

FLORA. *Mea typographically culpa.*

ROSALIND. Anyway, I'm frightfully sorry about the nose fiasco . . . Verzeihe mir, Frau Rosenbaum [Forgive me.] . . . and best of luck with everything . . .

ROSALIND *leaves.* GERTRUDE *begins trying to tune a note on the piano.*

HETTY. Now, we've got four bearables – this last one . . . and those three who'd just left the Central School were serviceable . . .

FLORA. What about the King Lear? . . . you know . . . the one in the rather vivacious rain-bonnet?

HETTY. If they are to play different characters none of the girls can be too distinctive, yes? That Lear had Brobdingnagian breasts . . .

FLORA. I suppose we're rather on the lookout for Lilliputian breasts, aren't we?

GERTRUDE *is whacking a note on the piano.*

HETTY. Well, let's hope – (*Shouts.*) We can live without 'middle C', thank you, Gertrude . . .

FLORA. She's in a bit of a tizz, about the tribunal being postponed yet again . . . Anyway, well done us for getting this far . . .

HETTY. Not exactly the Moscow Art as yet, is it?

CHARLIE *pops her head round the door.*

CHARLIE. There's a late arrival . . . Miss Charlotte Peters. (*She goes off. And comes in again, taking her cap off.*) It's me . . . but I've gone right off the idea . . . I'm goin' home . . .

HETTY. Absolutely not . . .

FLORA. Take heart, dear, you can't possibly be worse than Miss Edith Rutter and her indescribably vulgar interpretation of 'Blow, wind, and crack your cheeks'.

CHARLIE. I 'aven't got a speech and you've 'eard me whistle so I can do a joke or a magic trick . . .

HETTY *is looking through a pile of typed sheets.*

HETTY. We'll have the magic trick, thank you.

CHARLIE *comes forward, she picks up the glass and the jug, pours water into the jug.*

CHARLIE. Jug water – water jug. (*She tips the jug slowly over FLORA's head.*)

Alakazam! (*No water comes out.*)

HETTY. Bravo . . . Now I want you to read this . . .

She hands her a typewritten page.

CHARLIE. I'm diabolical at reading . . .

HETTY. Diabolical's fine, just have a go . . .

CHARLIE *reads the speech, haltingly mispronouncing words, and almost comically.*

CHARLIE. Henry Vee. 'O . . . God of battles steel my soldiers' . . . hearts possess them not . . . with fear take from them now the sense . . . of reckoning if the oppos'd . . . ' I can't –

HETTY. *Opposèd* . . . Good, that's right . . . Always follow the thought through to the end . . . and just imagine . . . this young man . . . this king . . . he has these soldiers' lives in his hands and he's only the same age as you . . . 'take from them now the sense of reckoning' – counting, adding up, y'see, he's praying his soldiers won't work out how terribly outnumbered they are . . . He's praying for courage . . . well, I think in our own way we've all been there, haven't we, Charlie? Have another go . . . and just say it to me . . . don't worry about anyone else . . .

CHARLIE *improves and somehow becomes very moving.*

CHARLIE. 'O God of battles! Steel my soldiers' hearts; Possess them not with fear; take from them now The sense of reckoning, lest the opposed numbers Pluck their hearts from them. Not today, O Lord! O not today . . .'

She gets tearful and stops. The water that magically disappeared pours out of the jug and splashes on the floor

(these magic jugs are available from Davenport's Magic Shop, Charing Cross, London).

HETTY. Can you cook?

CHARLIE *shakes her head sadly.*

FLORA. Can you sew?

CHARLIE *sniffs and shakes her head.*

HETTY. Can you change a tyre?

CHARLIE *'s face lights up.*

CHARLIE. Yes Yes! I bloody can. My brother Tommy's a mechanic . . . only he's just been called up . . .

HETTY. So what can you tell us about *our* transport . . . ?

She hands her the photograph.

CHARLIE. Silver Ghost Rolls-Royce 1922 – only the bloody Shakespeare of the road!

They all laugh.

CHARLIE. Am I in?

HETTY. Yes, I think you are.

CHARLIE. Bloody Nora!

HETTY. Well . . . notionally.

CHARLIE. Come again?

FLORA. We haven't actually got Ministry permission . . . as yet.

CHARLIE. Well, you'll be alright . . . you're posh enough, in't yer? Odds on . . .

HETTY. I wouldn't bet on it.

MAUREEN, *a lady official, leads HETTY and FLORA along corridors to a gloomy Home Office room.*

MAUREEN. So. If there is to be conscription of women you're wanting 'Reserved occupation' status for your troupe of 'players'.

HETTY. All we require is a petrol ration for one, possibly two vehicles; itinerant status for the troupe vis-à-vis food vouchers, etc. and a small advance for set, props and costumes. Salaries will be negligible, it will be a co-operative.

MAUREEN. And this is to be your contribution to the War effort? I take it this is to be a non-profit-making venture.

HETTY. I can say with the absolute certainty that comes from a lifetime involved with the theatre that it will be making no profit whatsoever.

MAUREEN. Ah, here's the minister.

A man appears. It is LEONARD of the toupee.

FLORA. Oh Lor', it can't be . . .

LEONARD. Do sit down. I believe we've already discussed the aforementioned proposition, and so you know I'm at a loss to understand why we should consider the performance of Shakespeare and his *ilk* of this order of resource-priority when we are at war? We have to deal with more practical considerations . . . A little group of Thespia will hardly serve as a deterrent to the Germans . . .

HETTY. Of course not . . .

FLORA. People . . . children especially . . . need stories to cheer them up . . . to distract them from all the . . . the . . .

HETTY. We have schools to nurture the mind, food to nurture the body but where do we look to nurture the soul?

LEONARD. To religion surely.

HETTY. Religion? That's usually the cause of men going to war in the first place . . . no, I mean to the Arts.

LEONARD. This war has nothing to do with religion . . . We're fighting against a ruthless dictatorship. [£]

HETTY. Yes but what are we fighting *for*? What is there about Britain we hold dear enough to die for? The land that gave the world Shakespeare . . . There wasn't an English language till he made it . . . he taught us how to think . . .