

DEFEAT. A TINY DRAMA

John Galsworthy

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DEFEAT. A TINY DRAMA

CHARACTERS

THE OFFICER.

THE GIRL.

DEFEAT

During the Great War. Evening.

An empty room. The curtains drawn and gas turned low. The furniture and walls give a colour-impression as of greens and beetroot. There is a prevalence of plush. A fireplace on the Left, a sofa, a small table; the curtained window is at the back. On the table, in a common pot, stands a little plant of maidenhair fern, fresh and green.

Enter from the door on the Right, a GIRL and a YOUNG OFFICER in khaki. The GIRL wears a discreet dark dress, hat, and veil, and stained yellow gloves. The YOUNG OFFICER is tall, with a fresh open face, and kindly eager blue eyes; he is a little lame. The GIRL, who is evidently at home, moves towards the gas jet to turn it up, then changes her mind, and going to the curtains, draws them apart and throws up the window. Bright moonlight comes flooding in. Outside are seen the trees of a little Square. She stands gazing out, suddenly turns inward with a shiver.

YOUNG OFF. I say; what's the matter? You were crying when I spoke to you.

GIRL. [With a movement of recovery] Oh! nothing. The beautiful evening—that's all.

YOUNG OFF. [Looking at her] Cheer up!

GIRL. [Taking of hat and veil; her hair is yellowish and crinkly] Cheer up! You are not lonelee, like me.

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YOUNG OFF. [Limping to the window doubtfully] I say, how did you how did you get into this? Isn't it an awfully hopeless sort of life?

GIRL. Yees, it ees. You haf been wounded?

YOUNG OFF. Just out of hospital to-day.

GIRL. The horrible war all the misery is because of the war . When will it end?

YOUNG OFF. [Leaning against the window-sill, looking at her attentively] I say, what nationality are you?

GIRL. [With a quick look and away] Rooshian.

YOUNG OFF. Really! I never met a Russian girl. [The GIRL gives him another quick look] I say, is it as bad as they make out?

GIRL. [Slipping her hand through his arm] Not when I haf anyone as ni-ice as you; I never haf had, though. [She smiles, and her smile, like her speech, is slow and confining] You stopped because I was sad, others stop because I am gay. I am not fond of men at all. When you know you are not fond of them.

YOUNG OFF. Well, you hardly know them at their best, do you? You should see them in the trenches. By George! They're simply splendid officers and men, every blessed soul. There's never been anything like it just one long bit of jolly fine self-sacrifice; it's perfectly amazing.

GIRL. [Turning her blue-grey eyes on him] I expect you are not the last at that. You see in them what you haf in yourself, I think.

YOUNG OFF. Oh, not a bit; you're quite out! I assure you when we made the attack where I got wounded there wasn't a single man in my regiment who wasn't an absolute hero. The way they went in never thinking of themselves it was simply ripping.

GIRL. [In a queer voice] It is the same too, perhaps, with the enemy.

YOUNG OFF. Oh, yes! I know that.

GIRL. Ah! You are not a mean man. How I hate mean men!

YOUNG OFF. Oh! they're not mean really they simply don't understand.

GIRL. Oh! You are a babee a good babee aren't you?

[The YOUNG OFFICER doesn't like this, and frowns. The GIRL looks a little scared.]

GIRL. [Clingingly] But I li-ke you for it. It is so good to find a ni-ice man.

YOUNG OFF. [Abruptly] About being lonely? Haven't you any Russian friends?

GIRL. [Blankly] Rooshian? No. [Quickly] The town is so beeg. Were you at the concert before you spoke to me?

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YOUNG OFF. Yes.

GIRL. I too. I lofe music.

YOUNG OFF. I suppose all Russians do.

GIRL. [With another quick look tat him] I go there always when I haf the money.

YOUNG OFF. What! Are you as badly on the rocks as that?

GIRL. Well, I haf just one shilling now!

[She laughs bitterly. The laugh upsets him; he sits on the window-sill, and leans forward towards her.]

YOUNG OFF. I say, what's your name?

GIRL. May. Well, I call myself that. It is no good asking yours.

YOUNG OFF. [With a laugh] You're a distrustful little soul; aren't you?

GIRL. I haf reason to be, don't you think?

YOUNG OFF. Yes. I suppose you're bound to think us all brutes.

GIRL. [Sitting on a chair close to the window where the moonlight falls on one powdered cheek] Well, I haf a lot of reasons to be afraid all my time. I am dreadfully nervous now; I am not truding anybody. I suppose you haf been killing lots of Germans?

YOUNG OFF. We never know, unless it happens to be hand to hand; I haven't come in for that yet.

GIRL. But you would be very glad if you had killed some.

YOUNG OFF. Oh, glad? I don't think so. We're all in the same boat, so far as that's concerned. We're not glad to kill each other not most of us. We do our job that's all.

GIRL. Oh! It is frightful. I expect I haf my brothers killed.

YOUNG OFF. Don't you get any news ever?

GIRL. News? No indeed, no news of anybody in my country. I might not haf a country; all that I ever knew is gone; fader, moder, sisters, broders, all; never any more I shall see them, I suppose, now. The war it breaks and breaks, it breaks hearts. [She gives a little snarl] Do you know what I was thinking when you came up to me? I was thinking of my native town, and the river in the moonlight. If I could see it again I would be glad. Were you ever homeseeck?

YOUNG OFF. Yes, I have been in the trenches. But one's ashamed with all the others.

GIRL. Ah! Yees! Yees! You are all comrades there. What is it like for me here, do you think, where everybody hates and despises me, and would catch me and put me in prison, perhaps. [Her breast heaves.]

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YOUNG OFF. [Leaning forward and patting her knee] Sorry sorry.

GIRL. [In a smothered voice] You are the first who has been kind to me for so long! I will tell you the truth I am not Rooshian at all I am German.

YOUNG OFF. [Staring] My dear girl, who cares. We aren't fighting against women.

GIRL. [Peering at him] Another man said that to me. But he was thinkin' of his fun. You are a veree ni-ice boy; I am so glad I met you. You see the good in people, don't you? That is the first thing in the world because there is really not much good in people, you know.

YOUNG OFF. [Smiling] You are a dreadful little cynic! But of course you are!

GIRL. Cyneec? How long do you think I would live if I was not a cyneec? I should drown myself to-morrow. Perhaps there are good people, but, you see, I don't know them.

YOUNG OFF. I know lots.

GIRL. [Leaning towards him] Well now see, ni-ice boy you haf never been in a hole, haf you?

YOUNG OFF. I suppose not a real hole.

GIRL. No, I should think not, with your face. Well, suppose I am still a good girl, as I was once, you know; and you took me to your mother and your sisters and you said: "Here is a little German girl that has no work, and no money, and no friends." They will say: "Oh! how sad! A German girl!" And they will go and wash their hands.

[The OFFICER, is silent, staring at her.]

GIRL. You see.

YOUNG OFF. [Muttering] I'm sure there are people.

GIRL. No. They would not take a German, even if she was good. Besides, I don't want to be good any more I am not a humbug; I have learned to be bad. Aren't you going to kees me, ni-ice boy?

She puts her face close to his. Her eyes trouble him; he draws back.

YOUNG OFF. Don't. I'd rather not, if you don't mind. [She looks at him fixedly, with a curious inquiring stare] It's stupid. I don't know but you see, out there, and in hospital, life's different. It's it's it isn't mean, you know. Don't come too close.

GIRL. Oh! You are fun [She stops] Eesn't it light. No Zeps to-night. When they burn what a 'orrible death! And all the people cheer. It is natural. Do you hate us veree much?

YOUNG OFF. [Turning sharply] Hate? I don't know.

GIRL. I don't hate even the English I despise them. I despise my people too; even more, because they began this war. Oh! I know that. I despise all the peoples. Why haf they made the world so miserable why haf they killed all our lives hundreds and thousands and millions of lives all for noting? They haf made a bad world everybody hating, and looking for the worst everywhere. They haf made me bad, I know. I believe no more in

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anything. What is there to believe in? Is there a God? No! Once I was teaching little English children their prayers isn't that funnee? I was reading to them about Christ and love. I believed all those things. Now I believe noting at all no one who is not a fool or a liar can believe . I would like to work in a 'ospital; I would like to go and 'elp poor boys like you. Because I am a German they would throw me out a 'undred times, even if I was good. It is the same in Germany, in France, in Russia, everywhere. But do you think I will believe in Love and Christ and God and all that Not I! I think we are animals that's all! Oh, yes! you fancy it is because my life has spoiled me . It is not that at all that is not the worst thing in life. The men I take are not ni-ice, like you, but it's their nature; and they help me to live, which is something for me, anyway. No, it is the men who think themselves great and good and make the war with their talk and their hate, killing us all killing all the boys like you, and keeping poor People in prison, and telling us to go on hating; and all these dreadful cold-blood creatures who write in the papers the same in my country just the same; it is because of all of them that I think we are only animals.

[The YOUNG OFFICER gets up, acutely miserable.]

[She follows him with her eyes.]

GIRL. Don't mind me talkin', ni-ice boy. I don't know anyone to talk to. If you don't like it, I can be quiet as a mouse.

YOUNG OFF. Oh, go on! Talk away; I'm not obliged to believe you, and I don't.

[She, too, is on her feet now, leaning against the wall; her dark dress and white face just touched by the slanting moonlight. Her voice comes again, slow and soft and bitter.]

GIRL. Well, look here, ni-ice boy, what sort of world is it, where millions are being tortured, for no fault of theirs, at all? A beautiful world, isn't it? 'Umbog! Silly rot, as you boys call it . You say it is all "Comrades" and braveness out there at the front, and people don't think of themselves. Well, I don't think of myself verree much. What does it matter? I am lost now, anyway. But I think of my people at 'ome; how they suffer and grieve. I think of all the poor people there, and here, how lose those they love, and all the poor prisoners. Am I not to think of them? And if I do, how am I to believe it a beautiful world, ni-ice boy?

[He stands very still, staring at her.]

GIRL. Look here! We haf one life each, and soon it is over . Well, I think that is lucky.

YOUNG OFF. No! There's more than that.

GIRL. [Softly] Ah! You think the war is fought for the future; you are giving your lives for a better world, aren't you?

YOUNG OFF. We must fight till we win.

GIRL. Till you win. My people think that too. All the peoples think that if they win the world will be better. But it will not, you know; it will be much worse, anyway.

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[He turns away from her, and catches up his cap. Her voice follows him.]

GIRL. I don't care which win. I don't care if my country is beaten. I despise them all animals animals. Ah! Don't go, ni-ice boy; I will be quiet now.

[He has taken some notes from his tunic pocket; he puts them on the table and goes up to her.]

YOUNG OFF. Good-night.

GIRL. [Plaintively] Are you really going? Don't you like me enough?

YOUNG OFF. Yes, I like you.

GIRL. It is because I am German, then?

YOUNG OFF. No.

GIRL. Then why won't you stay?

YOUNG OFF. [With a shrug] If you must know because you upset me.

GIRL. Won't you keep me once?

[He bends, puts his lips to her forehead. But as he takes them away she throws her head back, presses her mouth to his, and clings to him.]

YOUNG OFF. [Sitting down suddenly] Don't! I don't want to feel a brute.

GIRL. [Laughing] You are a funny boy; but you are verree good. Talk to me a little, then. No one talks to me. Tell me, haf you seen many German prisoners?

YOUNG OFF. [Sighing] A good many.

GIRL. Any from the Rhine?

YOUNG OFF. Yes, I think so.

GIRL. Were they verree sad?

YOUNG OFF. Some were; some were quite glad to be taken.

GIRL. Did you ever see the Rhine? It will be wonderful to-night. The moonlight will be the same there, and in Rooshia too, and France, everywhere; and the trees will look the same as here, and people will meet under them and make love just as here. Oh! isn't it stupid, the war? As if it were not good to be alive!

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YOUNG OFF. You can't tell how good it is to be alive till you're facing death. You don't live till then. And when a whole lot of you feel like that and are ready to give their lives for each other, it's worth all the rest of life put together.

[He stops, ashamed of such, sentiment before this girl, who believes in nothing.]

GIRL. [Softly] How were you wounded, ni-ice boy?

YOUNG OFF. Attacking across open ground: four machine bullets got me at one go off.

GIRL. Weren't you verree frightened when they ordered you to attack?

[He shakes his head and laughs.]

YOUNG OFF. It was great. We did laugh that morning. They got me much too soon, though a swindle.

GIRL. [Staring at him] You laughed?

YOUNG OFF. Yes. And what do you think was the first thing I was conscious of next morning? My old Colonel bending over me and giving me a squeeze of lemon. If you knew my Colonel you'd still believe in things. There is something, you know, behind all this evil. After all, you can only die once, and, if it's for your country all the better!

[Her face, in the moonlight, with, intent eyes touched up with black, has a most strange, other-world look.]

GIRL. No; I believe in nothing, not even in my country. My heart is dead.

YOUNG OFF. Yes; you think so, but it isn't, you know, or you wouldn't have 'been crying when I met you.

GIRL. If it were not dead, do you think I could live my life—walking the streets every night, pretending to like strange men; never hearing a kind word; never talking, for fear I will be known for a German? Soon I shall take to drinking; then I shall be "Kaput" verree quick. You see, I am practical; I see things clear. To-night I am a little emotional; the moon is funny, you know. But I live for myself only, now. I don't care for anything or anybody.

YOUNG OFF. All the same; just now you were pitying your folk at home, and prisoners and that.

GIRL. Yees; because they suffer. Those who suffer are like me I pity myself, that's all; I am different from your English women. I see what I am doing; I do not let my mind become a turnip just because I am no longer moral.

YOUNG OFF. Nor your heart either, for all you say.

GIRL. Ni-ice boy, you are verree obstinate. But all that about love is 'umbog. We love ourselves, noting more.

At that intense soft bitterness in her voice, he gets up, feeling stifled, and stands at the window. A newspaper boy some

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way off is calling his wares. The GIRL's fingers slip between his own, and stay unmoving. He looks round into her face. In spite of make-up it has a queer, unholy, touching beauty.

YOUNG OFF. [With an outburst] No; we don't only love ourselves; there is more. I can't explain, but there's something great; there's kindness and and –

[The shouting of newspaper boys grows louder and their cries, passionately vehement, clash into each other and obscure each word. His head goes up to listen; her hand tightens within his arm she too is listening. The cries come nearer, hoarser, more shrill and clamorous; the empty moonlight outside seems suddenly crowded with figures, footsteps, voices, and a fierce distant cheering. "Great victory great victory! Official! British! 'Eavy defeat of the 'Uns! Many thousand prisoners! 'Eavy defeat!" It speeds by, intoxicating, filling him with a fearful joy; he leans far out, waving his cap and cheering like a madman; the night seems to flutter and vibrate and answer. He turns to rush down into the street, strikes against something soft, and recoils. The GIRL stands with hands clenched, and face convulsed, panting. All confused with the desire to do something, he stoops to kiss her hand. She snatches away her fingers, sweeps up the notes he has put down, and holds them out to him.]

GIRL. Take them I will not haf your English money take them.

Suddenly she tears them across, twice, thrice, lets the bits flutter to the floor, and turns her back on him. He stands looking at her leaning against the plush-covered table, her head down, a dark figure in a dark room, with the moonlight sharpening her outline. Hardly a moment he stays, then makes for the door. When he is gone, she still stands there, her chin on her breast, with the sound in her ears of cheering, of hurrying feet, and voices crying: "'Eavy Defeat!" stands, in the centre of a pattern made by the fragments of the torn-up notes, staring out unto the moonlight, seeing not this hated room and the hated Square outside, but a German orchard, and herself, a little girl, plucking apples, a big dog beside her; and a hundred other pictures, such as the drowning see. Then she sinks down on the floor, lays her forehead on the dusty carpet, and presses her body to it. Mechanically, she sweeps together the scattered fragments of notes, assembling them with the dust into a little pile, as of fallen leaves, and dabbling in it with her fingers, while the tears run down her cheeks.

GIRL. Defeat! Der Vaterland! Defeat!. . . One shillin' !

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[Then suddenly, in the moonlight, she sits up, and begins to sing with all her might "Die Wacht am Rhein." And outside men pass, singing: "Rule, Britannia!"]

CURTAIN