

SHELTER

A Play in One Act

by

WALTER J. ESSEX

SchoolPlay Productions Ltd

15 Inglis Road, Colchester, Essex CO3 3HU

SHELTER

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ISBN 978 1 872475 60 8

Printed and published by
SchoolPlay Productions Limited,
15 Inglis Road,
Colchester, Essex, CO3 3HU

CAST

Mr. George Coombes - *an ARP Warden*

Mrs. Marjorie Coombes - *his wife*

Ray Coombes (12) }
 } - *their sons*
Jack Coombes (21) }

Mrs. Edna Bates - *a widow in her late 40's*

Mrs. Ethel Thornton

Beryl - *her daughter*

Reg Bateman - *a railway worker in his mid-20's*

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A Midlands town in the autumn of 1940. The scene is set in the Anderson shelter in the back garden of the Coombes family house. It has been made reasonably comfortable: a table with an old cloth over it, some teacups, etc., a comfortable old armchair, another couple of upright chairs, a set of bunks D.S.L. A bare bulb hangs from the roof. An old paraffin heater is on the floor. The entrance to the shelter is D.S.R.

At the rear of the stage is a raised area representing the outside. On the cyclorama are seen barrage balloons.

Before and during the opening of the curtains, there is the sound of an air raid siren, followed by the clank and flushing of water when lavatory chains are pulled. It is 8.00 p.m.

A figure is seen dimly crossing the rear stage from U.S.L. to U.S.R., exiting and then reappearing moments later D.S.R. entering the shelter. It is MRS. EDNA BATES, in her late 40s, a widow of a soldier killed in W.W.I. She immediately sits in the only armchair and emits a large sigh - as of relief. She has brought with her a large basket containing such things as knitting, newspapers and a thermos flask, and also a birdcage which is covered with a heavy cloth. She deposits the cage on the table which is beside her. She peers under the cloth.

Edna: It's all right, Percy, you can go back to sleep again now. You're safe in here with mother. *(Smiling smugly)* And I've got my nice chair.

(As she settles down, taking her knitting from her basket, two figures can be seen running across the rear of the stage L. to R. - MRS. MARJORIE COOMBES and her son, RAY, who is about 13. GEORGE COOMBES has followed them, but remains standing U.S.L., looking after them, buttoning up the tunic of his ARP uniform).

George: Stay down till I come for you.

Marjorie: I'd rather get back to my bed when the all-clear sounds.

George: *(Insistent).* I've told you, wait for me!

Marjorie: Take care, love.

George: Hurry up and get inside

Ray: *(Coming back a few steps)*. Dad - remember to save me any decent bits of shrapnel if you find any.

George: You get down there fast - and look after your mother.

Marjorie: *(Calling from offstage)*. Ray!

Ray: Coming.

(RAY follows his MOTHER off U.S.R. GEORGE exits U.S.L. Moments later MARJORIE and RAY, who are carrying blankets, basket etc., enter shelter D.S.R. MARJORIE sees EDNA and stops, obviously cross that she is in the armchair).

Marjorie: I don't know how you do it.

Edna: *(looking up)*. Hello there, Marjorie. Young Ray. *(To RAY)*. I don't want any of your nonsense down here tonight.

Ray: Nonsense....?

Edna: Not playing at Spitfire pilots like last night. Whizzing around here like a mad thing. Noise outside is bad enough.

Ray: *(Annoyed)*. I like that! It's OUR shelter - OUR garden.

Marjorie: Ray! *(MARJORIE motions her son towards the bunks with her eyes. RAY sprawls on the bottom bunk, playing with a model aeroplane. MARJORIE takes some darning out of her basket as she settles on one of the upright chairs)*. Like I was saying, Edna - I don't know how you do it.

Edna: Do what?

Marjorie: Get in here first every night and look as though you've been here for hours by the time we get in. You must get a shift on.

Edna: I don't waste my time getting to the lavatory. I make myself nice and comfortable before the siren goes off. MY bowels don't react to the first wail of the siren like most do. MY nerves are strong, like the rest of me.

Ray: *(In an undertone)*. She'd hold herself all night so long as she got the only comfy chair down here.

Marjorie: *(In a loud whisper)*. Ray!

Edna: *(Unruffled)*. I heard him, but it takes a lot more than cheek from the likes of him to bother me.

(MARJORIE, bristling with the criticism of her son, as well as being cross with RAY, crosses over to the bunks).

Marjorie: Come on, my lad, give me a hand. I want you in that bed and asleep.

(Dialogue continues as she begins to spread blankets on the bunks, draping some over the side of the top one so that the bottom bunk is 'curtained off'. RAY reluctantly helps her).

Ray: O, Mum, must I? If it's anything like last night's noise, there's no chance of sleep.

Marjorie: Just do as you're told. Here, tuck that in. (*Hands ROY a corner of a blanket*).

Ray: Honestly, Mum, there's no need. Old Biggsy'll let us have a sleep in school tomorrow. He did today.

Edna: I thought school was for learning, not sleeping.

Marjorie: Sleeping at school?

Ray: Yes. Most of us lost so much sleep because of last night's raid that old Biggsy....

Marjorie: MISTER Biggs!

Ray: MISTER Biggs spread the gym mats on the floor of the hall and the classes took it in turn to have some sleep.

Marjorie: And did you?

Ray: What?

Marjorie: Sleep!

Ray: Course not. We were enjoying missing Maths. Didn't want to waste the pleasure by sleeping.

Marjorie: (*Triumphantly*). In that case - bed! - NOW!

Edna: (*Chuckling*). Caught yourself out there, young Ray.

(*RAY reluctantly pulls aside the draped blankets and lies on the bottom bunk. MARJORIE goes back to her chair*).

Marjorie: (*Calling out*). Shoes!

(*RAY'S shoes come clattering through the 'curtain'*).

Marjorie: (*Getting up*). How many times have I told you to undo the laces? (*She picks up the shoes, undoes the laces, then places the shoes neatly next to the bunk*). You'll break the backs of them and then where'll you be without shoes on your feet? Can't afford to waste coupons, never mind the money.

Edna: Do some of these youngsters good to go without, then they'll know how to look after things.

Marjorie: (*Softening*). They'll be going without enough before this war's over.

(*First sounds of a distant barrage can be heard. The WOMEN stop their knitting and darning to look up, listening expectantly. RAY sticks his head out from the bunk*).

Ray: (*Excitedly*). Did you hear that?

Marjorie: Sshh! (*All three continue to listen in frozen attitudes. MARJORIE breaks the silence*).

Marjorie: (*To EDNA*). Our turn again tonight?

Edna: (*Almost cheerfully*). Could be just passing over on their way to Birmingham).

Marjorie: You make them sound like commercial travellers.

Edna: (*drily*). Dropping off a few visiting cards on the way.

Marjorie: (*Smiling despite herself*). Not a joking matter really, Edna.

(*RAY has ducked back inside his bunk*).

Edna: Course not, but there's no point taking it all too seriously either. Oh, I suppose some poor souls'll cop it tonight - might even be us - but life has to go on, doesn't it? At least that's what my Horace always used to say. And he put up with more than us. He never talked about them trenches much, but he told me enough for me to realise they weren't nice, knowing they could be blown to bits any minute of the day. (*Pause - then, very quietly*). And he was. At the Somme.

(*Long pause. MARJORIE fiddles with her darning, looking a little embarrassed.*

EDNA stares into space, a thin smile on her lips).

Edna: (*Cheerfully - breaking the spell*) And if Horace Bates could keep cheerful with all the Kaiser could throw at him, damned if Charlie Hitler's going to get me down.

Marjorie: (*Relieved*). Cup of tea, Edna?

Edna: Got my flask here somewhere. (*EDNA rummages in her basket*).

Marjorie: It's all right - I've got plenty here.

(*MARJORIE begins to pour tea for herself and Edna. Meanwhile, lights come up on rear stage. GEORGE COOMBES appears U.S.L. Sounds of distant bombing*).

George: (*Looking offstage*). Come on, this way - Hurry!

(*MRS. ETHEL THORNTON, a woman in her late 30s, enters with her daughter Beryl, aged about 14*).

Mrs. Thornton: Are you sure it's all right?

George: Yes. Hurry up.

Mrs. T.: This is kind. Come on, Beryl, don't dawdle. Thank the kind gentleman.

Beryl: (*Ungraciously*). Thanks.

(*All three exit U.S.R. and re-enter a few moments later D.S.R., GEORGE leading the other two. MARJORIE and EDNA look up in surprise. At the sound of his father's voice, RAY pokes his head through the blanket 'curtain'*).

George: Come in - quickly - must get this door shut. (*He ushers in ETHEL THORNTON and BERYL. Both look a little uncomfortable and remain standing just inside the door*).

Marjorie: George - What's up?

George: It's all right, love. This is Mrs. Thornton....

Mrs. T.: Ethel Thornton.

George: old Mrs. Green's daughter - you know, number 23. Got caught outside, so I said she could come down here.

Marjorie: Oh - right. (*MARJORIE looks at the number of chairs, as if working out how to accommodate her 'guests'*).

Mrs. T.: I hope it's not troubling you.

Marjorie: Of course not.

Edna: (*Muttering under her breath*). No choice it seems. (*To GEORGE*). Checked her Identity Card have you, George?

Mrs. T.: Well, really!

George: (*Cajoling*). Come on, Edna.

Edna: (*Lightly*). Well, you can't be too sure these days, can you? Supposed to be spies about. (*MRS. THORNTON, obviously ruffled, rummages in her handbag*).

Mrs. T.: All right then, if it satisfies you - HERE! (*MRS. THORNTON produces her Identity Card and Ration Book and holds them out to EDNA who studiously ignores them*). Identity Card and clothing coupons and MY name on them both.

Marjorie: It's all right, love, we don't need to see them.

George: Just Edna's joke.

(*GEORGE gives EDNA a baleful look. EDNA shrugs her shoulders and carries on knitting. Discomfited, MRS. THORNTON replaces the cards in her handbag. BERYL has stayed very close to her mother all the while*).

George: There's a couple of deck chairs under the bunks, love. Hey, Ray, get the deck chairs out.

Marjorie: (*To RAY*). And then back into bed.

Ray: (*Whining*). Oh, Mum.

George: Do as your mother says. (*To MARJORIE*). I'd better be getting back on top. It's not good tonight.

Marjorie: Our turn again is it?

George: Seems like it. I'm going to be busy. Must go.

Marjorie: Take care.

George: (*Leaving*). Remember - stay until I come for you.

(*GEORGE exits D.S.R. Moments later he is seen crossing the rear stage R. to L. and exits U.S.L. Meanwhile, RAY has been assembling the deck chairs with bad grace. EDNA has ignored the newcomers who still stand around awkwardly*).

Marjorie: Haven't you got those chairs up yet?

Ray: (*In obvious difficulty*). Whoever invented these must have had a warped

mind!

Beryl: *(Taking the initiative).* Here, let me. *(BERYL takes one of the chairs, erects it in one single movement and grins in triumph at RAY).*

Beryl: Mum. *(She indicates the chair to her mother, who sits down in it D.S.C. RAY still struggles with the other chair, furious with himself).*

Beryl: Shall I do it for you?

Ray: NO!

Marjorie: Don't be rude, Ray! *(RAY finally erects the chair).*

Ray: There!

(BERYL gives him a contemptuous half-smile and sits, as regally as she can summon up, in the second deck-chair. RAY, thoroughly deflated, returns to his bunk behind the blanket curtaining. EDNA watches RAY get into his bunk).

Edna: What's up with him? He didn't have to be told again!

Marjorie: *(Ignoring EDNA).* What are you doing around here, Mrs. Thornton?

Mrs.T.: Looking for my mother.

Marjorie: Oh yes - Mrs. Green at number 23 - George said.

Mrs. T.: I came up from Gloucester this morning - brought Beryl with me. Couldn't leave her on her own. Took us hours. I've been hanging around the neighbourhood almost as long, waiting for her to come home. I can't think where she can be.

Edna: *(Still intent on her knitting).* You'll be waiting a long time.

Mrs. T.: Beg pardon?

Edna: I said you'll be waiting a long time.

Mrs. T.: What do you mean?

Edna: I mean she's gone away.

Mrs. T.: Gone away? - Where?

Edna: To her daughter's in the country. Leastways, that's what Doris Jones told me in the butcher's this morning - when she'd finished trying to sell herself to Mr. Fletcher for some scrag ends of shin beef - WITHOUT coupons.

Marjorie: But YOU'RE her daughter.

Mrs. T.: If it's true, it'll be to my sisters's - near Southam. *(Suddenly angry).* Oh, what a waste of a day. I've been worried sick about my mother being here with all these raids going on. I've been trying to persuade her for ages to go to our Molly's. When she last wrote she said she wouldn't budge. And now, having come all this way, dragging Beryl with me, I find it's been a waste of time. She might have let me know.

Marjorie: *(Placating).* At least you know she'll be safe, and that will take a worry off your mind.

Beryl: *(Petulant).* Oh, SHE"LL be all right, but we've got ourselves caught up in

this tonight.

Marjorie: Don't you worry yourself, love, you'll be as safe as houses in here.

Edna: (*Muttering*). Depends where the houses are.

Marjorie: (*Aside to EDNA*). Edna! Don't go upsetting the child.

(*EDNA gives MARJORIE an unsmiling look of nonchalance, turns to look at BERYL, and then returns to her knitting*).

Edna: (*Still muttering*). I think I'd almost prefer young Ray's aeroplane noises.

Mrs. T.: (*Angrily*). I hope someone shoots those planes out of the sky.

Marjorie: (*Pensively*). Yes. (*RAY shoots his head out from behind the 'curtain'*).

Ray: There's Bofors guns down the park. Not sure if they've ever scored though.

Marjorie: My son's in a bomber crew.

Mrs. T.: Well I hope he gives Herr Hitler as much as we're getting.

Marjorie: And there'll be many a German hoping THEY'LL be shot out of the sky.

Mrs. T.: Oh.... sorry.... I didn't mean....

Marjorie: It's all right. It's just war. Gets a bit confusing, doesn't it? (*Pause*)....
Cup of tea, Mrs. Thornton?

Mrs. T.: If you can spare it.

Marjorie: Beryl?

Beryl: (*Testily*). No thanks!

(*MARJORIE pours tea, offers Mrs. Thornton some magazines and the women settle down in silence. Meanwhile, RAY, still peering through the 'curtain', talks to BERYL, whose deck chair is directly next to him*).

Ray: (*Sarcastically*). Chair comfy?

Beryl: (*Off-hand*). It'll do.

Ray: Got any souvenirs?

Beryl: Souvenirs?

Ray: Yes, you know - shrapnel, bullet cases....

(*BERYL turns her head away with a contemptuous sigh. At that moment there is a sound of a stick of bombs falling in the near distance. RAY listens with an air of excitement. EDNA and MARJORIE look up in expectancy. MRS. THORNTON and BERYL exchange frightened glances. BERYL leaps up and buries her head in her mother's lap. As the sound fades, RAY speaks*).

Ray: (*Sneering*). It's all right. It's not near enough to worry about.

Marjorie: Ray!

(*In an angry movement, BERYL gets up and faces RAY*).

Beryl: (*Bursting out*). You belt up, you snivelling pup! It's all wonderful for you isn't it? Full of excitement, isn't it?....

Ray: (*Taken aback*). Hey....

Beryl: (*Overriding him*). How big's the collection then? How many pieces of shrapnel? What's the biggest piece you've got? How many bullets? Got a

propeller off a Messerschmidt, have you? A tailpiece from a Heinkel?....

Mrs. T.: Beryl!....

Beryl: You make me sick. Next thing you'll have in your collection is a soldier's blown-off leg - or a Spitfire pilot's helmet, blown off half-a-mile up!

(MRS. THORNTON leaps up and slaps her daughter's face. BERYL sinks into her mother's arms sobbing uncontrollably. MARJORIE and EDNA have observed in stunned silence. MRS. THORNTON turns to them, tears in her eyes).

Mrs. T.: Sorry about this. It's her father you see.... Dunkirk.... can't get it out of her mind.

(EDNA gets up from her chair and crosses to the bunks. She throws up the blankets).

Edna: *(To RAY).* Out you!

(EDNA looks at MARJORIE as if daring her to interfere. RAY sheepishly crosses to his mother, bewildered. The bombardment outside continues intermittently. EDNA crosses to BERYL, gently prises her from her mother's clasp. BERYL allows herself to be led to the bottom bunk).

Edna: *(To BERYL).* Have a lie down, my love. It'll do you the world of good.

(BERYL lies on the bunk. EDNA tucks a blanket around her, then lets down the blanket 'curtain').

Edna: *(To the others).* She'll be better for a rest. *(Settling down again).* Shall we have some more tea? I've plenty in my flask.

Marjorie: *(To RAY - not unkindly).* Ray - top bunk.

Ray: *(Submissively).* Yes, Mum.

(RAY climbs onto the top bunk as EDNA pours tea from her flask. Lights on front stage dim. During a pause in the action, there are sounds of the screaming down and explosion of bombs).

Lights come up rear stage. JACK COOMBES in his RAF uniform, runs on from U.S.L. He stands for a few moments and looks about him, a worried look on his face. He looks up at the sky, which appears red, the result of many fires started by the air-raid. After a moment's indecision he runs off again the way he came.

Lights on the front stage reveal the occupants of the shelter to be asleep, all except for RAY, who is lying on the top bunk playing with his model aeroplane. On rear stage, JACK enters once more, looking rather agitated. He is startled by a voice calling from offstage.

George: (*Offstage*). Hey! Who's there? - Who's there?

Jack: (*Calling*). Hullo! (*GEORGE enters U.S.L.*).

George: Who the hell's that? (*Recognises his son*). Jack! Good God, son, what are you doing here? Weren't expecting you till next week.

Jack: All changed. My week's leave is cancelled so I've got two days now.

George: Some damn time you've chosen to come.

Jack: What's CHOICE got to do with it?

George: (*Smiling*). Hey, it's good to see you, lad. Your mother'll be pleased.

Jack: Still worrying about me?

George: What do YOU think? - We both do. Young Ray'll be glad to see his idol.

Jack: (*With an embarrassed grin*). Some idol!

George: If it was up to him he'd be up there flying beside you.

Jack: No thanks! I'd end up fighting HIM, rather than Jerry! Anyway if we do our job properly, HE'LL never have to fight.

George: Here, you'd better get down the shelter and I'd better get back to my post. It's one hell of a night to be out.

Jack: I'll come with you.

George: No you don't. You do your share in other ways. Your mother'll be glad of your company. Go on.

(*JACK is about to go to the shelter when ANOTHER MAN runs on U.S.L. It is REG BATEMAN, a railway worker in his mid-20s. He sees GEORGE*).

Reg: Mr. Coombes! Thank God I've found someone. Have you seen our Elsie?

George: Sorry, Reg, I've not seen her - not likely tonight!

Jack: (*Doubling back*). What's up?

Reg: Hello, Jack. It's Elsie. I don't know where she is.

Jack: Down a shelter probably.

Reg: That's just it. She's not in the Jones's shelter like she usually is. And Mrs. Jones hasn't seen her.

George: Not in the house?

Reg: I went there first. I should have finished my shift hours ago, but with this going on I had to stay on.

George: What's it like down the station?

Reg: Lines blocked in both directions - there'll be no trains through there for a while. Anyway, Mr. Watkins said I could come and check on Elsie if I could get through.

Jack: She'll be all right, surely.

Reg: But the baby's due in a couple of weeks.

George: Was there no note at home?

Reg: None that I could see.

George: Look, I've got to get back. You get down our shelter with Jack. If I hear

anything I'll let you know.

Reg: No, I can't go down there, not while I don't know where Elsie is. Can I come with you?

George: *(Reluctantly)*. All right, if you must, but I don't know what it'll do. Come on. 'Bye Jack. I'll chat to you later.

(GEORGE exits hurriedly U.S.L., followed by REG. JACK stands and looks after them, then hurries off U.S.R. Lights fade on rear stage. Lights come up front stage. JACK enters the shelter D.S.R.)

Jack: *(Quietly calling)*. Hello.

Ray: *(Starting up)*. Who's that? *(Recognises his brother)*. Jack! *(RAY leaps off the bunk noisily, rousing the others as he does so. He rushes up to his brother)*. Hey, Jack. Thought you weren't home till next week.

Marjorie: Jack! *(MARJORIE gets up from her chair and hugs JACK)*.

Jack: Hello, Mum. Sooner than you thought, eh?

Marjorie: It's never soon enough. *(MARJORIE holds JACK at arm's length)*. Well, let's look at you. Well, you're looking better than I expected.

Edna: Evening, Jack.... or is it morning now?

Jack: Hello, Mrs. Bates. *(He looks at his watch)*. And it's one o'clock nearly.

Marjorie: What a time to arrive!

Jack: Not been easy getting through.... a lot of dodging about.

Mrs. T.: Is it still bad?

Edna: You've got ears, haven't you?

Jack: *(Ignoring EDNA)*. It's a bad night. Centre of town's copping it pretty badly.

Marjorie: Oh, Jack, this is Mrs. Thornton, Mrs. Green's daughter.... from Gloucester. HER daughter's asleep over there.

Beryl: *(Grumpily from behind the 'curtain')*. No, she's not.

Marjorie: They got caught out as the raid started.

Jack: *(To MARJORIE)*. I'm glad you've given up the kitchen table anyway.

Mrs. T.: Kitchen table?

Jack: Yes. The day war was declared, Mum insisted we all spent the night under the kitchen table.

Ray: For a whole bloomin' week!

Jack: Well, four nights. Anyway, you're better off in here tonight.

Ray: You got leave, Jack?

Jack: Just a couple of days - and one of them's gone now.

Marjorie: *(Disappointed)*. I thought you had a week.

Jack: All changed, I'm afraid. As from the day after tomorrow I'm captain of my own bomber crew.

Marjorie: *(Quietly)*. Oh no. *(MARJORIE sits down quietly)*.

Ray: *(Excitedly)*. Great! A Wellington?

Jack: Yes.

Ray: Great! Wait till I tell Johnny Beaver tomorrow. His cousin's only a rear-gunner.

Jack: *(Suddenly angry)*. Scoring points are you? Well, a rear gunner's got as much guts as anyone up there - or as little.

Ray: *(Taken aback)*. I only....

Jack: You don't know what it's like, Ray, and I hope you never will.
(Somewhat cowed, RAY walks over to his MOTHER).

Edna: *(Defusing the situation)*. Sorry there's no tea left, Jack. But I've got a little something here you might like. *(EDNA takes a small bottle of whiskey from her basket and offers it to JACK. JACK accepts the offer).*

Jack: Thanks, Mrs. Bates, I could do with it. *(JACK examines the cups).*

Edna: Oh, don't bother with a cup. Swig it as it is.

Jack: *(Smiling)*. Thanks. *(JACK takes a large swig from the bottle and then hands it back. As the conversation continues EDNA takes a swig herself before returning the bottle to her basket).*

Jack: Sorry, Ray, it's not been a good day. *(Takes in everybody)*. Rotten journey here and then to be met with this.

Mrs. T.: Do these raids always go on so long?

(At the sound of her mother's voice, BERYL puts her head through the 'curtain'. RAY walks across to the bunks, picks up his plane and begins to admire it).

Edna: This is the longest yet.

Marjorie: I hope George is all right.

Jack: I met Dad as I came in. He's all right.

Marjorie: God knows how he'll get into work tomorrow with no sleep.

Jack: *(Quietly)*. From what I've seen out there, there'll be a lot who'll have no work to go to.

Mrs. T.: What do you mean?

Jack: I mean those Jerry bombers have been doing a good job. The whole of the town centre seems to be on fire, and there's fires everywhere you look.

Mrs. T.: Why here? Why us?

Jack: Legitimate target.

Mrs. T.: Legitimate!

Jack: All the factories.

Mrs. T.: So?

Jack: Aeroplanes - parts, assembly! What people like me rely on - what we ALL rely on.

Edna: *(Sarcastically)*. "Careless talk costs lives".

Jack: *(Smiling)*. It's hardly a secret!

Ray: You can give 'em as good back, Jack!

Jack: (*Quietly*). Yes.... perhaps. (*JACK wanders over to the bunks, where BERYL is still peering out*). Hello. Who are you?

Beryl: (*Shyly*). Beryl.

(*BERYL gets out of the bunk and wanders over to her mother*).

Beryl: When can we go home, Mum?

Mrs. T.: It'll be a while yet, love.

Marjorie: When we hear the all-clear you must come into the house and get some proper rest before you start travelling anywhere.

Mrs. T.: That will be kind, thanks.

(*BERYL puts her arm around her mother and leans against her. JACK takes the plane from RAY*).

Jack: Spitfire, eh?

Ray: Yes. I want to make a Wellington like you fly, but I'm not handy enough, and Dad hasn't got much time to help.

Jack: If I get a decent leave, I'll give you a hand.

Ray: (*Excited*). Will you?

Jack: (*Smiling and ruffling RAY'S hair*). Course.

(*EDNA and MARJORIE have returned to their knitting and darning. MRS. THORNTON and BERYL just cling to each other. The barrage is continuing in the distance. JACK leaps up onto the top bunk next to RAY*).

Jack: (*To RAY*). Been to the flicks recently?

Ray: Yes, I went with Johnnie Beaver to see "Dark Eyes of London". Bella Lugosi as Doctor Orlof - really gruesome.

Jack: How do you mean, gruesome?

Ray: Well, this Doctor Orlof runs a home for the blind and he gets a deaf and dumb giant to bump off the inmates so's he can get their money and....

Marjorie: How did YOU get to see a film like that?

Ray: (*Caught out*). Oh, well.... Johnnie's uncle works at the Astoria and.... well, he got us in.... and....

Marjorie: When?

Ray: (*Sheepishly*). Last Tuesday.

Marjorie: And you told me you went to see "Old Mother Riley" at the Rex.

Ray: Yes.... well, Johnnie said that....

Marjorie: You wait till I tell your father. He'll not be pleased. Lying as well!

Mrs. T.: Can't think why they want to make films like that.

Jack: (*Laughing*). "Old Mother Riley"?

Mrs. T.: (*Peeved*). No - the other thing. There are enough nasty things in this world without going to be entertained by them. What was that lovely film WE saw the other week, Beryl?

Beryl: "One Hundred Men and a Girl".

Mrs. T.: That's the one - Deanna Durbin. Lovely music, and she's got such a sweet voice. You enjoyed it, didn't you, Beryl?

Beryl: *(Unconvincingly)*. I suppose so.

Mrs. T.: Well, you said you did.

Beryl: I preferred "Heidi".

Marjorie: Oh yes - Shirley Temple. I had a good cry at that one.

Edna: I prefer a good laugh myself. What's that latest George Formby one? Oh yes, "Let George Do It", with that pretty Phyllis Calvert. Funny it was. George playing his ukelele and mistaken for a spy, and it was the bandleader all the time. Oh, I did laugh.

Marjorie: Have you seen Robert Donat in "Mr. Chips"? - I had a lovely cry over that one too.

Edna: Might go down to the Rex on Saturday.

Jack: I doubt it.

Edna: What d'you mean?

Jack: It's gone.

Marjorie: } Gone?

Edna: } What!

Ray: } The Rex?

Jack: I told you it was bad in the town centre. I dodged through it to get here. The Rex is just a pile of rubble.

Marjorie: But it was new - just last year!

Edna: *(Drily)*. I suppose it was tempting fate to show "Gone With The Wind".
(RAY laughs, but stops as he realises no-one else is. There is a strange quiet - then the screaming of descending bombs is heard. JACK reacts).

Jack: Everyone lie down!

(They all throw themselves flat, except EDNA, who squeezes under the table. The bombs explode very close and the lights go out. BERYL screams).

Beryl: Mum! *(She continues screaming. JACK has to make himself heard above the screaming).*

Jack: It's all right. Just keep still. I'll find a light.

Marjorie: There's a candle on the table - and some matches somewhere.

Jack: I've got matches. *(Angrily)*. Shut that girl up!

(A loud smack is heard - the screaming stops. JACK strikes a match and lights a candle on the table. In the dim light, BERYL is seen on the floor in a frozen attitude, a hand to her cheek, looking shocked. Her mother has an arm round her).

Mrs. T.: I'm sorry, love, I had to do it.

(BERYL falls weeping into her mothers's arms).

The picture inside the shelter is held as the lights come up rear stage. GEORGE appears U.S.L. dragging REG BATEMAN, who is resisting and shouting.

Reg: No! No! Leave me.

George: *(Strongly)*. Do as you're damn well told. You're no good to me the way you are.

Reg: But Elsie....

George: WE'LL deal with Elsie. You get down our shelter!

Reg: I must get back!

George: *(Pushing him)*. NO! Do I have to thump you? I've told you, you're no help the way you are. Get on. *(GEORGE, meeting with less resistance, pushes REG off U.S.R. They re-appear a few moments later in the shelter D.S.R.)*.

George: Get in and stay there.

Reg: I must find her.

Marjorie: George! What's up? What's going on up there?

George: Just keep Reg down here. He's a liability the way he is.

(REG begins to cry - he throws himself into MARJORIE'S vacated chair and buries his face in his arms on the table. EDNA takes out her whiskey bottle once more).

Edna: Someone else needs a sip of this I think. *(EDNA holds out the bottle to REG, gently shakes his shoulder, but gets no response. EDNA shrugs her shoulders and takes a swig herself before returning the bottle to her basket. JACK joins MARJORIE and GEORGE at the entrance to the shelter).*

Jack: What's wrong?

George: He found out where Elsie was. She'd been out seeing Mrs. Fletcher, it seems, when the alert went.

Jack: Fletcher?

Marjorie: Butcher's - corner of Jesmond Road. *(To GEORGE)*. Go on.

George: Bert Fletcher called in at the A.R.P. Post and he told us he'd left them there. They were going under the stairs. Well, Reg just flew. I followed him as he was in a right panic by then.

Marjorie: Well, the baby's nearly due.

George: We'd just turned into the top end of Jesmond Road when a stick of bombs came down at the other end. We jumped behind a garden wall. When we could see again - well, the end of the road had gone. Next thing is Reg racing down the road, screaming at the top of his voice, then tearing at any bit of rubble that came to hand. We had to pull him off. He could have caused the rubble to shift the way he was going on - and there might be survivors.

Jack: *(Very quietly)*. Is there any chance, Dad?

George: *(Shaking his head)*. Not likely.

Jack: Want a hand up there?

George: Thanks Jack - I was going to ask if you'd mind.

Marjorie: Be careful!

George: Worst's probably over.

Marjorie: Even so....

(MARJORIE watches them go. They are briefly seen crossing the rear stage from R. to L. Lights go down rear stage. MARJORIE goes across to REG, whose weeping has subsided, and places a hand on his shoulder).

Marjorie: Reg. *(No answer)*. Reg. *(REG slowly turns and looks at her)*.

Marjorie: *(Gently)*. They'll do the best they can, you know.

Reg: It's my fault. I should have got home sooner.

Marjorie: It's nobody's fault on a night like this.

Reg: *(Bursting out)*. God! How I hate those Germans!

Ray: *(Angrily)*. Don't worry, Jack'll get our own back on some of them.

Marjorie: Ray!

Ray: Well, he will.

Beryl: Well I hope he gets the ones that killed my Dad!

(MRS. THORNTON comforts BERYL).

Edna: *(Loudly, firmly, yet gently)*. I think we could all do with calming down a little.

Reg: *(Blazing up)*. Calm down! You stupid cow! Calm down, she says, and my Elsie crushed under that house.... and the baby....

(EDNA shows no reaction).

Marjorie: *(Comforting)*. Ssh.... I know.

Reg: Elsie wanted a boy, for me, but I told her I didn't mind. A girl as pretty as her mother would be fine. *(REG breaks down again. After a brief pause, he leaps to his feet and dives for the door. MARJORIE goes after him).*

Reg: I'm sorry, Mrs. Coombes, I can't stay. *(He rushes offstage D.S.R. MARJORIE slowly returns to her chair).*

Edna: *(Calmly and gently)*. I DO understand, you know. I've been a widow a long time now, but I don't forget.

Lights fade to BLACK OUT.

It is four hours later. All is quiet; the bombardment has stopped. MARJORIE strikes a match and lights a candle. RAY is asleep on the top bunk, the blankets that draped the bottom bunk thrown over him. BERYL and MRS. THORNTON are on the bottom bunk. EDNA is asleep in her chair. The light

wakens EDNA. She rubs her eyes and looks around.

Edna: What time is it?

Marjorie: I don't know. I fell asleep.

(The two WOMEN remain still, heads tilted, listening intently).

Edna: It's quiet.

Marjorie: Has the all-clear gone?

Edna: I haven't heard it, but I was asleep like you.

Marjorie: It must have done, and we've all slept through it. *(Stretches)*. Lord, I ache. *(MARJORIE goes over to the bunks and looks at the occupants).*

Marjorie: Shall I wake them?

Edna: No point really.

Marjorie: We'll be more comfortable in the house.

Ray: *(Waking)*. Mm? Eh? Oh, Mum. Is it over?

Marjorie: Think so. Come on, let's get to our beds. *(She gently shakes Mrs. Thornton).*

Marjorie: Mrs. Thornton.... Mrs. Thornton.

Mrs.T.: *(Waking up)*. Yes? What is it? *(Realises where she is)*. Oh.

Marjorie: I can make you more comfortable in the house.

Mrs. T.: *(Getting up)*. It's a shame to wake Beryl.

Beryl: I'm not asleep. *(Sitting up)*. I haven't been asleep.

Mrs. T.: Is it safe?

Edna: I'm not budging till I've heard the all-clear.

Marjorie: I told you, we must have slept through it.

Beryl: I didn't hear it, and I've been awake.

Edna: *(To MARJORIE)*. See.

Marjorie: After what came down, it's probably out of action. *(To BERYL)*. You've heard no more planes or bombs have you?

Beryl: Not for hours.

Marjorie: There you are then. Come on - a nice cup of tea and then a warm bed.

Ray: You sure, Mum? Dad said we were to stay until he came for us.

Marjorie: He's probably been too busy to come. *(Pause)*. I wonder if he found Elsie.... Poor Reg.

Edna: There'll be a few more "poor Reges" I reckon after last night - and "poor Elsies".

Marjorie: Elsie might be all right.

(EDNA gives MARJORIE a meaningful look).

Marjorie: Well - WE'RE all O.K. Come on, let's go up.

(MARJORIE has been gathering her things into her basket. RAY retrieves his plane from his bunk. MRS. THORNTON brushes down BERYL'S clothes).

Beryl: Don't fuss, Mum - please.

Edna: I'm staying put a while yet just to make sure.

Marjorie: Edna....

Edna: It's all right, you go ahead. Percy'll keep me company.

Marjorie: Oh well, please yourself.

Edna: (*Firmly*). I do.

(*Except for EDNA they all begin to leave D.S.R.*).

Mrs. T.: (*To EDNA*). Goodbye - thanks.

Edna: Safe journey home, love.

(*They all leave - and can be seen a few moments later crossing the rear stage R. to L. and exiting U.S.L.*).

Marjorie: (*Offstage*). Oh Lord! The roof's gone! Come on - quick!

(*EDNA picks up the bird-cage, places it next to her on the table and peers under the cover*).

Edna: You all right, Percy? Just you and me in here now. We'll go home soon. Better safe than sorry, eh? (*EDNA takes out her knitting and begins to hum tunelessly - then pauses, chuckling*). "Gone with the Wind" - good one that.

(*Lights come up rear stage. JACK and REG enter U.S.L., JACK'S arm on REG'S shoulder. Both are dishevelled*).

Jack: I'm sorry, Reg. Everyone did what they could.

Reg: (*Dazed*). Why Elsie? - and the baby?

Jack: Why anyone? (*Bitterly*). It's war.

Reg: What's Elsie done to that loony Hitler?

Jack: (*In an undertone*). No more than the people I bomb over there.

Reg: What?

Jack: Nothing. Come on, let's go down and find Mum. Maybe she can fix us a cuppa. (*GEORGE rushes in U.S.L.*).

George: Jack! Jack! We've got to get them out fast!

Jack: What?

George: There's a delayed action bomb right in the middle of the road in front of the house. Could go off any time.

Jack: Wouldn't they be safer down there?

George: Can't tell the size of it. Better get them out and through the back.

Jack: You sure?

George: For God's sake, just move!

(*The three MEN run off U.S.R. and re-emerge in the shelter D.S.R.*).

George: Marjorie!

Edna: Gone.

George: Gone? - Where?

Edna: Back inside.

Jack: Oh, God!

George: But I told her to wait for me.

Jack: Come on, Dad. Reg, get Mrs. Bates out of here - through the back.

(REG is too dazed still to take this in. JACK and GEORGE hurriedly exit D.S.R., re-emerge U.S.R. and rush off U.S.L.).

George: *(Calling offstage)*. Marjorie! Marjorie!

Jack: *(Calling)* Mum!

Edna: What's up, Reg? Why've we got to get out?

Reg: *(Looking at his dirty hands)*. Elsie's gone, Mrs. Bates.

Edna: *(Crossing to REG - comforting)*. She wouldn't have felt a thing....

(A loud explosion cuts her off. EDNA and REG fall to the ground. Simultaneous BLACK OUT and quick curtain).

THE END