THOMAS TARBOX, a soldier; early twenties

GHOST SOLDIERS, deceased casualties of the war

THE GERMAN

AN UNKNOWN GERMAN SOLDIER, early-twenties

Suggested Doubling:

Edgar Ashbourne / Dr. Rupert Whitehall / Theodore Grimmel / Rev. Roderick Chalkin

Lieutenant Charles Moorings / Ghost Soldier

Private Godfrey Glummer / Ghost Soldier

Sergeant Thomas Tarbox / Ghost Soldier

Unknown German Soldier / Ghost Soldier

TIME

The present and 1917-1918

PLACE

Minimal furnishings suggest various locations in London: a theatre, parlor, city street, hospital ward and grounds, an office, apartment, chapel, barroom, and cemetery.

ACT I

PROLOGUE

(The sultry strains of a Viennese waltz sweep over the audience as they are seated by the ushers. As the music fades, an usher, EDGAR ASHBOURNE, shuffles to the center of the stage. HE appears ancient and enfeebled, with white hair and spectacles perched on a splotched face. The theatre lights dim as EDGAR taps a gong, then speaks in a raspy voice.)

EDGAR

Ladies and gentlemen, before the dining and dancing commence, you've been instructed to convene in the theatre for reasons I shall now explain: Year after year, we ushers escort you to your seats, rarely knowing your names, though your faces become familiar while ours fade into the fog of memory, and why not? You don't come to the theatre to remember us but to forget yourselves. Tonight, however, one of us will be introduced: my name is Edgar Ashbourne, witness to innumerable plays which is why I feel eminently qualified to write one. Embossed on your invitations is the title of the evening's festivities and also of the play, which is part comical, tragical, musical, and features myself in several roles -- scratch an usher and you'll find an actor! There are many worthy subjects to write about, and as retired teacher, minister, and physician, I had many options. Since I'm partial to lurid tales of horror and suspense, the place I chose was London; the time, during the first world war; and naturally, a play by an usher should feature an usher, one whose fate flowed swiftly from my pen. *(pause)* Now notice if you will, a bright golden sphere above your heads.

(A golden sphere is illuminated above the stage.)

EDGAR

Imagine that sphere is the full moon over London in the year 1917. Its luminance transports you through time, dropping you into the plush velvet seats of the Victoria Theatre where you'll notice a young woman seated near the stage on the aisle.

(ANNABELLE SNOWDEN, an attractive woman in her late twenties, stands.)

EDGAR

Her name is Annabelle Snowden, and you'll observe her leaving her seat, being followed by a dashing young usher.

(ANNABELLE strolls up the aisle followed
by WILFRED BLACKSTONE.)

EDGAR

You'll also notice that the stage has become the parlor of Annabelle's parents, Doctor and Mrs. Snowden. The other woman is Doctor Snowden's sister, Mavis Paley, who is visiting from the United States. And now I leave you to enter the world of "The Usher's Ball."

SCENE 1

(In the parlor of an upper class home in 1917, DOCTOR GERALD SNOWDEN reads the newspaper while his wife, HELEN, scans an album of photographs, and his sister, MAVIS PALEY, knits. THEY speak with refined British accents.)

GERALD

It's nearly midnight; she should have been home by eleven at the latest.

HELEN

It's a new play, isn't it? They tend to be overwritten.

GERALD

I hate her going out alone at night. I don't approve of her independent woman philosophy, and I'm surprised you tolerate it.

HELEN

Oh, stop fretting.

GERALD

The last time she went to the theatre, one of the ushers followed her home. What if he's up to no good?

HELEN

If he's an usher, then I'm sure he's respectable.

GERALD

If he's respectable, why does he follow her? Why doesn't he introduced himself?

HELEN

He's probably shy.

MAVIS

At least we know he likes the theatre.

GERALD

Everyone likes the theatre, even fiends and lunatics!

HELEN

Oh, dear, it's starting to rain and she forgot her umbrella. (*she sighs*) Annabelle was twenty-eight last Friday -- nearly thirty. I never thought my only daughter would be denied the love and companionship of a husband and children.

MAVIS

Oh, Helen, don't put her to pasture yet.

GERALD

Besides, she's not unhappy, she has us and her music, and there's Inky.

HELEN

How can you say that?! Inky's a cat -- hardly a substitute for a husband!

MAVIS

That depends. Seriously, aren't there any eligible doctors or patients at the hospital?

HELEN

Not on my ward, and Gerald won't even look. He doesn't even try!

GERALD

I'm a doctor, not a matchmaker. (*to Mavis*) It's not my fault that every man in England's either fighting or well on his way. Ever since enforced enlistment, the only ones left are too young or too old, and the patients who recover are sent back or reenlist.

MAVIS

What about the fellows who've mostly recovered, but aren't quite able to go back -- you know what I mean.

GERALD

You mean someone sufficiently maimed? Like an amputee?

HELEN

We don't want Annabelle to be a nursemaid.

GERALD

The men who can't reenlist, are usually crippled for life. If they're shell shocked, they're plagued with nightmares or compulsions and incapable of being good companions, never mind providers.

MAVIS

What about the men who've completely recovered? Men you could save from returning to the front if you claimed they had some sort of heart condition or asthmatic lungs.

GERALD

Are you suggesting I write false exemptions...?

MAVIS

Well, yes, why not? I don't mean for Annabelle's sake, but to save the poor bastards from getting killed.

GERALD

Forged exemptions can be bought on the black market for fifteen pounds, but it's illegal, unethical, and unpatriotic -- just the sort of thing that destroys morale.

MAVIS

Oh, to hell with morale; the whole country's suffering from a protracted case of lunacy.

GERALD

The damn Huns started this, not us -- you keep forgetting that!

MAVIS

The war was supposed to last three weeks, then three months, then three years, and now the Times predicts yet another year! How long can this treadmill of slaughter go on, and for what?

GERALD

For England!

MAVIS

For vengeance!

GERALD

Yes, that too, but it's vengeance that keeps men fighting for justice, for their countries, their way of life.

MAVIS

Their way of death!

GERALD

Enough, Mavis! You can get away with being a conchie, but if you were a man, you'd be consigned to cleaning latrines.

HELEN

If she were a man, she'd enlist like everyone else.

MAVIS

Nonsense! Oh, I'll admit to feeling vengeance myself, God knows, but it's not the best of me -- it's the worst. Why can't we strive to be better, more...civilized? Why are our boys up to their knees in mud shooting each other?

GERALD

Only saints turn the other cheek, Mavis. It's human nature to fight back.

MAVIS

And it's human nature to run naked and tear raw meat from bones with our teeth, but we don't, do we? We dress ourselves, dine with forks and knives, and we even write poetry and fly aeroplanes. All I'm saying is that it was bad enough when men were going at each other with spears, but now we're dropping bombs with lethal gases -- it's barbaric!

GERALD

So what do you suggest?

MAVIS

Take the toys away! Confiscate the weapons -- all the guns and grenades, all of them everywhere! Then sit down and talk!

GERALD

We can't; the Huns and Turks won't let us; we don't even speak the same language. Yes, war is dreadful, but it's inevitable, and this one's worth fighting.

MAVIS

Tell that to the wives and mothers of the dead.

GERALD

Don't forget fathers and sons -- everyone mourns the dead, Mavis. Christ, you're still so naive!

MAVIS

And you're so...compliant! You're a doctor, Gerald, you have the power to save lives. What's the point if you're saving them to be sent back and killed?

GERALD

I don't think of it that way.

MAVIS

Because you don't think at all; you just do your job.

GERALD

My duty.

MAVIS

Duty is not honor! You're hopeless.

GERALD

And you're arrogant!

HELEN

Gerald!

GERALD

Easy for you to preach from your safe little pulpit in New York!

MAVIS

No, it's not; nobody listens to me there either, and now the Americans are threatening to enter the fray.

GERALD

About time too! Tell me, does Malcolm share your views?

MAVIS

No -- which is why we're getting divorced.

HELEN

You're what...?

MAVIS

You needn't pretend to be surprised.

HELEN

Oh, Mavis, I'm so sorry.

GERALD

It was a bad match from the beginning, and I told you so.

MAVIS

You did not.

GERALD

You should have married Ollie Blanchard.

MAVIS

God, no!

GERALD

Or that chap from Paddington.

HELEN

Oh, Gerald, leave her alone!

GERALD

Me?!

HELEN

You should hear yourselves! Did you fight like this when you were children?

GERALD

Constantly!

HELEN

Ssssshush! Annabelle's back.

(ANNABELLE enters, visibly shaken.)

GERALD

Annabelle, where have you been?

MAVIS

Hello, dear, you look ghastly. Was the play that bad?

GERALD

Good lord, you're shivering.

ANNABELLE

I've had quite a...a shock.

GERALD

Sit down. Let me get you a brandy -- here, take mine.

HELEN

For pity's sake, Annabelle, what happened?

ANNABELLE

(pause as she sits) Remember that usher I told you about -- the one who followed me?

(As ANNABELLE speaks, WILFRED BLACKSTONE appears standing by a bench on a moonlit street.)

WILFRED

Pardon me, Miss, my name is...

ANNABELLE

His name is...

ANNABELLE

...Wilfred Blackstone.

WILFRED

...Wilfred Blackstone.

(Now ANNABELLE appears beside WILFRED.)

WILFRED

I couldn't help but notice you at the theatre. I've been your usher for the past year, and well, I wondered if you might like to join me for a drink?

ANNABELLE

You mean now?

WILFRED

Well, yes, the pubs are still open. I...I hope you don't think I'm being presumptuous. I don't even know if you're married or...engaged.

ANNABELLE

I'm Annabelle Snowden, and I'm not engaged.

WILFRED

I realize it's late, so if it isn't convenient, perhaps we could meet another time?

ANNABELLE

Another time would be better. My parents insist on waiting up for me, but we can chat a bit if you like. *(pause as she sits)* Did you enjoy the play?

WILFRED

Yes, Mister Howard's very clever, and the acting was superb.

ANNABELLE

I'm so glad they kept the theatres open. There were rumors they were going to be closed, and I couldn't live without my nights at the theatre. *(pause)* So, Mister Blackstone, do you have any other occupations -- besides ushering?

WILFRED

During the day, I teach history and music at Wickenden Gate Academy. And what occupies you, Miss Snowden?

ANNABELLE

I'm the organist at Saint Dismas and the chapel at Mercy Hospital.

WILFRED

You're also a composer. I heard you sing with Esther Grimes at the Atheneum.

ANNABELLE

Really? Did you follow me home then as well?

WILFRED

At a discreet distance. To be honest, I've followed you on eleven different Thursdays.

ANNABELLE

Eleven! And I only noticed you twice. Why didn't you approach me before?

WILFRED

Until now I was content to simply follow, but after hearing your songs, I...I had to meet you. The melodies haunted me, and I wanted to learn the words. Perhaps I could copy the scores, and teach my students in the choir -- if you wouldn't mind.

ANNABELLE

I'd be happy to give you copies.

(A crack of thunder is heard.)

WILFRED

Here, we can share my umbrella. It's going to rain any second. I always know because of the twinge in my leg -- from shrapnel.

(The moment WILFRED opens his umbrella, rain falls, and ANNABELLE steps beneath the canopy.)

ANNABELLE

Where were you wounded?

WILFRED

In the Ginchy Valley. I was with the First Battalion Grenadier Guards -- in charge of the communication trenches. A sniper hit me on the road to Lesboeuufs. We lost some brave men. If we weren't digging trenches, we were digging graves, but I did organize a few concerts with an orchestra of artillery. The men loved to sing -- in full voice with harmonies that made them weep. Sometimes the French lines joined us as well.

ANNABELLE

How lovely.

WILFRED

(pause) I'm due for a physical next month, and hope to be recommissioned.

ANNABELLE

You *want* to go back?

WILFRED

It's one thing to teach history; it's another to be part of it.

ANNABELLE

If you meet my Aunt Mavis, she'll try to talk you out of going. She's a pacifist.

(Another crack of thunder is heard.)

WILFRED

When you're in the trenches, you don't really think about politics. Most of war is waiting till it's your turn to scramble then shoot, and the cold can be intense. Still it seems that everything's charged, and somehow you feel more...alive.

ANNABELLE

We women wouldn't know; we're left behind knitting socks.

WILFRED

And singing. I like your song about soldiers being remembered at the age they died, so they're saved from the burden of growing old

ANNABELLE

I'm afraid I wrote that before I'd seen the casualties. Believe me, some of my father's patients look older than the old. There's no light in their eyes, especially if they wake up to find parts of themselves missing. Our chaplain said that's why soldiers need faith, to believe they have souls, that only their bodies are being sacrificed.

WILFRED

Perhaps, though I tend to be a rationalist.

ANNABELLE

Can a rationalist love music and lead a choir?

WILFRED

Of course. We may not believe in God, but we believe in angels -- like you, Miss Snowden. All the Lyceum ushers look forward to your Thursdays, and you have such an extraordinary voice. I wonder if you've ever considered a career on the stage?

ANNABELLE

Oh, no, I only perform at weddings, funerals, and the occasional Sunday service. My father thinks girls are destined for the domestic arts, and any conspicuous talent should be kept demurely hidden.

(A violent crack of thunder is heard!)

ANNABELLE

Oh, dear it's coming closer.

(Lightning flashes and strikes through the rod of the umbrella into WILFRED'S skull and throughout his body. HE shakes violently, releasing the umbrella, then reaching out to touch ANNABELLE who gapes in terror as a high soprano note escape her lips.)

ANNABELLE

AAAahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh...

(ANNABELLE and WILFRED collapse. Then lights shimmer, and music is heard as THEY become their SOUL SELVES, rising in slow motion, suspended in time. WILFRED grasps ANNABELLE'S hand and THEY waltz for several moments, then kiss passionately until thunder rumbles and WILFRED collapses. ANNABELLE falls to her knees, clasping her throat and shouting.)

ANNABELLE

Help, help! Someone, please help us! Ohhhh, Wilfred...

(ANNABELLE bends over WILFRED, placing her lips on his, then pressing on his chest as darkness descends, and SHE returns to her seat in the parlor.)

ANNABELLE

After he collapsed, I tried to resuscitate him, but couldn't feel his breath, so I pressed on his chest (*to Helen*) the way you showed me, and finally he... gasped. When the ambulance came, I went with him.

GERALD

To Mercy?

ANNABELLE

Yes, Doctor Whitehall thinks the lightning passed through the rod of the umbrella through the top of his head, then raced down his throat to his lungs, and stopped his heart.

HELEN

Annabelle, you saved his life!

GERALD

Did Whitehall check you out as well?

ANNABELLE

Yes, he tried to keep me overnight, but I'm fine, though my head's throbbing, my throat's parched, and look -- there's a mark where the lightning entered my necklace and burned my throat.

HELEN

Let's hope it doesn't leave a scar.

MAVIS

Or affect your vocal chords.

ANNABELLE

Instead of screaming, I sang the purest note I'd ever sung, and then the strangest thing...

(A sustained whistling interrupts ANNABELLE.)

MAVIS

Annabelle...?

GERALD

What is it...?

ANNABELLE

There's a high pitched ringing -- it comes on suddenly, then stops. *(the whistling fades)*
 Doctor Whitehall said it should go away eventually, but it's horrid -- like the whistle
 of an angry kettle.

GERALD

Helen, hand me my bag. *(to Annabelle)* I'm going to give you a sedative.

MAVIS

Poor fellow -- what rotten luck. He lives through the war, and it still nearly kills him.

HELEN

What do you mean?

MAVIS

Well, I imagine after the lightning struck his head, the shrapnel drew the electric current
 down towards his leg.

GERALD

(handing pills to Annabelle) Here, take these. They'll help you sleep.

HELEN

Tomorrow I'm instructing the new volunteers in first aid, and Mavis has agreed to join
 us. We were hoping you'd come as well, but you'd best sleep in.

MAVIS

When you've recovered, we'll visit Mister -- what's his name?

ANNABELLE

Blackstone. Wilfred Blackstone. Father, will you please check on him?

GERALD

Of course.

HELEN

If you like, I'll bring my Brownie and take his picture.

GERALD

God, no! Leave the poor man in peace. *(to Annabelle)* Now go to bed, dear.

MAVIS

Good night, Annabelle.

(After ANNABELLE leaves, HELEN turns to MAVIS.)

HELEN

My poor girl; she finally meets a man, and he's struck by lightning!

SCENE 2

(The usher, EDGAR, enters, gesturing for the actors to scurry off stage while a bed containing WILFRED BLACKSTONE is wheeled in.)

EDGAR

In 1917 very little was known about the pathology of lightning. There were no machines to trace the hieroglyphics of the heart and brain. (*approaching Wilfred's bed*). Our patient, Wilfred Blackstone, suffered a direct hit, with volts of electricity passing straight through his skull to his brain which is seventy-eight percent water. That water simmered, then boiled, causing cerebral swellings, epileptic seizures, cardiac arrhythmias, and scorched cells in virtually every organ. To phrase it more poetically, poor Wilfred swallowed fire -- celestial fire.

(Now EDGAR dons a white coat and Irish accent to become DOCTOR RUPERT WHITEHALL. GERALD enters and THEY both observe WILFRED.)

GERALD

So Rupert -- too soon to venture a prognosis?

RUPERT

He's still comatose, but the external burns are healing. Even the soles of his feet were singed, poor bugger. Your daughter thinks she resuscitated him in time, but if his brain's affected, she didn't do him any favors.

GERALD

Nice looking chap. Annabelle said he served at the front.

RUPERT

He was a captain; parents deceased, no siblings, though we did contact the headmaster at his academy. Apparently, Blackstone was a first rate teacher. Damn, there I go again -- speaking in the past tense as if he's already gone.

GERALD

We all do -- no sense denying it.

(HELEN, wearing her nursing uniform, enters, followed by ANNABELLE and MAVIS.)

GERALD

Annabelle! You shouldn't be here; he's not ready for visitors.

HELEN

She insisted on coming.

RUPERT

Good to see you looking well, Annabelle.

MAVIS

So this is your romantic usher? Even asleep, he's quite dashing.

GERALD

He's more than asleep, Mavis; he's in a coma.

RUPERT

Pardon me, ladies, but I'm due in surgery.

ANNABELLE

Wait, Doctor, please. Will he...?

RUPERT

Too soon to tell. I did examine his eyes, and he doesn't have cataracts from the flash. I've heard it happens.

(RUPERT departs.)

GERALD

Now why don't we let the poor man rest, and get on with our work.

ANNABELLE

If you don't mind, I'd like to sit with him a while.

MAVIS

You know, Annabelle, since he admired your songs, you ought to sing for him.

ANNABELLE

You mean here...?

MAVIS

It might be just the medicine he needs, and I don't imagine other patients would mind.

GERALD

Let's go, ladies!

(GERALD, HELEN and MAVIS depart, leaving
ANNABELLE speaking softly.)

ANNABELLE

Wilfred, it's Annabelle. If you can hear me, then I suspect you know you were burned by lightning. Perhaps you don't remember, but our souls slipped out of our bodies, until we fell back into ourselves -- except I was breathing and you weren't. Oh, I wish I knew what you were feeling, and pray you're not in pain. My Aunt Mavis thinks it might help if I sang to you. Shall I? *(pause, then she sings)*

*Our boys, so far from home,
Who fought and died alone,
Our boys, forever young,
For you this song is sung:*

*Now deep in unmarked graves,
Your journeys ended quick,
Like candles lit with flames
That only touched the wick.
Snuffed too soon by battles
You braved in bitter cold,
With boys who stood beside you,
They too will not grow old.*

*Our boys, so far from home,
Who fought and died alone,
Our boys forever young,
For you this song is sung:*

*You'll never know the pleasures
Of courtships and careers,
Of children grown through seasons,
Days of laughter, nights of tears.
Dear boys, you missed your futures,
Though years won't take their toll;
The sun still shines without you
On paths you'll never stroll.*

(WILFRED sits bolt upright, grasping ANNABELLE'S wrist. SHE screams as a high pitched sound is heard and lights shimmer, revealing the shadowy GHOST SOLDIERS, drifting slowly, then spinning off in different directions.)

ANNABELLE

Ahhhhhhhhh!!!

(HELEN, dressed in her nursing uniform, dashes into the ward, and attempts to release WILFRED'S hand.)

HELEN

Let go! Let go of her arm!!

ANNABELLE

Help me! Help!

WILFRED

Shuuuu... shuuvvv....

HELEN

I'm trying, Annabelle, I'm trying...

WILFRED

Shuuvvvv...

HELEN

He's got a grip like a vice!

(WILFRED finally releases ANNABELLE, then falls back to sleep.)

HELEN

Step back! (*sighing with relief*) My god, what a fright you gave me! Now look at me; are you all right?

ANNABELLE

I...I don't know...

(GERALD and RUPERT enter, followed by MAVIS.)

GERALD

Annabelle! What the devil...?

MAVIS

My dear, what's happened?

GERALD

We could hear you all over the hospital!

ANNABELLE

I...I'm sorry, but he sat up, then grasped my arm. I was so startled, and then he...he spoke. You heard him, mother, didn't you?

HELEN

Yes, dear.

ANNABELLE

I hope I didn't upset the other patients.

RUPERT

Never mind that. If he sat up and spoke, it means he's rallying. He may even be cognizant.

HELEN

Look, his lips are moving.

WILFRED

Shuvvvv....

RUPERT

It sounds like he's saying "shove."

WILFRED

Shovel.

RUPERT

Shovel! That's clear enough.

(WILFRED sits bolt upright again, his eyes wide open, causing the onlookers to scatter with a gasp! Meanwhile, several GHOST SOLDIERS reappear as ANNABELLE stares in disbelief.)

ANNABELLE and MAVIS
(*gasping*) Ohhhhhh!

GERALD
Good lord!

HELEN
Step back!

HELEN

Watch his hands!

MAVIS

Look at his eyes moving. What does he see, I wonder?

HELEN

Some of the boys think they're still in the trenches.

RUPERT

(pushing Wilfred back) Relax now and lie back, there's a good lad.

HELEN

Annabelle, dear, you're trembling.

ANNABELLE

I'm fine. It's just that I...I thought I saw...

(The GHOST SOLDIERS vanish.)

ANNABELLE

It's nothing, I...I'm just skittish; I need some fresh air.

MAVIS

What you need is a drink!

GERALD

Go back to your patients, Rupert; no need for all of us to be here. Helen can fetch one of the aides to keep an eye on him.

RUPERT

Fine. Good day, ladies.

HELEN

I'll see you at home, dear.

(RUPERT and HELEN depart.)

GERALD

That song you were singing was hardly appropriate for men convalescing.

ANNABELLE

It was his favorite, but I...I didn't mean for my voice to carry.

MAVIS

I thought it was lovely, a nice change from “Pack up your Troubles in your Old Kit Bag.”

GERALD

Go home, Annabelle. This lightning business has frayed your nerves.

ANNABELLE

I’d prefer to stay.

GERALD

Out of the question.

ANNABELLE

Please, father...

GERALD

Absolutely not!

ANNABELLE

Perhaps if I sing something else...?

GERALD

You heard me -- no! And if I were you, I wouldn’t be indulging any fantasies of future happiness with this fellow. He may not make it, and if he does, he won’t be the same.

MAVIS

Really, Gerald, you needn’t be so discouraging. What if he can hear you?

WILFRED

Shovel.

MAVIS

At least he’s speaking. Come now, Gerald, let Annabelle say goodbye to Wilfred in private.

(GERALD and MAVIS depart as an ethereal hum is heard and lights shimmer. The GHOST SOLDIERS surround Wilfred’s bed while ANNABELLE stares agape. WILFRED’S SOUL-SELF rises and leads the GHOST SOLDIERS, marching towards a distant light.)

SCENE 3

(Distant marching sounds continue as EDGAR enters the parlor, followed by MAVIS and ANNABELLE.)

EDGAR

As an amateur historian, I should comment on “The Great War” which began in 1914 in the town of Sarajevo, where a Serbian fanatic assassinated the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne. The Austrians declared war on Serbia and were joined by the Germans. Then Serbia was defended by the Russians, who were joined by the French and British. Within months the armies formed lines of entrenchment that stretched from the English Channel to Switzerland, and four years later, ten million had died -- an entire generation of boys forever young.

(EDGAR continues, peering over MAVIS’S shoulder as she sits, reading The London Times.)

EDGAR

Now we regard World War One as utter madness,...

EDGAR

...the waste of it all.

MAVIS

(to Annabelle) The waste of it all!

ANNABELLE

Shush, Auntie, you’ll upset yourself.

MAVIS

(referring to an article) Look here: the Germans invented another gun!

EDGAR

It fired six hundred bullets a minute.

MAVIS

(reading) “The equivalent of two hundred and fifty British troops armed with rifles.”

EDGAR

And especially cruel were the...

EDGAR

...grenades.

MAVIS

Grenades...

MAVIS

...aren’t evil enough. Why do we keep producing pernicious weapons? Why are we all so enthralled with power and...

MAVIS
...proficiency?

EDGAR
Proficiency;...

EDGAR
...matters; In fact,...

EDGAR
I'm a crack shot.

ANNABELLE
I'm crack shot.

MAVIS
You're what?!

ANNABELLE
I'm rather good with a Webley. Father takes me to the firing range so I can learn to defend myself.

MAVIS
Ah, yes, why not since the whole of Europe's regressed to gun-crazed tribalism -- blind fools leading keen sighted boys, relying on...

MAVIS
...their vigor.

EDGAR
Their vigor...

EDGAR
...and their marksmen's eyes;...

EDGAR
... ah, youth!

MAVIS
Ah, youth!

(EDGAR departs as ANNABELLE sighs.)

ANNABELLE
Look, Auntie, it's getting very tiresome, all this ranting on and on. You know I agree with your views, but nobody else does. When I defend you, I'm attacked for being a woman who can't possibly know what it's like.

MAVIS
Which is why suffrage is more important than ever! We can't keep putting it on the back burner. Once we get the vote, we can participate, take charge, and stop the carnage!

ANNABELLE
You can preach all you like, but women like mother will vote for whatever their husbands want. And what about those women in factories assembling bombs?

MAVIS

They can't help themselves. They were raised to be submissive to men and their politics, but mark my words, when enough of us have mustered the courage, the tide will turn.

ANNABELLE

(pause) You know, there's something I've been meaning to tell you. It's about what happened when the lightning struck.

MAVIS

Well, out with it.

ANNABELLE

When Wilfred and I were in shock, our souls flew out of our bodies. I know you and father are atheists, but I swear I could look down and see the top of my head and my body beneath it, and I could see Wilfred as well. Shall I go on?

MAVIS

Please do.

ANNABELLE

We were hovering about twenty feet off the ground, when Wilfred -- his spirit -- clasped mine, and we...well, we flew even higher, then waltzed in circles. It was if we were suspended in a great floating bubble studded with stars, and then we... kissed. It was the most exhilarating moment of my life -- until we fell, and the next thing I knew I was on my knees trying to resuscitate him.

MAVIS

Go on.

ANNABELLE

When our lips touched, he stared at me with such tenderness. Oh, Auntie, I...I can't stop thinking about him -- which is why I'm furious that father's forbidden me to see him! How does he know Wilfred won't recover?! He's not god! He has no right to tell me I'm not entitled to my feelings, my future!

MAVIS

He's only trying to protect you, dear.

ANNABELLE

You don't believe me, do you?

MAVIS

It doesn't matter what I believe. You know your father and I weren't raised in a religious home -- we weren't even baptized. I've only entered churches to hear you sing and admire the architecture. To me, all religions are perverse male delusions that subjugate women.

ANNABELLE

I'm not talking about religion so much as faith -- faith that we're more than our bodies.

MAVIS

Well, I'm afraid you'll have to give me more time to...digest your experience, though I confess I rather like the idea. It gives one hope, doesn't it? Have you told your mother?

ANNABELLE

Not yet. When she's home, she's usually cooped up in her darkroom, so I don't want to be a bother.

MAVIS

Well, I'm glad you told me.

ANNABELLE

Good, because that's not all. In the hospital, when Wilfred grasped my arm, I could see what he sees.

MAVIS

You mean like clairvoyance?

ANNABELLE

It was only a glimpse, but there were soldiers, more like the shadows of soldiers or their ghosts, drifting about -- until Wilfred left his bed and led them away. (*she sighs*) I'm so impatient for Wilfred to get well. Waiting here, I feel so restless, so stifled -- father hovers over me like a great hulking bear. I wish I could leave, but where would I go?

MAVIS

Once I have a flat of my own, you can move in with me. I daresay I've overstayed my welcome. I'll soon drive poor Gerby to an early grave. Can you believe I called him Gerby?

ANNABELLE

Well, I love having you about -- so does mother, though sometimes we wonder if you miss Uncle Malcolm.

MAVIS

I miss our mutual friends -- most of whom have taken sides and decided I'm the least desirable -- sssshush! He's home.

(GERALD enters the parlor.)

MAVIS

Hello, Gerald.

ANNABELLE

Hello, father, let me take your coat.

GERALD

You're up awfully late. Damn rain's starting again and it's going to be torrential -- just what we don't need! You wouldn't believe the numbers that came in today; two infantry divisions were wiped out, and there's another outbreak of typhoid. They're going to build a third annex, and they're thinking of bedding some of the boys at the Atheneum.

MAVIS

Sit down, let me fix you a drink.

GERALD

Thanks. *(pause as he sits)* By the way, Annabelle, your friend, Mister Blackstone, has caused quite a ruckus. I told your mother not to mention it because I didn't want to get your hopes up, but he's been up and about -- still wobbly, mind you. Anyway, he continued to repeat the word "shovel," so Rupert called in Sydney Pearlman, our new psychiatrist. He told Rupert to humor the lad, give him a shovel and see if it helps fetch him back to reality. So Rupert borrowed a shovel from one of the grounds men.

(In the hospital ward, RUPERT approaches WILFRED with a shovel.)

GERALD

The minute Blackstone got hold of the thing, he leapt out of bed, marched down the corridor, stepped out the door, and plunged it into the ground.

(WILFRED has grasped the shovel, left his bed, and is digging around the periphery, slowly, obsessively.)

GERALD

Naturally, everyone assumes he's digging a trench, reliving his war experience, and in no time, he'd dug a rather sizable trough. He's still at it, and we've had complaints, but decided to leave him be since they're going to plant a hedgerow there anyway. Still, it's a grim sight, a lad in his pajamas digging away, clearly out of his mind. He's already been dubbed "The Digger."

(MAVIS hands GERALD a glass of whiskey.)

MAVIS

At least he's moving, building his strength.

GERALD

We couldn't believe he had the stamina, never mind the compulsion. Sydney calls it a fugue state. Apparently, when the brain's sufficiently addled, a chap can forget who he is.

ANNABELLE

Poor Wilfred...

MAVIS

Your psychiatrist sounds like a compassionate man.

GERALD

He's young, energetic, but a bit balmy himself, and no wonder. He takes on our worst cases -- the night screamers and twitchers. He's even developed a twitch of his own -- under his eye. It's unnerving, but the boys don't seem to mind, and half the nurses are in love with him.

MAVIS

Perhaps the people who walk past, who see Wilfred digging a trench, will comprehend the lunacy of war, how it corrupts and unhinges the mind.

GERALD

He was struck by lightning, Mavis, not a bullet; he's not a casualty of war.

MAVIS

Everyone in England's a casualty of war.

ANNABELLE

Maybe he isn't digging a trench at all, but a mass grave.

(WILFRED picks up a bone, and walks off.)

GERALD

Another thing, Annabelle: apparently, I was wrong about the effect of your song on the ward. Several patients have asked to hear it again, and they're requesting others as well.

MAVIS

How marvelous!

GERALD

While I may find your songs depressingly sentimental, the boys don't.

MAVIS

I don't understand you, Gerald. Annabelle's songs are a response to suffering, and didn't you say that suffering ennobles one's character?

GERALD

I did, but it doesn't. We've had too many patients who are petty and vindictive, though we try not to judge them. We're just grateful they were brave enough to fight for our freedom. That's what we concentrate on, though today...

MAVIS

What...?

GERALD

(he sighs) I lost twelve -- twelve boys barely out of school, mostly from infections. Turns out the bacteria in mud is as lethal as bullets. *(yawning)* God, I'm exhausted. Good night, ladies.

ANNABELLE

Good night, father.

MAVIS

Sleep well, Gerald.

(GERALD leaves, and ANNABELLE buries her head in her hands.)

MAVIS

Time for bed, dear.

ANNABELLE

I hate my bed! But no matter where I sleep, I dream about rats, armies of them, skittering across the floor, making that hideous sound. Oh, Auntie, do you think Wilfred's having the same thoughts, the same dreams...?

MAVIS

I can't say. As for the rats -- the trenches are infested with them, so I suspect the soldiers dream about them, or even imagine the Germans as rats. Armies are trained to think of their enemies as beastly so they're easier to kill.

ANNABELLE

I try to forget, to block them out, and the strange thing is...Inky. Now when I reach out to stroke him, he hisses and runs away.

MAVIS

How odd, but surely you don't think...?

ANNABELLE

I don't know what to think. All I know is I want to learn more about Wilfred -- which is why I'm going to Wickenden Gate. I'm to meet the headmaster; his name is...

ANNABELLE

...Theodore Grimmel

THEODORE

Theodore Grimmel...

SCENE 4

(In an office at Wickenden Gate Academy, EDGAR has become the headmaster, THEODORE GRIMMEL, who greets ANNABELLE.)

THEODORE

...and you're Miss Snowden, I presume? We were extremely distressed to hear about poor Wilfred. He was very much admired, a favorite of our boys -- they called him Freddie. I understand you were with him when the lightning struck?

ANNABELLE

Yes. *(pause)* One of the last things Wilfred said was that he wanted copies of my songs -- to teach the boys in his choir, so I brought these. *(handing over sheets of music)* Have you found someone to replace him?

THEODORE

You mean replace Morris Crowe? He was our choir leader, but we lost him at Gallipoli.

ANNABELLE

Oh, I was under the impression that Wilfred was the choir leader -- since he taught music.

THEODORE

He's a man of many talents, but Morris led the choir and taught music. Of course, neither man is easy to replace. So, can you tell us how Wilfred's convalescing? When I spoke with Doctor Whitehall, he said the lightning seems to have divested him of speech.

ANNABELLE

Yes, but his burns are healing, he's gaining strength, and lately he's obsessed with digging. He seems to be living in another world, and it's populated with soldiers and...rats.

THEODORE

Rats, you say? Well, he's certainly dissected hundreds in his class. He once confessed that he admired their cunning, their capacity to propagate in any surroundings.

ANNABELLE

Why was Wilfred dissecting rats? I thought he taught history.

THEODORE

No, science -- botany, anatomy, chemistry, and taxonomy. In fact, we were hoping he'd return when the war ends.

ANNABELLE

I don't understand -- why would Wilfred say he taught music and history?

THEODORE

Perhaps he thought it would make him more appealing, and he did sing with the choir on occasion. Of course, young men say all sorts of things to impress women, and Wilfred was quite the ladies man, or so I'm told.

ANNABELLE

Did you know him well?

THEODORE

Not socially, but please, if he can hear you, convey our regards, and tell him our prayers are with him.

ANNABELLE

Yes, of course. You know, Headmaster, if you need someone to lead the choir or teach, I'd be happy to fill in.

THEODORE

That's very generous, but I'm afraid the teaching staff and students here are all male.

ANNABELLE

I did attend the London Academy of Music.

THEODORE

I'm grateful for the offer, Miss Snowden, but here at Wickenden Gate we have traditions dating back to 1837. Please don't take it personally.

ANNABELLE

But surely a woman choir leader is better than none at all?

THEODORE

We seem to be managing, but I'll certainly take a look at your songs -- to see if they're appropriate. I read music and often join choir myself.

ANNABELLE

(selecting sheet music) Then here, let's have a go at this one: "My Soldier Boy, Willy."

(THEODORE hums a few bars, then ANNABELLE joins him. THEY sing in harmony, though THEODORE is clearly appalled.)

THEODORE and ANNABELLE

*My soldier boy, Willy,
Came home from the war,
But something's gone missing,
He's not like before.*

*His eyes are still blue,
His smile still sweet,
But he's not my boy, Willy;
He's missing his feet.
We used to go dancing
When Willy had legs,
But they've been replaced
By two wooden pegs.*

*My soldier boy, Willy,
Came home from the war,
But something's gone missing,
He's not like before.*

*His arms once embraced me,
But they're missing too;
They were traded for wings,
Then away Willy flew.*

*Gone was his spirit,
Leaving memories instead,
My brave warrior, Willy,
Joined the legions of dead.*

THEODORE

(pause) Yes, well, thank you, Miss Snowden.

ANNABELLE

Thank you, Professor Grimmel.

(ANNABELLE marches out of the office, then THEODORE tears the sheets of music in half, and departs, muttering.)

THEODORE

Despicable rot!

SCENE 5

(In the hospital, HELEN appears, taking a photograph of WILFRED still digging up bones. In another area, GERALD, RUPERT, and the psychiatrist, SYDNEY PEARLMAN are scrutinizing Wilfred's X-rays.)

HELEN

You must be exhausted, and if you're listening, then you know we all find your behavior...

HELEN

....fascinating.

SYDNEY

Fascinating,...

SYDNEY

...never seen a case quite like it.

HELEN

I'm taking your picture for Annabelle. I'm her mother, you know. When I'm off duty, I take portraits of the boys to send home. Your own picture's been in all the papers -- not one of mine. Of course, I'm not a professional, but I intend to have an exhibition. I'm making a war album of sorts. (*pointing her camera*) Oh, do...

HELEN

...look here!

GERALD

Look here,...

GERALD

...Sydney, we can't keep him indefinitely!

(HELEN snaps the picture, then continues following WILFRED out of sight as GERALD continues.)

GERALD

He's been disruptive, and some of the nurses are afraid of him.

SYDNEY

Which nurses? And if you're suggesting sending him to Lockwood, it's out of the question. He's obviously improving; he just needs more time, that's all, tincture of time.

GERALD

We don't have "tincture of time" or space, and he hasn't spoken a bloody word since you gave him that damn shovel!

SYDNEY

But isn't it incredible? -- all those old bones he unearthed? Our ancient ancestors in Mercy's back yard! Our best archeologists have taken over the dig!

(In the parlor, MAVIS appears, pouring tea for ANNABELLE who is reading the newspaper. Now the action moves swiftly from the ANNABELLE and MAVIS in the parlor to GERALD and SYDNEY in the hospital.)

ANNABELLE

It says here that "Wilfred Blackstone, known as 'The Digger' dug up a femur dating back to the Roman invasion."

MAVIS

More tea, dear?

ANNABELLE

(nods) Amazing.

SYDNEY

Amazing...

SYDNEY

...what he discovered -- a partial skull from an Anglo Saxon warrior.

ANNABELLE

A sternum from a Danish Viking.

SYDNEY

A clavicle they found dates back to the Tudors.

ANNABELLE

Ribs from the Stuarts, the Hanovers, the whole of English history!

RUPERT

You realize, Gerald, that Blackstone wouldn't be here at all if it weren't for Annabelle.

GERALD

What do you mean?

RUPERT

I mean that if he weren't her beau, we'd have shipped him out weeks ago.

GERALD

He's hardly her beau; she only met him the night he was struck.

RUPERT

Then why does she visit so often?

ANNABELLE

I've been seeing Wilfred...

GERALD

When!?

MAVIS

When?

RUPERT

Early mornings.

ANNABELLE

Before anyone wakes up.

GERALD

But I forbade her!

RUPERT

Come now, Gerald, she's a grown woman.

ANNABELLE

I think he's starting to respond to me.

SYDNEY

If I may interject -- I think her presence does him a world of good.

GERALD

Well, he's not helping Annabelle! She can't eat; can't sleep; she's plagued with nightmares. What's the attraction anyway?

ANNABELLE

Sometimes he smiles.

GERALD

Those thin lips, that sinister flare to his nostrils.

ANNABELLE

He radiates warmth.

GERALD

He's all ice.

SYDNEY

Perhaps there's an inferno underneath.

GERALD

I say we ship him off today!

RUPERT

I'm inclined to agree.

SYDNEY

Well, I don't! Can't you see? Blackstone's a godsend -- he's provided us all with a welcome distraction. Lord knows what he'll do next.

GERALD

We're not here to provide a sideshow!

SYDNEY

If you're asking me to abandon the man, I can't do it! Incidentally, Gerald, I've scheduled an appointment with Annabelle...

SYDNEY

...next Tuesday.

ANNABELLE

Next Tuesday...

ANNABELLE

...I'm meeting with Wilfred's psychiatrist.

MAVIS

Good.

GERALD

Good!

GERALD

You'll see she's not only devious, she's daft!

MAVIS

Tell him about your dreams.

GERALD

She'll say the lightning's given her visions, claims she can see what Blackstone's thinking.

SYDNEY

How do you know? Did she tell you?

GERALD

Helen heard her chatting with Mavis. The two of them are thick as thieves.

MAVIS

Be honest; tell the doctor what you see,...

MAVIS

...the ghosts,...

GERALD

The ghosts,...

GERALD

...of dead soldiers,...

MAVIS

...and rats.

GERALD

...and rats...

GERALD

...scurrying everywhere. What rubbish!

SYDNEY

Well, excuse me, gentlemen, I have a patient to see -- the major who can't stop laughing.

RUPERT

(checking his watch) Must dash; I'm due in surgery.

(SYDNEY leaves, followed by RUPERT and GERALD.)

ANNABELLE

Auntie, will you come with me to Wilfred's flat? I have his address -- from the hospital records.

MAVIS

Of course, dear, but what do you think you'll find?

ANNABELLE

Photographs and books, clues to his past that might help him remember, and I'll collect some of his clothes.

(HELEN enters the parlor.)

HELEN

Ah, there you are! I'm the harbinger of great news, ladies! The Americans have agreed to enter the war! There's no way the Kaiser can defeat us now -- he'll be outnumbered and outgunned! We'll finally have our boys back!

(The parlor fades as several GHOST SOLDIERS appear on the hospital grounds, singing Annabelle's song.)

GHOST SOLDIERS

*A private was buried on Monday;
His coffin's a crate made of oak.
He tripped on a grenade in Vichy,
Now most of the bloke's up in smoke.*

*Oh, the gravedigger's dancing in circles,
His partner's a shovel held tight;
His ballroom a garden of tombstones
Where ghosts play their fiddles at night.*

(The GHOST SOLDIERS waltz off.)

SCENE 6

(In his office at Mercy Hospital, SYDNEY PEARLMAN gestures for ANNABELLE to be seated while GHOST SOLDIERS drift nearby, distracting her gaze.)

SYDNEY

You'll have to forgive my eye; I'm told the twitch is distracting, my perpetual wink, ha! *(pause)* As you know, Wilfred's my patient, and since he's practically mute, I was hoping to glean some insights from you, though your father tells me you're suffering as well -- from lack of sleep and appetite.

ANNABELLE

I'm fine, Doctor, really.

SYDNEY

I've been researching the effects of electricity on the mind, and it's extraordinary. I'm quite curious and open to anything you'd care to tell me. Whatever you say will be kept in strictest confidence; I'm not here to judge you.

ANNABELLE

Or commit me to the loony bin?

SYDNEY

Never, I'd commit myself first. *(offering a book)* If you're interested, this book contains accounts of people who survived being struck. It describes the pulsing heart, the prickling skin, hair standing on end. One of the victims, a retired grocer, became a world class cellist overnight. *(pause)* I've been told the experience changed you as well.

ANNABELLE

Yes, it's given me a gift -- like the cellist.

SYDNEY

(taking notes) Really? How so?

ANNABELLE

It's allowed me to see remarkable things.

SYDNEY

Like what for instance?

ANNABELLE

Right now five soldiers who recently died are lined up as if posing for a picture.

SYDNEY

Here? In this room?

ANNABELLE

Yes, and there's hundreds more all over the hospital. I've seen them every day since Wilfred grasped my hand. *(pause)* I can see you're skeptical, but why would I make up something so outrageous?! Why would I want to see the dead?!

SYDNEY

(pause) Perhaps for their mystery or a desire for an afterlife -- the hope conveyed by their images.

ANNABELLE

I didn't make them up for any of those reasons. They exist, but I can't be logical about them; they just are.

SYDNEY

Well, do they speak? Do you know their names?

ANNABELLE

(pause) Since you asked, they're telling me. There's a man with one arm named Colin Pitts; there's another who's blind named William Strange; and there's a tall man missing a foot named Phillip...

ANNABELLE

....Curlew.

SYDNEY

Curlew.

SYDNEY

That's enough, please stop! *(pause)* They were my...patients.

ANNABELLE

They're leaving; they didn't mean to frighten you.

SYDNEY

Don't they frighten you?

ANNABELLE

At first I thought I was losing my mind, that they were manic hallucinations. It started when Wilfred grasped my arm. It felt as if electric currents were coursing through my veins all over again, but it was his way of showing me -- showing me that he could glimpse two worlds at once.

SYDNEY

So Wilfred sees them too?

ANNABELLE

He doesn't just see them; he's their usher.

SYDNEY

Their usher...?

ANNABELLE

Their escort -- from here to the world beyond. You see, I think when Wilfred ceased breathing, his soul ascended, then returned. Now, while he sleeps, his soul leaves his body to usher the dead, the ones who didn't expect to die, who aren't ready to leave, and appear to be lost. Wilfred shows them the way.

SYDNEY

Which way? What exactly do you see?

ANNABELLE

It's difficult to explain: The dead are faded, foggy versions of themselves, though you can see their wounds.

SYDNEY

Tell me more. What about your first encounters -- what were they like?

ANNABELLE

Terrifying. They were drifting about the halls and wards, but then I saw Wilfred -- his spirit -- gesturing for them to follow.

SYDNEY

Did you see where he takes them?

ANNABELLE

Down the hallways, to portals opening in the ceiling where rays of colored lights are beaming down. The souls drift into the beams, and as they're lifted, they become flattened like kites. Then they shrink into tiny sparks that dance about then vanish altogether. As Wilfred recovers, they seem to be fading, so the more he heals, the less the dead reveal themselves -- at least to me.

SYDNEY

Can you also see the souls of the living -- mine for instance?

ANNABELLE

No, but I sense your...kindness. In fact, I think you're starting to believe me.

SYDNEY

I might even envy you. As a student, I was attracted to Hinduism, and spent a year in India, so you see, I'm susceptible to these ideas.

ANNABELLE

I've tried to explain to my Aunt Mavis. She's an atheist, but open minded. Mavis is my father's sister, but they're nothing alike.

SYDNEY

Your father doesn't seem to approve of your friendship with Wilfred. Why is that do you think?

ANNABELLE

He hates all my beaux, though Wilfred seems to vex him more than the rest, though I really shouldn't claim him as a beau since we'd only just met. My Aunt Mavis calls it "love at first strike."

SYDNEY

What about your relationship with your mother?

ANNABELLE

We get along. I think if it weren't for the war, she'd retire and open up a studio. She's learning to make composites with the portraits of the patients surrounded by their families.

SYDNEY

These are especially hard times for artistic people.

ANNABELLE

That's one of the reasons I was drawn to Wilfred -- he loves music, and I sensed he had a compassionate heart. It's cruel that it was stopped.

SYDNEY

But you started it again.

ANNABELLE

And he started mine. Do you think Wilfred will ever be himself again?

SYDNEY

Doctor Whitehall said his wounds are nearly healed, his organs functioning, his reaction to sounds indicate his hearing's improved, and the night nurses hear him muttering in his sleep.

ANNABELLE

What does he say?

(GHOST SOLDIERS enter, beckoning ANNABELLE.)

SYDNEY

Nothing coherent. I see your eyes darting about. More ghosts?

ANNABELLE

They're gesturing for me to follow. I think they like a witness when they leave, so if no one's looking, I wave.

SYDNEY

Then by all means go. *(pause, watching her leave)* But please come back.

(SYDNEY gazes longingly as ANNABELLE follows the GHOST SOLDIERS, drifting into darkness.)

SCENE 7

(An air raid siren wails then fades in the background as the beams of two flashlights are seen, wielded by ANNABELLE and MAVIS entering Wilfred's flat.)

MAVIS

Of all times for a bloody air raid! Thank heaven you brought torches. (*sniffing*) It smells like mold.

ANNABELLE

Maybe there's a leak somewhere...?

MAVIS

Let's get the hell out.

ANNABELLE

Not till I find his closet. He needs his shirts and trousers.

MAVIS

Look, here -- a photograph of young Wilfred and his parents, I presume.

ANNABELLE

(*turning the picture over*) There's writing on the back -- Ava, Arnold, and Wilfred, 1910. (*she sighs*) Just think: this is the room where he slept, and that's the window where he saw the first rays of morning light.

MAVIS

He's got quite a collection of theatre posters. And look here -- a copy of Field Service Regulations, The Stories of Edgar Allan Poe, and what appears to be a diary!

ANNABELLE

Let me see. Yes, it does look like a diary.

(ANNABELLE opens the diary, turns a few pages, then quickly shuts it.)

MAVIS

What's wrong?

ANNABELLE

Nothing, it's just that... No one should read another person's diary. It's too personal, too invasive, and too...

MAVIS

What...?

ANNABELLE

German. It's written in German.

MAVIS

Let me see. (*pause, reading*) It's German all right.

ANNABELLE

I can't read it.

MAVIS

Well, I can. I took lessons when we lived in Heidelberg.

ANNABELLE

Wilfred must be bilingual.

MAVIS

Or he's a spy.

ANNABELLE

Don't be daft!

MAVIS

Well, that would explain a few things. Didn't he tell you he taught history instead of science? And didn't he claim to lead the choir when he didn't?

ANNABELLE

He was only trying to impress me.

MAVIS

Or he's not who he says he is.

ANNABELLE

But that's Wilfred in the photograph!

MAVIS

Is it? It was taken years ago; it could be anyone...

ANNABELLE

It's definitely Wilfred! Besides, his English was perfect.

MAVIS

Quite a few Germans speak perfect English; they're better educated than we are. Listen, Annabelle, if Wilfred recovers and reenlists, he could have access to British battle plans. He could be connected to a whole network of spies.

ANNABELLE

You read too many newspapers. Every day someone somewhere's accused of being a spy!

MAVIS

Well, why don't we pick a page at random? Here we are, Tuesday, May twelfth: "Today while clearing our trench of an invasion of flies, our mess sergeant, a perfect soldier, was shot. *(pause)* I was beside him when the bullet flew through his mouth and out the back of his head. His bright eyes remained wide with surprise, and I couldn't believe how remarkably cool I was, but later I wept."

ANNABELLE

(pause) Continue please.

MAVIS

"Tonight my nerves were in such a state, that I decided to read the music I brought with me, to listen with my mind's ear to Bach's "Sacred Cantatas" which transported me from the abyss of despair." *(pause)* This could have been written by a German.

ANNABELLE

It may not even be Wilfred's diary. He might have taken it from a soldier he killed -- as a...a keepsake.

MAVIS

But his name's inside the cover, and since it's in German, we're obligated to turn it over to the...

ANNABELLE

No! What if they put him in prison?!

MAVIS

If he's an enemy agent...

ANNABELLE

Stop it! Stop! He's obviously in no condition to harm anyone! Besides, you said wars are insane; you said soldiers are only tools, the tools of lunatics on both sides -- *both* sides! They're to be pitied, you said, because they surrender their freedom to rhetoric -- the rhetoric of madmen!

MAVIS

They do.

ANNABELLE

They're blinded by vanity, you said, vanity disguised as...as...

MAVIS

Idealism.

ANNABELLE

Yes! Idealism corrupted by power, the power of guns! You spoke those words, Auntie, over and over, so I'll never get them out of my mind!

MAVIS

Yes, I did say them, though I'd no idea you were listening so intently.

ANNABELLE

I didn't just listen; I *believed* you, so don't you dare say a word about the diary!

MAVIS

(pause) All right, under one condition: let me translate. Then we'll find out who the author really is.

ANNABELLE

Agreed. And if Wilfred turns out to be a spy, you're not to breathe a word to a living soul. He's been struck dumb; he's suffered enough.

MAVIS

You're suffering too; you're love struck. You think time's running out, so you're pinning your hopes on a very brief encounter. But Annabelle, have you ever considered...

ANNABELLE

What...?

MAVIS

That your prince might be a toad?

ANNABELLE

He's not! He's a badly burned prince who burns in me, and when I visit and no one's looking, I...I kiss him. Sometimes I press myself against him, and when our lips touch, he melts the core of me. *(pause)* The truth is, I didn't mind thinking I'd become one of those tweedy spinsters playing the organ at other girls' weddings, but I hated thinking I was...cold, that I'd never feel passion, real rapturous passion.

MAVIS

Oh, Annabelle, of course you're not cold. I'm glad you feel as you do, only I wish you were happier. Everyone's noticed how you rarely smile; you're always dressed in black -- even your songs have become too morbid to sing in public.

ANNABELLE

Oh, they're being sung, Auntie.

MAVIS

Humph! By your ghosts...?

ANNABELLE

That's right.

(Their flashlight beams turn into the darkness, MAVIS departs and the GHOST SOLDIERS appear, singing as ANNABELLE conducts.)

GHOST SOLDIERS

*A sergeant was buried on Tuesday;
His coffin's a small copper tub;
They say that a fire bomb falling
Left nothing but buttons to scrub.*

*Oh, the gravedigger's dancing in circles,
His partner's a shovel held tight;
His ballroom a garden of tombstones
Where ghosts play their fiddles at night.*

(The GHOST SOLDIERS and ANNABELLE freeze as EDGAR enters in a ghostly light.)

EDGAR

Thus ends Act One of The Usher's Ball. You have ten minutes to escape the theatre.

(EDGAR shuffles off as darkness descends.)

End of Act One

ACT II**SCENE 8**

(HELEN approaches GERALD at the hospital while ANNABELLE is seated in the parlor.)

HELEN

Forgive me, for bothering you, Gerald, but we need to talk.

(HELEN and GERALD stand immobile as MAVIS approaches ANNABELLE in the parlor with a tray of glasses and a decanter of sherry.)

MAVIS

(referring to a stack of papers) Sorry it's taken so long, but I'm grateful you insisted on keeping the diary a secret. To expose it could have led to a tragic miscarriage of justice.

ANNABELLE

So he's not a spy?

MAVIS

Let's just say...

MAVIS

... he's not who you think he is.

HELEN

He's not who you think he is.

(Now the action moves swiftly back and forth from the hospital to the parlor.)

GERALD

Who?! What the devil are you talking about?!

HELEN

Last week, when I walked past her room, I saw Mavis taking notes from a book. She quickly covered it, and thought I didn't notice. Then later, I slipped into her room, and discovered Wilfred's diary -- well, you were right to feel suspicious. For one thing,...

HELEN

...he's bilingual.

MAVIS

He's bilingual.

MAVIS

Wilfred's mother was half German and taught him from the time he was a child, so to keep up his linguistic skills, he wrote his diary in German.

HELEN

I knew the book was important, so I tried to photograph the contents, then decided to copy a few pages and bring them to my old friend, Ingrid. She was born in Leipzig and could translate, though later I found an envelope with Mavis's translations...

GERALD

Oh, for god's sake, get on with it!

MAVIS

You'll never guess his secret passion -- not music, not theatre or history, but...

MAVIS

...ballroom dancing!

HELEN

Ballroom dancing, ...

HELEN

...is something he excels at and rattles on about, but mostly he writes about...

HELEN

...the war.

MAVIS

The war...

MAVIS

...is his primary subject.

HELEN

I've chosen several pages to read. Now sit down.

MAVIS

Sit back, my dear, close your eyes and think of Wilfred Blackstone during ...

MAVIS

...his first days in the army.

HELEN

His first days in the army,...

(As HELEN reads, WILFRED appears in uniform.)

HELEN

...he writes: I'm ashamed to be seen in civilian clothes. When I wrote my students, I told them that putting on the uniform of the British army is like wearing a suit of golden threads.

(WILFRED writes in his diary while MAVIS, HELEN, and ANNABELLE listen.)

WILFRED

My whole battalion marched to the train station while the crowds cheered, flinging flowers. Remember boys: there's nothing nobler than fighting to the death on a battlefield -- which is why it's so appalling to be stuck behind a desk! Colonel Graves says I'm too proficient in German to be wasted at the front, but at least I've been promoted.

MAVIS

He was promoted to....

MAVIS

...lieutenant.

HELEN

Lieutenant...

HELEN

...was his rank. He was assigned to translate letters from the captured and the dead.

MAVIS

(reading) I keep hounding the Colonel, requesting reassignment so I can join my mates in the trenches.

(Now WILFRED is seated behind a desk piled with letters, speaking out.)

WILFRED

I must tell you, Colonel, as I read these letters, I notice the German soldiers are rarely abusive towards our own. These rumors about decapitating Canadians, or keeping French women as slaves -- it's all rubbish! In fact, these letters are no different than ones I'd have written myself. Look here: "Dear Gertie, how I long to go cycling with you and Irma, " or "Dear Uncle Oskar, keep an eye on Manfred who's failing mathematics," or "Dear Frieda, how's my sweet muffin face?" et cetera. It's their relatives at home who hate us, but everyone looks forward to joyful reunions. What's most distressing is knowing who among these writers has been buried with his dreams. Perhaps I shouldn't say this, but sometimes, while translating, I sense I'm hearing their voices. So please, Colonel, get me a transfer while I still have my wits about me!

MAVIS

Then he finally got his wish, his transfer to the...

MAVIS

...Somme.

HELEN

...Somme....

HELEN

...is where they sent him first. Here he recounts his baptism by fire, his first day in the trenches, standing next to a poet from Oxford.

(The sound of artillery fire is heard as WILFRED dons a helmet and crouches in a trench next to another soldier, CHARLES MOORINGS, who shouts above the shots.)

CHARLES

Get used to it, Willy boy! Let me tell you -- in the whole history of language, there's no viler word than "Somme!"

WILFRED

It's a bloody hornet's nest!

CHARLES

The shelling drowns out the screams, and watch your feet -- the rats here are big as dogs!

WILFRED

What did you say?! Christ, I think I'm going deaf!

CHARLES

Plug your ears! (*pause as the shelling softens*) You think this is bad? See those woods? Walk fifty meters north, and there's walls of stacked bodies -- the stench unbearable. Hell couldn't possibly be worse.

WILFRED

God, I feel sick -- how do you stand it?

CHARLES

You get used to it.

WILFRED

Never, you're braver than I'll ever be.

CHARLES

Bollocks! Being brave isn't a matter of will. Everyone feels weak in the knees from all the bleeding guts and gore, knowing you could be next. No, no, Willy boy, being brave is simply succumbing to indifference.

WILFRED

Indifference...?

CHARLES

That's right, just relax, leave your fate to the furies, lift your gun, aim, and...

(CHARLES and WILFRED fire their guns, then HELEN speaks.)

HELEN

This comes later, in the Ginchy Valley where he spent...

HELEN

...Christmas.

MAVIS

Christmas...

MAVIS

...was his happiest time. By then he was promoted to captain, but he'd often leave the officers' dugout to join the boys in the trenches.

(CHARLES has left the trench as PRIVATE GODFREY GLUMMER, fresh from training, squats beside WILFRED.)

GODFREY

You're the conductor, right, sir? Heard all about last week's concert -- using your rifle as a baton and all.

WILFRED

We were a ragtag choir, but we hit the notes.

GODFREY

Sorry I missed it -- love to sing myself, know all the carols by heart. Heard about the truce too. Must've been a sight -- all the Bosch coming out of their trenches. What were they like?

WILFRED

Like us, only better equipped. After we buried the dead, we exchanged chocolates and cigarettes -- even shared photographs, and I served as the roaming translator.

GODFREY

Yeah? So what did they say?

WILFRED

That they'd had enough of lying in wet trenches and didn't want to shoot anymore. We said the same, and the truce lasted till morning, when General Coalman sent orders that we get back to killing each other -- so here we are.

GODFREY

Couldn't wait to get here myself, shoot a few Bosch and go home a hero. Didn't expect to be so sodding cold, and now I've got lice -- not to mention the jitters.

WILFRED

Everyone gets the jitters at first. Soon they'll stop and you'll just do the job -- like a cog in a machine.

GODFREY

Yeah? So what's that you're writing?

WILFRED

A journal of sorts -- my war stories.

GODFREY

Will I be in it?

WILFRED

If you like.

GODFREY

The name's Godfrey Glummer -- with two ms. I trained as a gunner so I'm Glummer the gunner, and I can clean and load a Vickers in my sleep. So will I be famous?

WILFRED

Not likely. I'm just recounting impressions to share with my students.

GODFREY

That journal might make a book someday.

WILFRED

Perhaps, or a play.

(A volley of shots are heard.)

WILFRED

Time to scramble, men!

(WILFRED and GODFREY rush off as lights fade on the trench, and MAVIS speaks.)

MAVIS

Now here's where he explains.

HELEN

Here's where he confesses!

(HELEN'S VOICE is heard as WILFRED approaches a young GERMAN SOLDIER, writing a letter.)

HELEN

I was sent to explore a bombed out barn. I thought I was alone until I heard a scratching sound, and there was a young German private sitting in the hay, writing a letter. His luger had fallen to his side, so I crept close...

(WILFRED aims his pistol at the GERMAN SOLDIER who leaps to his feet, his arms raised in surrender, his hand clutching his letter.)

GERMAN SOLDIER

Ach bitte Herr, schießt mich nicht. Haben Sie Gnade, wenn Sie können.
(*Oh, please, sir, don't shoot me. Have mercy, if you can.*)

WILFRED

Was machen Sie hier? (*What are you doing here?*)

GERMAN SOLDIER

Ich kam, einige Eier zu erhalten und ich einen Brief schreiben.
(*I came to get some eggs, and thought I'd write a letter.*)

(The GERMAN SOLDIER tosses his letter to Wilfred.)

GERMAN SOLDIER

Werden Sie meiner Familie meine Briefe schicken? (*Will you send my letter to my family?*)

WILFRED

Rennen Sie einfach los! (*Make a run for it!*)

GERMAN SOLDIER

Mein Gott, ich bin der glücklichste Mann auf der Welt!
(*My God, I'm the luckiest man in the world!*)

(The GERMAN SOLDIER salutes, then dashes off.)

MAVIS

He may have told you he was a rationalist, but...

MAVIS
...he prayed.

HELEN
He prayed.

WILFRED
(falling to his knees) Dear God, after seeing the terror in his eyes -- or was it his letter...? But how could I hurt him? How could I hurt any of the men whose hearts I came to know? God, forgive me...

(WILFRED cocks the German luger, points it at his leg, then lights black out. In the darkness a gunshot is heard and a gasp of pain as WILFRED falls and vanishes. Then HELEN continues speaking to GERALD and MAVIS to ANNABELLE.)

HELEN
So you see, Gerald...

HELEN
...he shot himself!

MAVIS
He shot himself,...

MAVIS
...then buried the luger! Several men came running to the barn, and chased after the boy, but he was long gone! So you see, dear, your...

MAVIS
...Wilfred's a pacifist!

HELEN
Wilfred's a pacifist!

GERALD
A bloody conchie!

MAVIS
I'm half in love with him myself.

GERALD
He let the Hun escape!

ANNABELLE
He let the boy go free!

GERALD
Excellent work, Helen!

MAVIS

(handing over the diary) Now you can be its guardian.

GERALD

We'll have to get hold of the original.

HELEN

But what if Mavis wrote it herself? After all, she's often said she'd write a novel.

GERALD

But why write in German? No, this has the ring of authenticity!

ANNABELLE

What Wilfred did took courage.

GERALD

What Wilfred did is tantamount to....

GERALD

...treason!

MAVIS

Treason...

MAVIS

...is the charge -- if he's found out. You can...

MAVIS

...imagine the scandal.

GERALD

Imagine the scandal:..

GERALD

... "The Digger's" dirty secret!

ANNABELLE

We must never tell a living soul.

GERALD

It's time he was exposed.

HELEN

Let's not be hasty...

GERALD

It's our duty!

HELEN
But think of Annabelle.

GERALD
Think of England!

SCENE 9

(In another area of the hospital, EDGAR, enters and speaks while WILFRED lies in bed, mumbling in his sleep. Tiny sparks of light dance about him.)

EDGAR
In 1917 we didn't know about the continuous lifelong generation of brain cells called neurogenesis. Only recently did we discover that our brains are dynamic, constantly creating and reorganizing with cunning virtuosity. Wilfred Blackstone had been burned, but his brain was still processing, still remembering, still dreaming...

(EDGAR departs as HELEN enters, followed by SERGEANT THOMAS TARBOX.)

WILFRED
Ich habe durst. (*I'm thirsty*)

HELEN
There, you see, Sergeant, he's speaking German! I'm afraid we'll have to move him before he upsets the other patients.

WILFRED
Ich hatte gern ein Glass Wasser bitte. (*I want a glass of water please.*)

THOMAS
He a bloody Hun all right.

HELEN
Let's see about finding an empty room.

WILFRED
Ich will nicht mehr im Bett liegen. (*I'm so tired of lying in bed.*)

THOMAS
Bleeding Bosch!

(HELEN and THOMAS depart leaving WILFRED mumbling; ANNABELLE is seen singing at the piano; and GERALD enters SYDNEY'S office.)

ANNABELLE

*Somewhere a soldier lies dying
In a world that's never known peace;
He fights against foes soon forgotten,
With comrades in fields stained with blood.
Will he die for ideals and his country
When he should have died for love?*

SYDNEY

Ah, Gerald, have you heard? Mercy's no longer an excavation site.

GERALD

About time!

SYDNEY

It seems that along with the bones our archeologists found an army of infected rats. A few scurried onto the wards, so they've closed shop till the war ends.

GERALD

Has "The Digger" gone as well?

SYDNEY

Not yet. You know, you may have to reconcile yourself to his presence in your life. Annabelle's feelings have not diminished, and he's getting better every day. He may make a full recovery.

GERALD

Good, then she'll see he's a real person and not a fantasy she's concocted to rescue her from spinsterhood.

SYDNEY

But what if he's not a fantasy?

WILFRED

Ich habe eine Frau getroffen. (*I've met a woman.*)

SYDNEY

Most everyone here thinks he's a fine fellow with a future who loves your daughter.

GERALD

Sorry, I prefer to trust my instincts, and I find him odious.

WILFRED

Sie heisst Annabelle. (*Her name is Annabelle.*)

SYDNEY

Gerald, did it ever occur to you that your “instincts” are the result of something else altogether? In psychology we call it cathexis. It’s when the emotional energy you should feel for an appropriate person, one’s wife for example, is felt instead for an inappropriate person.

GERALD

You mean like one’s daughter?

WILFRED

Annabelle...

GERALD

I know what you’re implying, and it’s outrageous! I’ve done nothing wrong, nothing!

SYDNEY

We’re not talking about “doing” but “feeling,” and your feelings are causing both of you considerable pain. What Annabelle needs is support and encouragement in her relationship with Blackstone. Instead she has to sneak about like a criminal.

GERALD

Because she’s mendacious as well as morose!

(GERALD and SYDNEY freeze as flashback explosions are heard by SERGEANT THOMAS TARBOX, who approaches the slumbering WILFRED, wielding a knife.)

GERALD

I’m her father; I know what’s good for her better than you, so mind your damn business!

SYDNEY

Blackstone is my business! He’s my patient and you keep trying to get him transferred, and I daresay you’d have succeeded if he hadn’t made a celebrity of himself.

GERALD

Trust me, I know things about Blackstone that will make you regret this conversation! You should be helping real wounded British soldiers, not a pathetic sniveling coward!

(GERALD and SYDNEY stand immobile as THOMAS draws forth his knife, violently stabs WILFRED in the neck, and flees! WILFRED gasps as ANNABELLE plays her piano in the parlor.)

ANNABELLE and the GHOST SOLDIER'S VOICES

*Somewhere a soldier lies dying,
Twice stabbed in the night through the heart.
Will he die of his wounds or live to grow wise,
Court his lover, then wed her, and flee
To the greenest green hills in the highlands,
Or be drawn to the shores of the sea?*

(HELEN approaches GERALD and SYDNEY.)

HELEN

Oh, thank heaven you're here! It's Wilfred Blackstone -- hurry!

(THEY dash off as the GHOST SOLDIERS enter Wilfred's room and surround his bed.)

GHOST SOLDIERS

*Somewhere a soldier lies dying,
Through centuries of wars lost and won;
Brave boys slain in battles
'neath graves marked by stones,
The stones worn to dust, trampled by feet,
As God's great armies continue to march,
Keeping time to the steady beat.*

(Lights fade to blackest night.)

SCENE 10

(SYDNEY is seated in his office; ANNABELLE enters in a fury.)

ANNABELLE

Excuse me, but what's happened?! Where's Wilfred?!

SYDNEY

Still in surgery.

ANNABELLE

Was he stabbed because he spoke German?! That's what the nurses are saying.

SYDNEY

Yes, I'm afraid Sergeant Tarbox thought he was back in the trenches.

ANNABELLE

My father's one of the surgeons, isn't he?!

SYDNEY

He's with Doctor Whitehall, and believe me, they're working desperately to save him. His notoriety has made his health a national concern. *(pause)* I know you're anxious, but please, sit down. Are you seeing any...?

ANNABELLE

No, but on my way here, I saw dark, rolling clouds. *(pause)* Lightning is born in cumulus clouds -- it's in that book you gave me. Whenever I see them, I tend to walk faster, as if they're chasing me. Forgive me for rambling; you must think me insane.

SYDNEY

Not at all. What I think is that you've been given a glimpse of another reality, one that's unfathomable and hidden from the rest of us.

ANNABELLE

Thank you, Doctor, for being...sympathetic.

SYDNEY

Please, call me Sydney. You're not my patient, you know.

ANNABELLE

Then call me Annabelle.

SYDNEY

It's a beautiful name. *(pause)* You realize when Wilfred recovers, they'll arrest him.

ANNABELLE

Arrest him...?

SYDNEY

It seems while he was serving in France, Wilfred allowed an enemy soldier to escape, then shot himself. He'll be tried by the district court martial as soon as he recovers.

ANNABELLE

But how...how do they know?

SYDNEY

Apparently, there was some suspicion, but now there's proof.

(RUPERT enters, his white coat splattered in blood.)

RUPERT

Ah, Sydney, Annabelle, it looks like he's going to make it. The blade missed his carotid by a hair -- he's damn lucky. He's lost a lot of blood, but he's strong; he'll pull through.

ANNABELLE

Oh, thank heaven!

SYDNEY

That's good news.

RUPERT

By the way, Annabelle, your father said to go straight home.

ANNABELLE

I'm staying right here.

RUPERT

He wants to spare you. It seems the military police are going to post a guard until he can be transferred.

SYDNEY

Surely they don't expect a man fresh out of surgery to escape?

RUPERT

No, but there's plenty of Hun-hating patients who might have another go at him, poor sod. Now, if you'll excuse me.

(RUPERT departs.)

ANNABELLE

You were saying something about proof -- what proof?

SYDNEY

They found his journal. It was written in German and -- where are you going?! Miss Snowden! Annabelle!

(ANNABELLE has dashed off and is followed by SYDNEY.)

SCENE 11

(In the Snowden's parlor, MAVIS and HELEN are seated, drinking tea.)

MAVIS

I've finally found a flat, and it's furnished. Once I've moved in, I can play hostess for a change.

HELEN

Mavis, dear, forgive me for asking, but is there any chance that you and Malcolm might reconcile?

MAVIS

Never. The trouble with marrying a judge is his impregnable belief in his own rectitude.

HELEN

But you endured it all these years -- what happened?

MAVIS

His damn committee to promote the States joining the slaughter. Malcolm thinks wars are good for boys -- rites of passage into his Darwinian idea of manhood. Ha! How I'd love to walk him through the wards to show him where his "rites of passage" lead! We argued so fiercely, we couldn't bear to be in the same room. I knew if I stayed, I'd become an embittered gorgon or wither away like his other wives.

HELEN

I can't imagine you withering -- Annabelle!

(ANNABELLE has burst in to confront MAVIS.)

ANNABELLE

You traitor! You liar! How could you!?

MAVIS

What are you talking about?!

ANNABELLE

They're going to arrest Wilfred!

MAVIS

What...?

HELEN

Oh, no...

ANNABELLE

They found the diary!

MAVIS

Slow down! What are you saying?!

HELEN

Oh, dear...

ANNABELLE

You're the only one who knew!

MAVIS

Bollocks! It wasn't me!

ANNABELLE

Then where is it?! Where's the diary?!

MAVIS

Wherever you put it!

HELEN

No, wait, Annabelle, stop! Please, stop! You won't find the diary because I...I found it.

MAVIS

Oh, no...

ANNABELLE

Mother...?

HELEN

(to Mavis) When I passed your room, I...I saw you cover it up, so after you left, my curiosity was roused,...

MAVIS

Go on!

HELEN

Well, then I mentioned it to Gerald...

MAVIS

Bloody hell!

ANNABELLE

Oh, no...

MAVIS

How did he get it? Did you give it to him?!

HELEN

No, I refused, but he...he found it *(to Annabelle)* in your room.

MAVIS

You could've warned us! You realize there'll be an investigation that implicates Annabelle!

ANNABELLE

I can't believe this -- my own mother!

HELEN

I...I'm sorry, I regret my role in this, but Annabelle, you have to admit he's a coward.

ANNABELLE

No, he's not! He's the bravest man I know, and I don't care what he's done! You and father betrayed me, and I'm not staying in this house another night! (*starting to leave*) I'm sorry I accused you, Auntie; I hope you'll forgive me.

HELEN

Where are you going?

ANNABELLE

To pack!

MAVIS

I'll help; you can stay at my flat.

(ANNABELLE marches off, followed by MAVIS.)

HELEN

Oh, Mavis, wait! Please, please don't go. (*tearfully*) What...what can I do?

MAVIS

Nothing! You've not only lost a daughter, you've sent a good man to prison or worse. You do know the penalty for allowing the enemy to escape -- death by execution!

HELEN

Oh, God, I...I didn't think. If only you'd told me! You always leave me out -- the two of you.

MAVIS

We're not school girls, Helen. If your daughter confides me, it's because I listen while you're holed up in that damn darkroom or at work.

HELEN

That's right, I work! People depend on me while you've always had a man to support you! You natter on about women's rights, but I'm the one who's out there -- living the life of a wage earning woman, and it's bloody hell! And if I'm in my darkroom, it's because I need to make something I can touch that isn't going to bleed to death in front of me!

MAVIS

Please don't think I disparage your work, but that doesn't condone what you and Gerald have done.

(MAVIS starts to leave.)

HELEN

Wait, Mavis; you can't just leave like this! There must be something -- anything -- I can do. Please, tell me.

MAVIS

(pause, she sighs) All right. Keep us informed; tell us everything. They'll take him away, and I want to know when and where.

HELEN

Yes, of course; I...I promise.

MAVIS

Now it's your turn to be brave.

(MAVIS departs, leaving HELEN in tears.)

SCENE 12

(An organ resounds at the Mercy Hospital Chapel where EDGAR stands at a podium, dressed as a minister, while the CHAPEL CHOIR gathers with ANNABELLE joined by SYDNEY, HELEN, GERALD, MAVIS, DOCTORS, PATIENTS, and the GHOST SOLDIERS.)

EDGAR

There's a celebratory mood here in the hospital chapel: it's the day after the Kaiser's army surrendered.

(Now EDGAR becomes the REVEREND RODERICK CHALKIN, speaking with evangelical fervor.)

REVEREND RODERICK CHALKIN

Today let us offer prayers of gratitude for the American victory at Cantigny, and the defeat of Germany and her allies. This war will not be one of the forgotten wars. No indeed, this will be the war to end all wars! Too many men have endured the evils of confinement in trenches; too many minds have been shattered by horrors more repellent than the rats we see taking over the city. And are the rats not an allegorical presence? Have we not devolved into beasts filled with vengeance for creatures who are really like ourselves? It's true, the bombings have ceased, and buildings will be reconstructed, but what about lives? What about souls? Perhaps we can begin the healing by finding pity in our hearts for prisoners like "The Digger" who we thought we knew. But what is any man's true identity? Is "The Digger" a traitor? Is he a coward or a pacifist? Or is he a teacher whose diary revealed a sympathetic heart? *(pause)* Now there are legions of us calling on soldiers everywhere to relinquish their weapons, to meld the metal of guns, grenades, and bullets into bricks, and I say, yea! Forge the bricks in the fires of forgiveness, then lay them into towering pyramids of peace! Yea, I say: pyramids of peace with foundations of war that enjoin us to cease fighting! To end forever the madness of our death driven world! *(pause)* And now Miss Annabelle Snowden has composed a song for this occasion:

(ANNABELLE sits at the piano, and the CHOIR sings in harmony.)

ANNABELLE, THE CHAPEL CHOIR, and GHOST SOLDIERS

*Will our Pyramids of Peace
Pay homage to our lands,
Rising like great mountains,
Or sink in shifting sands?
Will foundations forged of metals
From guns that killed and maimed,
Inspire a world of wonders
Or fuel the fires untamed?*

*Oh, Pyramids of Peace we'll build,
With steps for all to climb;
Pyramids of Peace we'll build,
Our monuments sublime.*

(The GHOST SOLDIERS dance off as the CHAPEL CHOIR disassembles.)

SCENE 13

(In a dimly lit pub, SYDNEY sits, drinking whiskey until ANNABELLE arrives.)

ANNABELLE

Thank you for meeting me.

SYDNEY

Of course, Annabelle. May I buy you a drink?

ANNABELLE

No, thank you.

SYDNEY

I understand you and your Aunt have been interrogated.

ANNABELLE

We might have gone to prison, but Mavis knew a solicitor who defends pacifists, so we're free, though I'm forbidden to contact Wilfred.

SYDNEY

Your father's quite distraught. I dare say he regrets the role he played in all this.

ANNABELLE

Did he tell you that?

SYDNEY

No, your mother did. *(holding out a package)* She asked me to give you this.

(Pause as ANNABELLE unwraps a framed photograph.)

ANNABELLE

The light on his face makes him look angelic. *(pause)* Is it true Wilfred's speaking?

SYDNEY

Fluently, but he appears to have a rare form of anterograde amnesia which means he's unable to recall incidents after the trauma. In other words, he remembers everything *before* the lightning struck but nothing after.

ANNABELLE

Not even...?

SYDNEY

Sorry. *(pause)* I asked if he'd had any unusual visions or sensations, but he only admitted to nightmares of his days in the Somme. I sensed a reluctance to be forthcoming, but I'm not inclined to push him, especially since he won't be with us for long.

ANNABELLE

You mean he'll be transferred to prison. *(pause)* I heard that once the armistice is signed, the prisoners will be sent home.

SYDNEY

Yes, but I'm afraid Wilfred's charges are too serious. We'll keep him here as long as we can. He's still "The Digger" to the staff, and there's a sympathetic feeling towards him. I'm sure you know there's petitions being passed about, pleas for a merciful sentence.

ANNABELLE

I have to see him!

SYDNEY

Yes, I...I thought as much.

ANNABELLE

My mother gave Mavis a nurse's uniform I can wear, but I'll need to get past the guard.

SYDNEY

The fellow on night duty sits outside his room and tends to nod off, so you'll have privacy. Just be at my office tomorrow after ten.

ANNABELLE

Thank you, Sydney; I knew you'd understand. I suspect you're one of us.

SYDNEY

My first week at Mercy, I had a patient, a handsome lieutenant shot full of shrapnel with both arms amputated at the elbow. He'd wet himself and was apologizing to the nurse. He couldn't even wipe the tears flowing down his face. After the nurse left, he begged me to give him an overdose. I couldn't end his life, but he ended my belief in war. Now I wonder how anyone, after seeing these boys, barely out of school, their perfect bodies mangled, their minds stunted by horrific images -- how can they still claim war as an instrument of virtue? It's absurd. *(pause, he sighs)* Annabelle, I should say that I...I hope you won't be...disappointed.

ANNABELLE

What are you saying...?

SYDNEY

I'm afraid a man divested of even a few memories can seem indifferent about things he once cared about. *(he sighs)* In our conversations, he seemed disinclined to return to his former life, to rekindle old friendships. He knows that excerpts from his diary have been published, and he feels exposed, even violated.

ANNABELLE

Does he blame me for finding the diary?

SYDNEY

No, he doesn't mention you, so I'm concerned that your devotion, might not be... reciprocal. I just don't want to see you get hurt, and perhaps I...I'd hoped to see more of you myself.

ANNABELLE

Well, you'll see me tomorrow.

(ANNABELLE departs as the CHAPEL CHOIR continues singing.)

THE CHAPEL CHOIR and GHOST SOLDIERS

*Will our Pyramids of Peace
Have doors that lead inside,
Tunnels and to chambers,
Great labyrinths that hide
The lonely ghosts of soldiers slain,
In wars both won and lost.
Will they praise our pyramids,
Though lives are what they cost?*

*Oh, Pyramids of Peace we'll build,
With steps for all to climb;
Pyramids of Peace we'll build
Our monuments sublime.*

SCENE 14

(Rat scurrings are heard as WILFRED sits, propped up in his hospital bed, reading Doctor Jekyll and Mister Hyde. ANNABELLE enters dressed in a nurse's uniform uniform.)

ANNABELLE

Wilfred...?

WILFRED

Hello.

ANNABELLE

Oh, my dear, it's so wonderful to hear your voice again. You recognize me, don't you?

WILFRED

Of course, Annabelle.

ANNABELLE

(pause) Oh, please say more; I love hearing you speak.

WILFRED

I'm told I owe you my life. I also heard you were a frequent visitor.

ANNABELLE

Yes, but I've been banished. Doctor Pearlman said no one can hear us. *(pause)* He said you don't remember digging up the bones.

WILFRED

I must have been a sight.

ANNABELLE

You were heroic! One of the archeologists said that touching the skeletons of ancient warriors made him weep. He said they still vibrated with suffering.

WILFRED

Yes, well, I...I've been hearing some extraordinary tales.

ANNABELLE

They're not tales; they're true! *(pause)* How I wish you could remember, because when you were struck, our spirits danced. Then later, you led the soldiers who died -- from this world to the next.

WILFRED

(pause) I don't know what to say. I...I'm sorry, but my memory's a blank.

ANNABELLE

(pause) Why don't I believe you?

WILFRED

I beg your pardon...?

ANNABELLE

You can't have forgotten! (*reaching out*) Oh, Wilfred, let me hold your hand!

WILFRED

(*withdrawing*) Please, Annabelle... (*pause*) Look, you'll have to forgive me, but I...I'm not myself yet; please understand.

ANNABELLE

Yes, of course. I've seen what you've endured, but you're better now, and no matter what happens, I'm here to help.

WILFRED

Look, you mustn't...

ANNABELLE

Mustn't what? What is it...? (*pause*) Is it that you really don't remember, or that you no longer feel the same?

WILFRED

Look, you know there's going to be a trial. Officially, I'm charged with conspiring with the enemy and maiming myself to be rendered unfit for combat. One charge is bad enough, but with both I'm bound to be sentenced -- I could even be shot.

ANNABELLE

I won't let that happen; I'll help you escape!

WILFRED

That's very kind, but my former commanding officers are going to testify on my behalf. Colonel Graves said he'd explain how translating letters affected my judgment.

ANNABELLE

As if being merciful was a crime!

WILFRED

It is when you're at war.

ANNABELLE

But surely you know that everyone's on your side. There's letters in the Times every day; petitions are being signed.

WILFRED

I'm told if I'm lucky, I'll get off with as few as three years or as many as twenty. Still, it's more time lost, and I don't want the burden of someone waiting, expecting me to feel...responsible. When I'm released, I want to go back to teaching -- if anyone will have me. But what I don't want is to be constantly interrogated, photographed, and I especially don't want to be...

ANNABELLE

What...?

WILFRED

An usher! Yes, damnit, I remember. *(pause)* I always knew when they were coming because the barometric pressure seemed to change -- as if storms were brewing all around me.

ANNABELLE

For a rationalist it must have been...distressing.

WILFRED

You've no idea. *(pause)* As a child I was told that when we died our spirits would be radiant and beautiful, but the soldiers were still so... damaged.

ANNABELLE

But when they walked through the light, they *became* radiant -- luminous!

WILFRED

If it weren't for you, I'd be one of them myself, but my mind, my body, wants to plant its feet on solid ground. Every day I get stronger, the more they recede, and now it's been nine days -- nine blessed days of peace. The last place they appeared was in the operating room, circling my bed. When I awoke, they were gone, and that's when I knew I didn't want to usher the dead; I want to usher the living -- the living!

ANNABELLE

But Wilfred, they...they need you.

WILFRED

They'll find their way; with the war ended, there won't be as many.

ANNABELLE

(pause) It may sound strange, but I...I miss them.

WILFRED

Then *you* should be the usher. Please, don't look so...depressed. You're so lovely, so talented; try to think of your future, of finding someone worthy of you. Forget the dead; forget me.

ANNABELLE

How can I? I know you so well. I know your thoughts and feelings -- I've read your diary.

WILFRED

You and everyone else!

ANNABELLE

I'm sorry about that, but your writing expressed your love of music and dancing, and confirmed that you taught science instead of history. Did you lie to impress me?

WILFRED

No, I lied because I'm a liar. Look, that diary's full of bull and sentimental rubbish. What I didn't write is that I'm a philanderer who's seduced and deceived dozens of gullible girls.

ANNABELLE

Then it's not true that you followed me eleven times?

WILFRED

No, only four. I'm no good, Annabelle, believe me, no good at all.

ANNABELLE

How could you be an usher if you're no good?

WILFRED

That's a question I've asked a thousand times. What I think is that the soul or essence of a person, is somehow independent of the mind -- which explains why everyone always rises. So it doesn't matter if a man's a feckless rotter because his soul remains good and pure no matter how he behaves.

ANNABELLE

Then what's important is that we've seen each other's souls. Later we'll explore each others minds. Oh, Wilfred, I've been longing to share my thoughts and feelings, my songs and my...my body.

(ANNABELLE unbuttons and removes her uniform.)

WILFRED

Annabelle, please stop. *(pause, staring)* You shouldn't...

ANNABELLE

Would you like me to crawl in beside you?

WILFRED

No, no, please don't. You're very...beautiful, but really, you must dress yourself. Please! I...I have to insist. Now get dressed, or I'll...

ANNABELLE

Or you'll what...?

WILFRED

Just do as I say, damnit!

(ANNABELLE sits, clutching the uniform in her lap.)

WILFRED

Look, when I followed you, I was infatuated, it's true, and you've been incredibly generous -- wonderful in every way. But what I need now is to get well, and if I'm lucky, someday I'll marry an ordinary girl, have ordinary children, teach ordinary students, and vacation by the sea. That's all I want -- a pleasant, peaceful life completely free of everyone living or dead who reminds me of this place!

ANNABELLE

Everyone...?

WILFRED

Yes! When I'm out of prison, I'll pack up and move to Cardiff or as far as Ireland, or even to the States -- New York or California. I suppose that makes me sound like a bloody coward, so the charges against me are true after all. *(pause)* Oh, please, don't cry... *(mumbling)* Christ...

ANNABELLE

(glancing about the room) Do you think they're here now? Soldiers, can you hear me? Are you with us...?

WILFRED

Annabelle...

ANNABELLE

Can you make yourselves visible?

WILFRED

Please stop.

ANNABELLE

I know you're here; please show yourselves.

WILFRED

Annabelle, for godssake!

ANNABELLE

Maybe if I sing? *Somewhere a soldier lies dying;
In a world that's never known peace...*

WILFRED

I said stop it this instant!

ANNABELLE

(turning, searching) Oh, please, my soldiers, show yourselves, and help me; help me keep him...

WILFRED

Don't do this, please don't...

ANNABELLE

I'll find them; I know they're here.

WILFRED

I'm serious! If you don't stop this instant, I'll call the guard!

(ANNABELLE stops to stare at Wilfred.)

WILFRED

Now put on your dress, damnit!

(ANNABELLE dresses herself.)

WILFRED

I think it's best if you leave. Look, I'm sorry; believe me, I never intended to hurt you.

ANNABELLE

(approaching him) Won't you kiss me...?

WILFRED

I'd rather not. (*lying down, closing his eyes*) If you don't mind, I'm very tired.

ANNABELLE

I...I'll miss you, my...my dear...

WILFRED

Good night, Annabelle.

(ANNABELLE walks away, crestfallen. After SHE leaves, WILFRED weeps as the VOICES OF THE GHOST SOLDIERS are heard singing slowly, sadly, their voices echoing.)

GHOST SOLDIERS

*My soldier boy, Willy,
Came home from the war;
But something's gone missing,
He's not like before...*

SCENE 15

(A bitter wind howls as EDGAR enters, while ANNA-BELLE wanders in from the opposite direction. THEY ignore each other, as if coming from different planes of space and time, then EDGAR speaks.)

EDGAR

I chose to create a tale of horror, and what's more horrible than war? Only to be in the grip of great mortal despair, and I ask you, who is deader? The ghost soldiers or a woman wandering the streets in despair, without direction, without even a coat, possessing only an insatiable need that can never be fulfilled -- not by music or theatre or the man she loves. Although I attempted to control the plot, the characters flowed from my pen by their own logic, so I can't be blamed, and it's not over yet.

(Thunder is heard as EDGAR backs away, surprised that his characters have reappeared. In the Snowden parlor, HELEN is reading Mary Shelly's Frankenstein as MAVIS enters. Meanwhile SYDNEY and GERALD also appear, standing in the hospital.)

MAVIS

Sorry to barge in like this, but have you seen Annabelle?

HELEN

No, why? What's happened?

MAVIS

No one's seen her since she went to visit Wilfred. I thought she stayed for a romantic tryst, but when I called Doctor Pearlman, he said she'd left last night.

HELEN

(mumbling) Oh, dear God...

MAVIS

I'm sick with worry!

HELEN

Does Gerald know?

MAVIS

I'm sure by now someone's told him...

MAVIS

...she's missing.

SYDNEY

She's missing!

(Now the action shifts swiftly from the hospital to the parlor.)

SYDNEY

Your sister, Mavis, phoned. No one's seen her since she left here late last night.

GERALD

She was here?!

SYDNEY

She met with Wilfred, and apparently,...

SYDNEY

...things did not go well.

MAVIS

Things did not go well.

GERALD

What do you mean?

HELEN

She had her heart set on him.

MAVIS

Well, he broke it. He said...

MAVIS
...he's not in love.

SYDNEY
He's not in love;...

SYDNEY
...doesn't even want to see her.

GERALD
The swine!

HELEN
The cad!

MAVIS
Don't believe it. Doctor Pearlman said...

MAVIS
...he was distraught.

SYDNEY
He was distraught;...

SYDNEY
...inconsolable, wept for hours.

MAVIS
She left a note on her bureau.

HELEN
What did it say?

GERALD
What did it say?!

(As MAVIS speaks, ANNABELLE is seen wandering aimlessly in a storm.)

MAVIS
Dear Aunt, I've gone cloud stalking.

SYDNEY
She's stalking clouds.

GERALD
What the blazes does that mean?

SYDNEY
I'm not certain, but I think she's...

SYDNEY
...looking for lightning.

MAVIS
Looking for lightning,...

MAVIS
...she wants to be struck again.

GERALD
Good lord!

HELEN
Why?!

GERALD
Why?!

(A lightning bolt strikes, but misses ANNABELLE.)

SYDNEY
Perhaps to see her phantom soldiers.

MAVIS
Perhaps she wants to forget,...

SYDNEY
If you're struck hard, the slate's wiped clean, and you...

SYDNEY
...forget.

MAVIS
...forget...

MAVIS
...she was loved by...

SYDNEY
Her note was signed...

SYDNEY
... "The Usher."

MAVIS
The Usher...

(Lightning strikes again, missing ANNABELLE.)

HELEN
I'm to blame!

GERALD
I'm to blame!

HELEN
(*to Mavis*) If only I'd confronted you first!

GERALD

If only I'd minded my own bloody business!

HELEN

They might have married.

GERALD

I never thought she'd leave us.

HELEN

They might have had children.

GERALD

England first -- that's how I was raised.

HELEN

All I want is my family;...

HELEN

...we have to find her!

GERALD

We have to find her!

GERALD

Call the police!

SYDNEY

I'm going to search myself!

MAVIS

We'll trace her usual routes.

HELEN

Yes! Where's...

HELEN

...my umbrella?!

GERALD

My umbrella!

(A thunderous crack is heard as lightning strikes
ANNABELLE! SHE is jolted, then falls as VOICES
are heard, echoing.)

HELEN'S VOICE

Annabelle!

SYDNEY'S VOICE

Annabelle!

GERALD'S VOICE

Annabelle!

MAVIS'S VOICE

Annabellllllleeee...

(The music to "Somewhere a Soldier Lies Dying" is heard as the GHOST SOLDIERS surround ANNABELLE whose SPIRIT rises toward beams of light.)

EPILOGUE

(Fog rolls in as the waltz continues and EDGAR strolls onto the dimly lit stage.)

EDGAR

Those of you who ventured into the world of my lurid tale, deserve to know the characters' destinies: they died. All were wounded by the war, some more deeply than others. Annabelle was struck, her body buried, but her spirit chose to become an usher.

(As EDGAR continues, ANNABELLE'S SPIRIT enters.)

EDGAR

She remained on this stage called Earth to escort those souls making their exits in the dark. Among them was Doctor...

EDGAR

...Sydney Pearlman...

SYDNEY

Sydney Pearlman.

(The SPIRIT OF SYDNEY appears.)

SYDNEY

I perished three months later of influenza after treating an American tourist.

(ANNABELLE waltzes the SPIRIT OF SYDNEY into the mist as the SPIRIT OF GERALD appears.)

EDGAR

A decade later, came Annabelle's father,...

EDGAR
...Gerald Snowden.

GERALD
Gerald Snowden.

GERALD
I never ceased mourning the loss of my daughter -- till I tripped down the hospital steps and suffered a cerebral hemorrhage!

(ANNABELLE'S SPIRIT waltzes the SPIRIT OF GERALD into the mist.)

EDGAR
Six months later, came Annabelle's mother, Helen.

HELEN
My portrait studio was thriving, but in a fit of despondency, I took a few too many pills with my jiggers of gin.

(ANNABELLE'S SPIRIT dances with the SPIRIT OF HELEN into the mist.)

EDGAR
Then came Annabelle's Aunt Mavis whose gravestone reads:

(The SPIRIT OF MAVIS steps forward.)

MAVIS
"A suffragette who helped the women of England secure the vote in 1928." I married a barrister, and at the age of seventy, drowned in a boating accident.

(MAVIS'S SPIRIT is waltzed off by ANNABELLE'S SPIRIT.)

EDGAR
As for...

EDGAR
...Wilfred Blackstone.

WILFRED
Wilfred Blackstone....

(The SPIRIT OF WILFRED appears.)

WILFRED

After two years in prison, I immigrated to the United States where I changed my name, married, raised children, and continued teaching. At age fifty-eight, I succumbed to heart failure while cycling in a storm. That's when I saw a familiar face...

(Music is heard as ANNABELLE'S SPIRIT reaches out to WILFRED, and HE responds with joyous recognition. THEY draw close, dancing briefly, then depart together as the music fades.)

EDGAR

Annabelle's beloved Wilfred fathered three sons who had sons, and I'm the youngest. Didn't you wonder why this usher? Why this story? And why now? Last year, while rummaging through old albums, I discovered this remarkable photograph. (*drawing forth an old photograph*) It's a composite of Wilfred digging, surrounded by faded spectators who inspired my muse. Like Wilfred, I crave the transcendence of theatre, so I serve as an usher as do my sons and daughters. By now all the soldiers of World War One will have been ushered into the world beyond as you will be too, some sooner than later. (*pause*) And now if you still feel like dancing, please adjourn to the ballroom.

(EDGAR shuffles off stage as stars glimmer, and music is heard once again.)

End of Play

