

SILENT NIGHT

PART 1: MANOEUVRES

There is a simple set with benches and three blasted trees from No Man's Land.

To the sides, sit the Community and School Choirs. They sing some of the songs and carols and add crowd noise. The choirs are different at each venue since they will belong to the locale of the venue.

The BLAKELY family enters: ALICE: an Edwardian woman with a parasol; THOMAS, a school boy; WALTER, a soldier of the Cheshire Regiment and also ALICE'S sweetheart. In through this static group walks a thin, dark, nervous man; this is GAVRILO PRINCIP.

SCENE 1: SARAJEVO

GAVRILO PRINCIP I am standing outside Moritz Schiller's café, heavy with failure. There is birdsong. And a breeze from the river. Petals fall from the oleander trees like Christmas snow. But the city is hot and full of people. They are waiting to see a man in an automobile, and they are sycophantic fools. He is long gone by now. Our chance is lost. But then the motor car I thought was gone turns into the street where I'm standing and slows and stops by Schiller's Café, and the engine stalls. The hood of the car is rolled down and I can see important men in the car shouting at the driver, but I can't hear anything anymore: I can only see their mouths moving. And then I see him: the one on whose behalf they are all shouting. He is smiling at his wife, and she at him. But they are nervous. There is a black plume in her hat. It flutters in the breeze. The buttons on his uniform glint in the sun. She has a dark roses on her lap. I am so close I could call their names and they would turn and see me. And then, in the shimmer of the heat, even time stalls. There is only this moment. Like a held breath. One last moment of another world. I hear birdsong. And then the car rolls backwards. Everything is drifting away from me. I'm losing my chance. And I lift my revolver.

*Two distant echoey gun shots.
The group around PRINCIP open their hands and
blow white petals into the air.*

Petals fall. And then everything changes.

GAVRILLO stares at the gun in his hands.

SONG: There's a Long, Long Trail

Nights are growing very lonely,
Days are very long;
I'm a-growing weary only
List'ning for your song.
Old remembrances are thronging
Thro' my memory.
Till it seems the world is full of dreams
Just to call you back to me.

Chorus:
There's a long, long trail a-winding
Into the land of my dreams,
Where the nightingales are singing
And a white moon beams:
There's a long, long night of waiting
Until my dreams all come true;
Till the day when I'll be going down
That long, long trail with you.

SCENE 2: TEA BY THE RIVER

Parasols and picnics

ALICE	Such a long, long hot summer.
THOMAS	A golden summer.
WALTER	The summer, when far away, a Bosnian Serb shot an Austrian archduke.
THOMAS	But it was a long, long way away.
JOE	It barely rippled the waters of the River Dee.
ALICE	And it was a lovely summer for strolling in the Meadows.

WALTER Arm in arm with my sweetheart under the skylarks.

ALICE Dear Walter Nightingale.

WALTER Dearest Alice Blakely.

JOE And Joseph Blakely.

THOMAS And Thomas Blakely.

THOMAS gives a bunch of violets to WALTER who then offers them to ALICE.

ALICE *(She knows what's coming)* Violets! How lovely.

WALTER Will you marry me, Alice Blakely?

ALICE Soon.

WALTER When?

ALICE Be patient.

WALTER If only I were your patient, Sister Blakely.

ALICE Walter, if I marry you then I shall have to leave my post at the Infirmary.

WALTER When can I ask you again?

ALICE This time next year.

WALTER I shall be here this time next year, and if you say no I shall die.

JOE It was so sunny that anything seemed possible.

THOMAS And we listened to the military bands playing on the new bandstand on the Groves.

JOE And took rowing boats out onto the Dee.

ALICE Don't splash my new dress!

WALTER And we strolled in the gentle afternoon.

JOE The gentle afternoon?

WALTER It was very still and the sky was quite clear and later it was studded with tiny stars and there were bats and there were nightjars.

JOE And a rather lovesick nightingale.

ALICE Walter has a romantic soul.

JOE How lovely! Shall we have some tea?

She unpacks a teapot and cups from a basket. They spread a cloth and take tea.

THOMAS And muffins. I do like muffins.

JOE How's Londonderry, Walter?

WALTER All quiet for once.

JOE And how long is your leave?

WALTER As a matter of fact, I've been called back early.

THOMAS This Serbian thing?

JOE Are the top brass taking it seriously?

WALTER There's a Precautionary Period been announced.

THOMAS Sounds terrific: what does it mean?

WALTER We are to prepare for immediate mobilisation.

ALICE Good Heavens!

THOMAS So there is going to be a war?

WALTER It will blow over.

ALICE And if it doesn't?

WALTER It'll be a tin-pot little Balkan affair like all the other wars there recently: it'll snuff out like a candle.

JOE At least something exciting's happening to you. I've been stuck for most of July inside a dusty office with inky fingers copying out ledgers.

ALICE You poor thing. Shall I be mother?

Pours tea.

WALTER I thought you were with the Territorial Force. You must have a little bit of excitement every so often.

JOE It's a lark at weekends and summer camps, but weekdays. Ugh! I copy out ledgers, and for what? If I study mathematics, and work hard for years to come, I could one day become an actuary...

ALICE An actuary! How thrilling! What's an actuary?

JOE Exactly: a nobody!

WALTER He calculates insurance risks and dividends. And some chaps would give their eye teeth to sit around all day in an office.

ALICE Sugar?

WALTER Thank you. One lump.

JOE Yes it could be worse: I could still be day dreaming in a school room like Thomas.

THOMAS Steady on, Joe: I've tipped people in the river for less, you know.

JOE You and whose army?

ALICE Thomas has a scholarship for the Grammar School.

JOE Yes, he has a charmed life, does our Thomas.

WALTER Well done, Thomas. And what will you do when you finish?

THOMAS University. And perhaps... but you'll laugh.

WALTER Sounds extremely mysterious.

ALICE It is extremely mysterious.

JOE My little brother wants to run away and join the circus!

THOMAS I do not.

ALICE Thomas is a little bit of an amateur conjuror. He can produce scented roses from handkerchiefs and make silver coins disappear.

JOE Especially coins that don't belong to him.

WALTER And how exactly do you do that?

JOE He's sworn to secrecy.

ALICE But he might show you.

THOMAS Do you have a coin?

WALTER I do...

JOE Careful, Walter: you won't see that again!

THOMAS demonstrates his coin tricks.

WALTER Bravo! You should go on the stage.

ALICE Mother won't hear of it.

JOE He might need to when there are no jobs to go to. They've let William Maynard go from our place.

THOMAS offers coin back.

WALTER Keep it.

THOMAS Thanks.

ALICE They're letting people go?

JOE Things have been a little slow lately.

WALTER It's all this talk of a war in Europe. It unsettles people.

ALICE But a war in Europe won't affect us here, will it?

WALTER Probably not.

THOMAS Just our luck.

ALICE Poor William Maynard is an old school friend of Tom's.

THOMAS Don't worry about Maynard: he's pleased as punch.

ALICE But what will he do now?

THOMAS He's already taken the King's shilling.

JOE Another little coin thief.

ALICE Little William Maynard has joined the army?

THOMAS He's nearly seventeen and he's as tall as a tree.

ALICE I thought you had to be nineteen to join the army.

THOMAS Apparently, he put a slip of paper in his shoe with 19
written on it and when they asked if he was over nineteen
he said that he was. Quite a good ruse, don't you think?
I'm thinking of keeping him company!

ALICE You can't. And anyway, your teachers won't like it.

THOMAS I've had quite enough of being ordered about by little men
with big moustaches.

WALTER And of course, there's none of that in the armed forces.

THOMAS Do you know where the Cheshires are? Besides the ones
who are in Ireland like you, Walter!

JOE I'll wager they're not in Chester copying out ledgers.

WALTER The Second Battalion's out in India.

THOMAS That's where Maynard reckons he's headed. One minute
he's cycling round on an errand bicycle; the next he's
sailing for an outpost of the Empire to do glorious things.

JOE I've a mind to join the Regulars.

ALICE Whatever will mother say?

JOE She'll be thrilled to bits: the pay's bound to be better by half.

ALICE And what if there is a war?

JOE Then there'll be a whole heap of excitement. It's an exciting life, isn't it Walter?

WALTER It's very different from sitting in an office.

JOE No more dust and ink, but honest sweat and blood for King and country

THOMAS It's a proper Boys' Own adventure!

JOE It's a glorious life and I, for one, am game.

THOMAS Me too.

ALICE Don't be ridiculous, Joe. And Thomas Blakely, you're not old enough.

THOMAS The blooming war will be over by the time I am.

WALTER But there won't be a war. They've said all this about the Prussians before now and it didn't come to anything. It'll be another storm in a teacup.

ALICE More tea, Walter?

SCENE: POLITICS

They are all reading newspapers

THOMAS With Germany's support, Austria has invaded Serbia.

WALTER And in support of Serbia, Russia has put her forces on a war footing.

JOE And now, apparently, Germany has warned Russia not to mobilise.

ALICE Which, of course, Russia ignores.

ALL And so Germany declares war on Russia.

JOE And because France is Russia's ally, Germany demands an assurance of France's neutrality.

THOMAS But France will not give any such assurance

ALICE and seeing a chance to get back Alsace-Lorraine, her long lost territories, she mobilises.

ALL And so Germany declares war on France.

WALTER And marches on her borders,

JOE As fast as she can,

THOMAS via Belgium,

ALICE which is neutral.

WALTER The Germans demand unimpeded passage through to the French border.

THOMAS But Belgium refuses.

ALICE (*Waves her newspaper like a flag*) Gallant little Belgium!

WALTER And the British Government warns the Germans to respect Belgium's neutrality.

ALICE But they've stepped over the line.

JOE The British Government sends Germany an ultimatum,

THOMAS Which is ignored,

ALL And as of 11pm, on 4th August 1914, we are at war.

WALTER (*Takes an envelope from his top pocket and opens it*) The 1st Battalion of the Cheshire Regiment is with the British Expeditionary Forces.

ALICE And the lamps are going out all over Europe

SONG: A Pop at the Boche

Patter

There's a little spot of bother in some far and distant land
And the King has called us boys to do our part and lend a hand
So we're laying down our ploughshares and we're taking up the sword
And we're marching with the Cheshires for old England.

Chorus

We're going to take a little pop at the Boche
We're off to see the world, we're going to have some fun.
We're going to take a bit of a pop at the Hun
And show 'em how to fire a great big gun, bang bang.

SCENE: AT LAST THINGS ARE HAPPENING

- JOE At last something is happening.
- ALICE The streets of Chester are full of bustling crowds.
- THOMAS People are gathered in the squares.
- ALICE And everyone seems so thrilled and enthusiastic.
- WALTER We have to assemble horses, wagons, ammunition, rifles,
iron rations, bicycles, bully beef, tins of maconochie and
tents!
- JOE This is a just and unavoidable war!
- WALTER This is an administrative nightmare of a war, but we
practised mobilisation earlier this summer so we'll be ready
in no time at all.
- ALICE And in no time at all, the stores are besieged by anxious
people.
- THOMAS There is no bread, and not a single sausage to be had
anywhere in Chester.
- THOMAS But the Chronicle proclaims:
- JOE "While the British Fleet sails, British food supplies will be
quite secure!"

WALTER marches purposefully with a clipboard.

WALTER The Quartermaster is tearing his hair out because a couple of machine guns and some harness are late arriving from Dublin.

THOMAS Joe! The police have been knocking on doors.

ALICE Lord Kitchener has called on every available National Reserve Man to serve his country.

JOE And the Territorials! I've been ordered to report.

THOMAS You lucky thing!

ALICE On 9th August two batteries of the Cheshire Brigade Royal Field Artillery march out of the city. We went to see them go and I thought of Walter in Ireland.

WALTER Mobilisation 1st Cheshires complete on the 10th August. By the right, quick march!

ALICE It was quite a touching send off.

THOMAS It rained quite hard

JOE but it didn't dampen our spirits.

THOMAS We waved flags for them.

WALTER Eyes right!

ALICE They were magnificent

THOMAS And I longed to be with them.

WALTER Embarkation for France is on the 14th August in Belfast.

THOMAS They're taking horses in the street.

ALICE Mother, Tom and I were in a cab one minute and the next, the horse was taken and we had to get out and walk.

WALTER We've requisitioned as many good Irish horses as we can get.

ALICE The cabby was crying, poor thing.

THOMAS Fancy that: a grown man crying.

ALICE I think, Thomas, he was rather fond of his horse.

JOE And his livelihood, though I hear they get compensated quite handsomely.

ALICE And then Lord Kitchener calls for 100,000 men.

WALTER Your King and Country need you: a call to arms.

JOE Come along boys! Enlist today!

THOMAS Be ready! Join now!

WALTER Fall in! Answer now in your country's hour of need.

ALICE Where on earth will they all come from?

THOMAS I, Thomas Arthur Blakely, do make Oath,

ALICE Thomas!

THOMAS ...that I will be faithful and bear true Allegiance to His Majesty King George the Fifth, His Heirs, and Successors, and that I will, as in duty bound, honestly and faithfully defend His Majesty, His Heirs, and Successors, in Person, Crown and Dignity, against all enemies, and will observe and obey all orders of His Majesty, His Heirs and Successors, and of the Generals and Officers set over me. So help me God.

ALICE What have you done?

THOMAS Mother wept, but she said I'd made an oath before God and that I had to keep it.

JOE Are you in for three years or for the Duration?

THOMAS Three years of course: the newspapers are saying...

WALTER the Kaiser and his armies will be utterly crushed by Christmas.

ALL Hurray!

THOMAS So I thought I'd best get up there before it's too late.

ALICE Oh, Thomas Blakely, you foolish boy.

JOE Well he's made his bed now: let him lie in it.

THOMAS And within two weeks Kitchener has his 100,000 men.

ALICE Dearest Walter, I do hope you haven't forgotten us in all the excitement of your journey to the war.

WALTER Dearest Alice, sorry I haven't written, it's been awfully busy. We sailed on the SS Massilia, destination not announced, of course, but all talk was of France. There was a good deal of cheering and fluttering of handkerchiefs as we sailed out of Belfast. Very stirring moment. The men were quite cheery.

ALICE I do miss you.

WALTER There's so much khaki here the French shopkeepers take English money without turning a hair.

ALICE Do you need anything?

WALTER Please send boot laces, safety pins and an electric torch. Candles would also be useful and a box of Bryant and May. The French match sticks are as fierce as fireworks and most unpredictable. Hope Thomas is not finding training too much of a shock!

THOMAS Dear Walter, I haven't got a uniform, only an old blue thing and a wooden rifle.

WALTER Khaki's in very short supply, I'm afraid.

THOMAS One lad was drilling in his civilian clothes using an umbrella as a rifle and when it began to rain he put the thing up.

WALTER Bet that amused the officers no end.

JOE This war is already bringing out the best in people. Look at what a ne'er do well I was before all this.

ALICE Remind me to send my grateful thanks to the Kaiser.

JOE On this account you should not worry about Thomas: this will make a man of him.

WALTER Got to dash: something spooked the horses in the night and there was a stampede. I've got to help round them in.

VOICE Shall we shoot them as deserters, sir?

WALTER Interview them first.

VOICE Sir!

ALICE Will all this be over by Christmas?

WALTER I'm looking forward to seeing snow in Berlin.

JOE So am I.

THOMAS And so am I.

JOE Be happy for us Alice!

BOTH At last, something is happening to us.

SONG: Over by Christmas

It will all be over by Christmas
By Christmas we'll be marching home
And the snow will be falling, and we'll all be calling
We've not got a day more to roam, from home

It will all be over by Christmas
By Christmas the marching will stop
And the Boche will be losing, and we shall be boozing
As back home to Blighty we hop.

It will all be over by Christmas
By Christmas the shelling will stop
And the Boche will be running, and we shall be gunning
And back home to Blighty we hop.

SCENE: ALICE

THOMAS I came to say goodbye.

ALICE (*Reading paper*) According to the Chester Chronicle a Mr G.W. Hayes has donated his home, Hoole Bank, to be a

Red Cross Hospital. He's paying for the fitting up from his personal funds

THOMAS People are trying to do what they can to help.

ALICE And is this what you can do?

THOMAS Yes.

ALICE You've broken mother's heart.
And mine.

THOMAS Alice.
Please don't be... I'll write... I will write, I promise.

SCENE: TRAINING

WALTER The French are a decent lot: they greet us with songs and cheers and flowers. I feel quite the hero before I've even fired a shot. It seems too sunny for there to be a war on.

JOE There's a rumour some of us will get drafted into a battalion to go to France. Alice writes often.

WALTER And to me.

JOE She's very fond of you, you know.

WALTER And I can assure you that I have nothing but honourable intentions towards her. She is a very fine girl. In fact, when this war is over...

JOE (*sings*) When this ruddy war is over.... It hasn't even begun for me yet. I'm sending you a photograph. All the other boys are getting them done: don't I look quite the military man?

WALTER You look quite serious and grown up, Joe. Not the idiot we know and love!

JOE Careful Walter! I can, quite ruthlessly, bayonet a bag o' straw to death.

WALTER You are a card, Joseph Blakely.

JOE Post scriptum. Pardon the scrawl but just heard we are despatched. No official information as to where, but God knows, this is a glorious enterprise and I will endure! For King and country, I will endure!

WALTER Do let me know where!

JOE Birkenhead!

SONG: Pack up your Troubles

Private Perks is a funny little codger
With a smile a funny smile.
Five feet none, he's an artful little dodger
With a smile a funny smile.
Flush or broke he'll have his little joke,
He can't be suppress'd.
All the other fellows have to grin
When he gets this off his chest, Hi!

Chorus

Pack up your troubles in your old kit bag,
And smile, smile, smile,
While you've a lucifer to light your fag,
Smile, boys, that's the style.
What's the use of worrying?
It never was worth while, so
Pack up your troubles in your old kit bag,
And smile, smile, smile.

SCENE: THE CHESHIRE AT MONS

WALTER We march to this war down hot straight French roads, each man carrying 150lbs on his back, and the sun beating down on us till our tunics are wringing with sweat and our feet burn. The land is green and fresh and the roads overhanging with pear trees. People offer us wine and coffee. I'm flagging, but I'm wearing stripes and so I march as best as I can.

SERG Left right left right.

WALTER I have to show them I'm not weary.

SERG Come on, Cheshire lads: pick your feet up!

WALTER When we take the ten minutes rest at the hour, men collapse back onto their packs, still wearing them you understand, and they sleep where they fall. Like dead men.

SERG Captain wants us moving again; on your feet!

VOICE I was just back in Cheshire swimming in the Dee.

WALTER Fields give way to factories. We cross the Belgian border. The sun still burns and still we march. What wouldn't we give to wade waist deep into water right now? And then at last, in a thin yellow dusk, we trudge into a town called Dour

CPT (*Maps*) We're just short of Mons.

WALTER It's a busy little place full of clanging tramways and factories and smoking chimneys and mountainous black slagheaps.

SERG Platoon halt!

WALTER The Dragoon Guards trot through ahead of us, and nothing seems more out of place than these glossy animals and finely turned out men. When we sleep, billeted in factories among the slag heaps, it's the last night before our war begins.

SERG Shake yourselves, lads.

WALTER A busy army morning: the horses are groomed and fretting at their bits.

SERG Look lively, lads!

WALTER And it's a sort of organised chaos of men and shaving mirrors and motor vehicles and messages.

VOICE Another wire here, sir.

CPT JONES Another one!

SERG Look sharp! Let's not forget there's a war on!

WALTER Men are stamping their feet against the chill: the dew has made everything damp. But it will be warm.

CPT JONES The Manchesters are relieving us: we're moving out.

SERG You heard the Captain: Fall in!

VOICE This isn't a war, serg, it's a sight seeing trip.

SERG Look lively, Cheshire lads; and welcome to Cook's Tours:
Quick march!

WALTER We left behind the factories, and marched through fields of
land rising and falling so that we never know what's over
the next crest, but there's still no sign of any war.

SERG Keep those feet moving.

WALTER And all the while, the sun is climbing and men are
sweating. In the town behind us bells begin tolling.

VOICE It's Sunday, sir.

WALTER Scurrying between the platoons, there are families dressed
in church best black going down the lanes. And then a
cyclist rides over the hill ahead of us and pedals hell for
leather towards us.

JONES It's Tasker. What the devil's got into him?

WALTER Spit it out, Tasker.

TASKER Enemy ahead, sir. Just over the next rise.

JONES Prepare to engage.

SERG Extend to the right. And advance.

WALTER We reach the top of the bank and crouch by a thorn hedge
just in time to see the Dragoons wheel into formation.

VOICE The Hun isn't going to like this.

WALTER The horses rear and are held, then suddenly they leap into
a gallop, their riders drawing swords. It cheered the men to
see it.

JONES I can't see the enemy. What have you got?

WALTER (*Field glasses*) Nothing.
And all the while, it feels like a game: like we're on manoeuvres.

VOICE Something on the far hill, sir.

SERG Heads down!

WALTER The cavalry wheel towards the far hill, in a cloud of dust,
looking every inch a fighting force. And then the guns start.

SERG Machine guns.

JONES (*Field glasses*) Dear God.

WALTER Men tumble from horses. Horses flounder and roll, and
scream and bleed. A few stagger upright and bolt to a
copse of thin trees, and the men still mounted turn their
horses and follow.

JONES This isn't a battle; it's a massacre.

SERG Sir?

JONES Take us forward.

SERG Advance!

WALTER And then we saw infantry emerging like grey ghosts from
the thickets: dense formations of them.

SERG Two rounds battery fire. Repeat!

WALTER And we bang the bolts on the rifles up and down till our
hands ache and the barrels are red hot. Fifteen rounds a
minute.

SERG Repeat!

WALTER Men around me are hit. Sometimes they cry out,
sometimes there is just a sigh and stillness. I can still see
their open mouths, their surprised dead eyes.

SERG Repeat!

WALTER The Germans take heavy losses. But they keep coming and we keep mowing them down, till the field is strewn with horses and cavalry men and German infantry.

JONES Where's the ammunition mule?

VOICE No sign, sir.

SERG Well, look for it.

VOICE Sir!

SERG Who's got any bullets left?

VOICE I know where there's some.

WALTER And he crawls under the shooting to the dead and the dying and pulls through their pockets.

VOICE What are you doing, you bloody madman?

VOICE They can't use them anymore.

WALTER And he's stuffing handfuls of clips into his tunic to bring back to us.

CYCLIST Message sir. We're to retire.

JONES Sergeant!

SERG Retire! Individually to the right.

WALTER There are bullets whizzing above our heads, cracking into the stones and splintering the hedge. I crawl to the sunken road.

JONES Where's the rest of the Battalion?

VOICE They're retiring on our left!

WALTER A Major gallops up the lane.

MAJOR Who said to retire? Where the bloody hell did that order come from?

JONES With the runner, sir.

SERG Advance! And look sharp about it.

MAJOR No use now, sergeant. Bring them back in.

SERG Retire

VOICE Make your bloody mind up.

WALTER And the Major gallops off into the afternoon sunshine.

SERG No more messages, sir?

JONES Nothing.

WALTER We can hear heavy firing going on all around.

SERG Where's the rest of them?

WALTER He's right. The Cheshires seem to be the only ones here.

JONES Heads down! Get down! Down!

WALTER And then suddenly low, there's a biplane above us and a hell of a lot of firing starts.

JONES Cease fire: it's a Farman: it's one of ours!

VOICE I've never seen one of them before, sir.

SERG Bloody useless new fangled things. What's the use of something you can see coming for miles?

WALTER And we watch it turning. It shimmers in the heat and we see the explosions of sudden white smoke on the hill below before we hear the thud of the guns.

VOICE It's drawing their fire, sir.

JONES Time to move out while they're busy.

SERG Moving out!

WALTER We had to leave the wounded. They lay bleeding and pleading for us to take them with us. And we couldn't take them.

SERG This way.

WALTER We found a railway line and a French soldier, no more than a boy, clutching a bugle and in red trousers and a blue jerkin from another kind of war.

SERG Where are your company, lad?

JONES Ou sont les Français?

BOY J'en sais pas.

WALTER He's dazed and bleeding. Captain Jones scans the horizons.

JONES (*Field glasses*) Hell. They've flanked us! I think the rest of Corps have moved back. We're behind their lines.

SERG Held them off for a good while.

A shot rings out.

WALTER And then there's a shot and the French boy falls at my feet with a bullet between his eyes

JONES Sweet Jesus!

WALTER And the Sunday bells are ringing again, wildy and loudly, and this time, it's a warning.

CPT Time to go!

WALTER We run into a wilderness of lanes and thickets and dead men and flies and Sunday bells and dying horses. We're lost, left behind by a retreat we never knew was happening. I heard afterwards that some of us saw angels and that the Germans fled. I didn't see the Germans fleeing. And the sun is as hot as a summer holiday. And the noise of the heavy artillery... (*shouts*) it didn't stop.

SCENE: ANGELS AT MONS / CAROL: It Came Upon A Midnight Clear

VOICE (sings) Yet in the woes of sin and strife
The world has suffered long;

WALTER We were by a farm when they caught up with us. I rolled into a small twist of hay in time to see Crookes take a bullet.

VOICE (sings) Beneath the angel strain have rolled
Two thousand years of wrong;

WALTER We were vastly outnumbered. It was pitiable. I think Sergeant Raynor surrendered when he thought he was the last man standing. The Germans handed out smokes. I could hear Raynor talking to Crookes. I had half a mind then to surrender too.

VOICES (sing) And man, at war with man, hears not
The love-song which they bring;

WALTER Maybe Raynor knew, because he looked around and waved his hand as if at a fly, but I knew he was telling me to hold tight.

VOICE (sings) Oh hush the noise, ye men of strife
And hear the angels sing.

WALTER I watched them dig a grave for Captain Jones and Drummer Hogan. The guns were still thudding, and there was rifle fire far away and the skylarks still singing. And when darkness came and the others had gone, I walked over the fields, stumbling over dead men till dawn.

SCENE: PATER NOSTER

ALICE Our Father
Which art in Heaven, hallowed be thy name
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done
On earth as it in Heaven
Give us this day our daily bread
And forgive us our trespasses
As we forgive those who trespass against us...

She breaks down.

VICAR Alice?

ALICE I'm sorry.

VICAR For what?

ALICE I can't forgive them. I won't forgive them.

VICAR What's happened?

ALICE Walter Nightingale.

VICAR Your young man...

ALICE He asked me to marry him and I said that he should ask me again next year... The battle at Mons... He's listed missing.

VICAR Oh Alice.

ALICE I hate the Germans: but now, I hate Joe too; and Thomas and Walter.

VICAR That isn't hate, Alice: it's fear.

ALICE Some of the wounded were brought to the Infirmary. I wasn't supposed to be on that ward, but I heard they'd come in and I went to look... just in case. Do you believe in angels?

VICAR That's a strange question to ask me, Alice.

ALICE There was a badly wounded man. But he was talking about angels over the battlefield at Mons. He was delirious. But, even so... Do you think God is on our side?

VICAR I believe that He's listening to us all...

ALICE Then why has he let this happen?

VICAR I don't know. Would you like me to say the prayer for you?

ALICE I think so... yes.

VICAR Our Father
Which art in Heaven, hallowed be thy name
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done
On earth as it is in Heaven...

SCENE: BERKENDAEL

WALTER is helped by a Belgian. Darkness. A lamp.

BELGE Voila Monsieur. Berkendael.

He hammers on the door.

NURSE Qui est la?

BELGE Mademoiselle. C'est Capiou.

NURSE *(Starts) Monsieur Capiou. Venez! Vite! (They bundle Walter inside)*

BELGE Bon chance, monsieur!

WALTER Merci.

NURSE Soldat?

WALTER Croix Rouge?

NURSE Bien sur. Je vous en pries...

WALTER Mademoiselle... English?...

NURSE Ah... English Soldier?

WALTER 1st Battalion of the Cheshire Regiment...

NURSE Are you injured?

WALTER Just tired.

NURSE What's your name?

WALTER Walter Nightingale.

NURSE So, Monsieur Rossignol

WALTER Rossignol?

NURSE This is your name while you are here. You have a flesh wound I must clean...

She cleans and bandages a wound on his forehead.

WALTER More hurt pride than anything... Your English is very good.

NURSE The Matron here is English. I must inform her...

WALTER No!

NURSE You're not our first fugitive. Our first secret soldiers were Cheshire soldiers, just like you.

WALTER When?

NURSE A few weeks ago.

WALTER Do you recall their names?

NURSE I think... maybe .. Bogaire...

WALTER Bogaire? Ah! Lieutenant-Colonel Boger? Well I'll be...

NURSE His leg was very bad. He had an operation here. His friend was a better condition... Monsieur Meachin.

WALTER Sergeant Major Meachin! Sly old dog... How did they do it?

NURSE There are many Belgians who want to help the Allies. They escaped from a hospital, and lived in woods and fields, till Monsieur Capiou brought them here.

WALTER He's a good man.

NURSE They were dressed in big black floppy hats and dirty shirts and beards. And Meachin – he had a hunchback made of old rags stuffed into his shirt.

WALTER Excellent! Are they still here?

NURSE The matron organised identity papers and friends to take them over the border into Holland.

WALTER If she were caught...

NURSE They would shoot her as a spy.

WALTER You're very brave.

NURSE She shows me how. When the Germans marched into Brussels, I wept and trembled with fear. But she said that I must not give way to my emotion; that my life no longer belonged to myself alone but also to my duty as a nurse.

WALTER What's her name?

NURSE She is Edith Cavell. Do you know her, Monsieur Rossignol?

WALTER shakes his head.

NURSE You'll see her in the morning. Lie down now while it's quiet. It's summer: it will be dawn too soon. You must sleep now.

A dawn chorus begins...

SCENE: DREAM

WALTER I've almost forgotten what silence sounds like.

ALICE Shhhh!

WALTER And birdsong.

ALICE And we walked in the meadows

THOMAS In a golden summer

WALTER Alice?

ALICE Shhh! You're dreaming.

JOE And far away, a Bosnian Serb shoots an Austrian archduke.

THOMAS But it's a long, long way away.

WALTER It will all blow over.

GAVRILO PRINCIP It barely ripples the waters of the River Dee.

ALICE Remember the heat?

GAVRILO PRINCIP I remember the heat.
I'm outside Schiller's café with a revolver in my hand.
And I remember him crying to her: Don't die, he said.

And I remember the vivid red wet stain spreading out over
her white dress. And everything changed.
It's so long ago now, it may as well be a dream.

SONG: Long, Long Trail

Nights are growing very lonely,
Days are very long;
I'm a-growing weary only
List'ning for your song.
Old remembrances are thronging
Thro' my memory.
Till it seems the world is full of dreams
Just to call you back to me.

Chorus:

There's a long, long trail a-winding
Into the land of my dreams,
Where the nightingales are singing
And a white moon beams:
There's a long, long night of waiting
Until my dreams all come true;
Till the day when I'll be going down
That long, long trail with you.

All night long I hear you calling,
Calling sweet and low;
Seem to hear your footsteps falling,
Ev'ry where I go.
Tho' the road between us stretches
Many a weary mile.
I forget that you're not with me yet,
When I think I see you smile.

Chorus:

There's a long, long trail a-winding
Into the land of my dreams,
Where the nightingales are singing
And a white moon beams:
There's a long, long night of waiting
Until my dreams all come true;
Till the day when I'll be going down
That long, long trail with you.

<Part one end>