

ONE WITHOUT SHAME

A one-act play

by

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The Playwrights Publishing Company

ISBN: 9781873130483

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Time: From early morning to dawn the following day.

Setting: The scene is France during the 1914-18 war. To the left of the stage there are sandbags placed around a makeshift shelter. There is a small wooden table and empty ammunition boxes used as chairs. Just to the right of the shelter a soldier sits on an empty ammunition box. To his right is a propped up rifle and on the ground is a British Army helmet. The noise of gunfire can be heard in the background.

Characters

PRIVATE WILLIAM (BILL) BANNISTER: An idealistic, strong-principled, 19 year old. He is intelligent but has no privileged educational background. Although threatened with severe punishment he refuses to be on the execution squad, which will execute a deserter from his Company.

PRIVATE ALFRED (ALF) REYNOLDS: A 19 year old who acts out loud mouth bravado to hide his true feelings of breaking down under stress. He tries to persuade his friend William that neither of them have any rights under army rules.

SERGEANT JOHN RAMPLE: A 39- year- old professional soldier who appears to enjoy aggressiveness. He prides himself on keeping good discipline and can't understand Private Bannister's principles.

M.O. (Medical Officer) CAPTAIN MARK HALL: A 44 year old career soldier. A pompous, 'by the book', officer. He firmly believes that, in time of war, army authority should not be questioned. His personality gives the impression that he thinks himself superior to the rank and file.

ACT 1

SCENE 1

(Sergeant Ramples voice can be heard, to the right of stage.) It's not enough to have a bloody coward on the team. Now Bannister's decided to play barrack room lawyer.

Where is the silly sod? *(A different voice answers)* Over by the trench Sergeant. *(He enters on stage and faces Private Bannister)*

SERGEANT: What the hell are you playing at Bannister? Sending a bloody letter to the Commanding Officer telling him you refuse to take part in the execution of Private Dayton. You must have lost your senses.

WILLIAM: No! Come to my senses is more like it Sarge.

SERGEANT: Talk to me like that Bannister and you'll end up dead quicker than Private Dayton.

WILLIAM: I won't become a murderer for anything or anyone.

SERGEANT: Look its soldiers like him that could lose us this bloody war. If we all became cowards, the Germans would bayonet our guts out.

WILLIAM: John Dayton is shocked out of his mind.

SERGEANT: We could all say that, it's no excuse; we don't run away there's nothing we can do about it. The orders come down from headquarters. Private Dayton is to be executed in front of the Company to set an example, before we move up to the Somme.

WILLIAM: How can we kill our own comrades? What does that make us? I couldn't live with that.

SERGEANT: After tomorrow's offensive, you might not have to worry about living with anything.

WILLIAM: He's only 16. He lied about his age so he could enlist.

SERGEANT: More bloody fool him. He took the oath to die for King and country. Now he's been given the opportunity.

WILLIAM: What will happen to me for refusing to join the execution squad?

SERGEANT: At the very least a court martial and a sentence of imprisonment if your lucky enough not to join Private Dayton. Why the hell weren't you a conscientious objector instead of joining up?

WILLIAM: I was willing to serve my country in a just war, but not by killing a fellow soldier.

SERGEANT: You're not killing a fellow soldier. You just happen to have been chosen as one of twelve other soldiers to carry out an order to be on the execution squad.

WILLIAM: I 'm being ordered to fire a bullet at a British soldier.

SERGEANT: Private John Dayton his now classed as a prisoner who should have acted like a real soldier and so should you. So let's get on with fighting this bloody war. At the moment, you're just as useless as the man to be executed. Think about the last time you had your stupid principles. You refused to scream on bayonet practice. Two weeks punishment duty wasn't it. You won't have it so easy with this one. You've made real trouble for yourself.

WILLIAM: Screaming while sticking a bayonet in a straw bag and imagining it was a human body just seemed psychopathic.

SERGEANT: Damn you Bannister if I wasn't a Sergeant I'd knock you down but I still think you can be a good soldier if you pull yourself together. War's a nasty business; I've had to make decisions that have put my own and other men's lives at risk.

WILLIAM: Do you agree with the execution?

SERGEANT: Whether I agree or not doesn't matter I carry out my orders. In that last fiasco, I was ordered to initiate a gas attack when I could feel the wind blowing in my face. As a result of that idiocy, some of our company were gassed. I have to live with that.

WILLIAM: Are you saying we are not allowed to question wrong actions.

SERGEANT: We are at the mercy of our master's, the generals. A general is a soldier who gives your life for his country. I put you on this duty to give you time to think things over. Have you done that?

WILLIAM: Yes Sergeant I've resigned myself to Army punishment rather than the tormented mind I would get if I took part in the execution of Private Dayton.

SERGEANT: Why don't you understand the situation before time runs out and it's getting very close to that? The Commanding Officer's been very patient with you up to now. It's time you gave up your stupid protest.

WILLIAM: I can't possibly see how protesting about taking part in killing a British soldier is stupid.

SERGEANT: Just what the hell are you hoping to achieve? You can't see the futility of what you're protesting about. *(He takes the rifle off his shoulder and moves across the stage. He then points to an area off stage)* You see that rat.

WILLIAM: Yes, I've been watching him on and off for the last ten minutes.

SERGEANT: *(He points a finger at the rat and shouts)* bang. Did you see it take off before he became a dead rat?

WILLIAM: Yes it does have some intelligence.

SERGEANT: Next time it might not be so lucky. It took heed of a warning the rat used his head so why the hell can't you? *(Reaching into his pocket he takes out a pack of cigarettes and offers one to William)*

WILLIAM: I don't smoke.

SERGEANT: I didn't until I came to France (*He puts the packet back in his tunic pocket*) I've nothing against you personally in fact I recommended you to be a Non-Commissioned Officer before this problem came up. I need good soldiers in this company. You have soldiered well so far.

WILLIAM: Thank you sergeant but you could be wrong about the rat not being dead.

SERGEANT: Why?

WILLIAM: Before you scared, him off I watched him eating the scraps from Army food.

SERGEANT: You really are peculiar Bannister. Here you are on report for disobeying army orders and yet still finding time for a joke. Some might even say you have a sense of humour in sending that protest letter to the C.O. stating you refuse to be part of an execution team. It's never been known for any Private to put himself in that position. If it had occurred back in Aldershot instead of on this battlefield you would have been locked up in the guardroom. Of course they don't carry out executions for desertion back in blighty so it wouldn't have arisen.

WILLIAM: Nothing seems the same since I left England.

SERGEANT: In the trench's, it's a different game altogether. It's essential that you lad's accept the discipline of fear. The last time we went into no-man's land I had to put a gun to a corporal's head before he would climb out of the trench. It was no problem afterwards because he was one of many from my company killed on that day.

WILLIAM: It strikes me that no one should be surprised at finding they break up under the circumstances.

SERGEANT: In war no matter what the circumstances, orders must be obeyed. Do you think that long serving men like me don't feel fear? I saw my best friend get his head

blown off in the Boer war. Tomorrow it's back up to the front and that's not going to be a bloody Sunday School outing for you or me. What did you do before you were stupid enough to join the army?

WILLIAM: I worked on my parent's farm.

SERGEANT: Strange I had you down as a college boy.

WILLIAM: I certainly intended too but I was needed to keep the farm going. (*He walks a few paces and looks over the trench*) It's very quiet out there tonight. I think they must be short of shells.

SERGEANT: Or saving them for tomorrow when we leave the trench.

Don't get complacent because this areas away from the front line. It's quiet now but you never know what to expect. A few weeks ago, private Grantly was on duty here when shelling started up, after it was over they found four different parts of him.

WILLIAM: That's a very sobering thought Sergeant.

SERGEANT: Sobering? considering your situation at the moment, you really are a cool customer Bannister.

WILLIAM: Situation? all I've done is make a protest against what I consider to be an injustice.

SERGEANT: You certainly are an innocent abroad. You must have been in the Army long enough now to know that isn't allowed. It may be possible for some high-ranking brass to do that but not for the private soldier.

WILLIAM: Then it's time for the private soldier to speak out.

SERGEANT: Our job is to carry out orders from the top. You were lucky not to have been in action on that first day at the Somme 250 from my company were killed in that offensive. It was supposed to be a walk across no-man's land to take over the German

trenches. It turned out to be an absolute slaughter. *(He walks away a few paces then turns and kicks a sandbag)* The stupid sods!

WILLIAM: It certainly was a blunder.

SERGEANT: At least we'll know what to expect when we go over the top this time.

WILLIAM: What will be different?

SERGEANT: On that, last one we were ordered to walk across because the enemy had been flattened by days of non-stop shelling. It didn't work out like that. They were ready and well prepared. My men were cut down like wheat from a scythe.

WILLIAM: Can we expect that tomorrow?

SERGEANT: Possibly but we won't be walking into it.

WILLIAM: Those Germans are full of surprises.

SERGEANT: We need more experienced soldiers there's too many of you boys coming in. God knows how many more private Dayton's will be punished before this war is over. Don't you feel any animosity to a soldier turning his back on the company before a crucial battle?

WILLIAM: No, I think everyone as a breaking point.

SERGEANT: Not in my company. *(Walks over to a box sits down and begins fumbling in his tunic pocket before pulling out an empty cigarette pack which he crumbles in his hand)* Damn I thought I had one left.

WILLIAM: *(Turns away from the obviously disturbed Sergeant and gazes into the periscope)* It looks like Salisbury plain out there before the noise of training begins.

SERGEANT: More than training is needed to prepare men for the Somme battlefield. You won't have time to do any drawing tomorrow afternoon.

WILLIAM: Drawing?

SERGEANT: Yes, I noticed you with pencil and pad a few days ago. What were you sketching?

WILLIAM: Just that desolate landscape over there (*He nods in the direction over the trench*)

SERGEANT: Why?

WILLIAM: I have no camera.

SERGEANT: You really are an odd one. Nevertheless, a damn good soldier. I suppose you farm lads get used to killing animals. Those town boys are real soft. I've seen them freeze at the sight of blood. One farmer is worth ten factory men.

WILLIAM: Pulling the trigger on a human being is different from shooting at crows or a rabbit.

SERGEANT: Do you think a soldier out here gives himself time to think that a German he's trying to kill is human. Most farmers probably see it as slaughtering pigs.

WILLIAM: I do not see it like that.

SERGEANT: Too bloody right you don't, that's your problem.

WILLIAM: Before I became a part of this carnage, I believed the war was necessary as a means of defence and liberation. It now seems to be more a futile sacrifice.

SERGEANT: Careful a man can't afford to be too reflective when he's not far off going over a trench top. All his attention should be on kill or be killed.

WILLIAM: Don't you see any possibility for negotiation. What was gained from thousands killed in the Ypres battle we both took part in?

SERGEANT: Whether we like it or not we voluntarily agreed to serve our country and if we backed off now we'd end up where private Dayton is and he's one too many from my Company.

WILLIAM: How can a 16-year-old be written off like that? He must have shown courage to join up as an underage soldier.

SERGEANT: He is old enough to know a soldier will face punishment if he breaks the rules and contravenes section 4 of the Army Act -showing cowardice in the face of the enemy.

WILLIAM: He's not the only soldier to have done that. So far, most of those who received a death sentence from the Court Martial have been reprieved.

SERGEANT: You have been doing your homework. Pity you can't get it through that soft head of yours what's happening. The delusion of this war coming to a quick end is over. The top brass believe morale is low and any loose discipline could result in thoughts of mutiny. The French Army is close to that at the moment.

WILLIAM: I think if soldiers have to shoot a comrade for giving way to overpowering emotions then morale is going to be even lower.

SERGEANT: Why do you think the men keep on fighting? It's because of a belief in patriotism and a sense of duty. That means strong discipline is needed.

WILLIAM: What about humanity?

SERGEANT: Out here, a person isn't an individual, he's part of the war machine. Didn't they tell you about that at Aldershot?

WILLIAM: Is no account taken of uncontrollable shock from the constant shelling.

SERGEANT: Shock isn't found in a good unit. A well-trained soldier should not breakdown because of gunfire.

WILLIAM: It could be a temporary lapse.

SERGEANT: Such behaviour can be transferred to other soldiers then you have panic, which destroys the fighting mentality needed in an attack like the one planned. Private Dayton was described in a Court Martial as being liable to cause panic. The Court had

no evidence that he had shown any previous courage, which would have helped his case.

WILLIAM: Didn't they consider his mental condition?

SERGEANT: No the trial found him to have no sign of any mental disorders. His state of mind was confirmed by the medical officer has been satisfactory.

WILLIAM: The last time we saw John Dayton in the trench he seemed to be in a trance-like state of shock.

SERGEANT: At dawn tomorrow his problems will be over but not for his next of kin.

WILLIAM: What do you mean?

SERGEANT: His family will be informed that Private John Dayton was executed for Acts prejudicial to military discipline and his grave marker will say 'Shot at Dawn.' His name will be forgotten.

WILLIAM: His family will remember him.

SERGEANT: He should have thought about his family before deserting.

When the word gets back to his hometown, his next of kin will be ostracised and left on their own. His name won't even be on any memorial. If he had lived, he would have been branded as a weak, untrustworthy individual and unemployable. This will be on his Army record.

WILLIAM: I can't believe civilians would act like that.

SERGEANT: Civilians are just as keen as the army to win this war and it means a soldier has to learn to live with his fears in order to give his best in battle.