

Walking Cathedral

Darren Baker

Cast

LAYLA MINER, gentle member of the English gentry

CLIFF MINER, her husband

BIFF MINER, their son

KAREN BELFRY, granddaughter of the local aristocracy

LADY BELFRY, the local aristocracy

BELL RINGER

GERMAN PILOT

VICAR

Scene One

Europe is on the eve of war – again. The Miners are sitting at a table in their garden and sipping tea. Son Biff looks uncomfortable.

Mrs. Miner But darling, it's not fair. Why can't I have a new hat if you can have a new car?

Mr. Miner Because a new car is practical. It's something for the whole family. You want a new hat just to keep up with the Joneses.

Mrs. Miner Not with the Joneses, dear, the Belfrys. Their flower show is coming up and I simply can't go to it wearing the same old hat as last year. Not this year.

Mr. Miner What's so important about this year's show? The Belfry rose always wins, year in, year out.

Biff That's because no other roses are allowed in the contest. The Belfrys have seen to that.

Mrs. Miner That's not true, Biff. The contest has always been open to the public. It's just that the Belfry roses were always so good that nobody saw any reason to compete with them.

Biff Oh, mother, you're so naïve. Their roses are no better than any others. Ordinary people won't enter their own roses because they're afraid to. Afraid members of their own class will jeer at them for stepping out of line.

Mr. Miner What's got into you?

Biff Don't you see, Father? England is still ruled by a medieval class system that insists the Belfrys have better blood than the rest of us. They would have us think since their blood is better, their roses must naturally be better as well.

Mr. Miner And have you ever been to one of their flower contests? Do you even know what you're talking about?

Biff You're not going to find me at one of those decadent orgies.

Mrs. Miner Biff, watch your language.

Biff I'm sorry, mother, but a flower contest in this day and age is pure decadence. Decadence from the ruling class, much the way your hat and father's car are decadence of the bourgeois class.

Mrs. Miner How can you talk that way to us?

Biff It's not your fault, Mother. You and father just don't know any better.

Mr. Miner And you do?

Biff Well, yes and no. Yes, I know more about it than you do, and no, I really know nothing at all.

Mr. Miner Lay, what's he talking about?

Mrs. Miner I think he just called himself an idiot and us worse.

Biff I don't mean it like that, Mother. You see, the most important thing I learned at Oxford was that I knew nothing at all. Once I knew that, I was able to open my eyes up to the real world. And the first thing I saw was all the injustice around us.

Mr. Miner And what do you propose to do about it? I didn't need Oxford to open my eyes to the injustice I saw in the mines where my father worked. But I didn't sit around in a garden like you are now complaining about it. I did something about it.

Biff (*Excited*) Really, Father? Did you organize a strike for better pay and working conditions?

Mr. Miner Well, actually...

Biff Maybe you dumped coal on the doorsteps of the mine owners? Flogged their scabs as they tried to cross the strike line.

Mr. Miner I'm not as dramatic as you are. No, I decided I wasn't going to be a miner like my father was and so learned to be an architect instead.

Biff (*Sits back in his chair disappointed*) Is that all?

Mr. Miner What do you mean "Is that all?" If I hadn't done that, you'd be hunched over in a coalmine right now with soot in your eyes.

Biff I'm not belittling what you did, Father. It's just that I want to go out and help other people first before I help myself. That's why I've decided to spend the rest of the summer slumming down in London.

Mrs. Miner Slumming? Oh, Biff, no. You just got back from Oxford and the weather has been so nice this summer. Why, it's rained barely half the time.

Biff I'm sorry, Mother, but there may not be much time left for me to help people. I fear war between us and Germany is imminent. When it comes, I will be called to slaughter people in defence of our class system. So I must go now.

Mr. Miner And has it ever occurred to you that you will be called instead to defend some nice things about England?

Biff Surely you're not talking about that wretched flower contest, Father.

Mr. Miner No, I mean our way of life. Our freedom to speak out against the system whenever we want to, the way you are now, and our freedom to worship whatever we please, be it religion or consumerism. None of these things exist in Germany any more.

Biff I don't disagree with you, Father, that the Germans are completely mad right now. And of course we'll have to stop them if they insist on making more demands for land. It's just too bad somebody didn't stop us when we were the scourge of indigenous peoples.

Mr. Miner Layla, make a note to send our other two children to Cambridge when the time comes.

Mrs. Miner I think you're both right. Biff, I too want to make our society more just and equal, and Cliff, I'm ready to do something about it. That's why I simply must have that hat. *(They are startled to see Karen make her entrance by climbing the garden wall. The men stand up.)*

Mr. Miner Can I help you, young lady?

Karen Hello, excuse me for intruding like this, but nobody came to the door when I knocked.

Mrs. Miner Sorry, dear, we were having a lively conversation.

Karen Yes, I heard your voices and that's why I thought I would try to catch you in your garden. My name is Karen Belfry. I'm the granddaughter of Lady Belfry.

Mrs. Miner Oh, I didn't know Lady Belfry had a granddaughter.

Karen Funny, isn't it? We've been neighbours all these years and we never had a chance to meet.

Mrs. Miner Well, I'm Layla Miner.

Karen How do you do.

Mrs. Miner And this is my husband Cliff.

Karen How do you do.

Mr. Miner The pleasure is mine, young lady.

Mrs. Miner And this is our son, Biff.

Karen Hello.

Biff Hello. I never would've expected Lady Belfry to have such a charming granddaughter. It's a shame the class system in this country prevented us from getting to know one another before.

Karen Excuse me?

Mr. Miner Don't mind him. He's just down from Oxford.

Mrs. Miner Won't you sit down? (*They all sit.*)

Karen I don't want to interrupt your teatime, but I just had to talk to you, Mrs. Miner.

Mrs. Miner Me?

Karen Yes. You see, the cathedral bell ringer has shocked all of us by entering one of his roses in this year's flower contest. (*Biff smirks. Karen gives him an unpleasant look.*) My grandmother has always won the award for best rose, in part because there was never any competition. Now she's quite old and I'm afraid the stress of having to compete might take its toll on her.

Mr. Miner What has any of this to do with us?

Mrs. Miner Well, that was the big news I've been trying to tell you, dear. I met the bell ringer on my way home from London yesterday. He asked me if he could show me something from under his coat. He was giving me such a queer look that I hesitated, but he took it out anyway. And there before my eyes was one of the most beautiful roses I had ever seen. He told me he not only planned to enter it in the contest, but also asked if I would sponsor it for him.

Karen That's why I've come to you, Mrs. Miner. I thought maybe you could persuade him not to enter his rose, at least not while my grandmother is still among us. Once she has departed, he can win all the contests he feels like.

Mrs. Miner But, my dear, I've already told him I would. And the bell ringer is quite old himself. I'm not sure he'll outlast your grandmother.

Karen I know, but her roses mean so much to her. I don't know why the bell ringer has to go off and make such trouble when there's already trouble enough in the world.

Biff I'll tell you why, Miss Belfry. Because that old man has been yanking that bell all his life for your and our pleasure. Now all he wants is a little pleasure for himself, but the aristocratic Belfrys are determined to keep it all for themselves.

Karen I beg your pardon?

Biff Oh, come now, Miss Belfry. I know the game here. Your grandmother sent you down here to do her bidding because she refuses to wallow with the likes of us ordinary people. Isn't that it?

Mr. Miner Biff, nobody wallows in this house.

Karen It's true my grandmother doesn't like to wallow, Mr. Miner, but I do. That's why I've spent the past few summers doing handy work in the slums of London.

Biff Really? You go slumming in London?

Karen Yes. I grew up with aristocratic pretensions all my life and. Now I find them to be a burden in this modern age. Slumming is a way for me to help people and get to know my real self at the same time.

Mrs. Miner And how does your grandmother feel about you going to the slums?

Karen She's not thrilled about it, but understands I will do what I want anyway. (*Looking at Biff*) But to answer your cutting remark a moment ago, Mr. Miner, she doesn't know I'm here. I'm on my way to the slums at this very instant and I thought I would drop by because, well, she is my grandmother and I hate to see her heart broken. In any event, I will respect your wishes.

Mrs. Miner Thank you, my dear. Maybe I will talk to the bell ringer and see if we can't find a way to please everybody involved.

Karen I would appreciate that. Thank you for your time. Now if you will excuse me, I must catch my train for the slums. Goodbye. (*She stands and the men stand up as well.*)

Biff Miss Belfry? I know you probably think I was out of line a moment ago, but could I ask you...that is to say, I would be honoured to accompany you to the slums. I mean, it was my plan to go anyway, next week, but since you're going that way now, I thought...

Karen And have you ever been to the slums before?

Biff No, I only read about them up at Oxford. That's why I thought you could show me around at first, sort of help me get started.

Karen I would be glad to, Mr. Miner.

Biff Please, call me Biff.

Karen Okay, Biff. But we really must get started.

Biff I'll go pack.

Mrs. Miner But Biff, you only just arrived.

Biff Sorry, Mother, but duty to my fellow man calls.

Karen Please, you shouldn't pack anything. It'll only be stolen the minute we reach the slums. We'll simply go there as we are.

Mrs. Miner But what about a change of...socks?

Karen That won't be necessary. Everything will be taken care of for us there.

Biff Great. Well, we're off. Bye, Mother. (*Kisses her*)

Mrs. Miner Goodbye, son.

Biff Goodbye, Father. (*Shakes his hand*)

Mr. Miner (*He stands*) Goodbye, son. Don't bring back any diseases with you.

Mrs. Miner Cliff.

Karen Goodbye now. It's been such a pleasure for me to meet you, folks. Don't worry, I'll look after your son for you.

Mrs. Miner (*Standing*) Thank you. Take care. Goodbye. (*Biff and Karen exit.*)

Mr. Miner Goodbye. (*They sit down.*)

Mrs. Miner How do you like the nerve of that girl. She comes in here, tries to dissuade me from sponsoring the bell ringer, then runs off with our son to the slums. Talk about aristocratic pretensions.

Mr. Miner By the way, dear, what exactly does sponsoring the bell ringer involve?

Mrs. Miner Oh, nothing really. Just that I show up looking my best before the judges. He said he asked me to do it because I have such good taste in style.

Mr. Miner That you do. But do you think you can talk him into forgoing the contest, at least for this year?

Mrs. Miner I think so, although it might take a new hat to get the point across to him. *(She reaches under the table, pulls out a hat and places it on her head. The hat is flat black, shaped like a bell with feathers sprouting from the top.)* Do you like it, dear?

Scene Two

The Miner garden, this time with Mrs. Miner sitting alone and sipping tea. Gunfire can be heard off in the distance. She is disturbed by the abrupt entrance of Lady Belfry.

Lady Belfry Are you Mrs. Miner?

Mrs. Miner Why, Lady Belfry, how nice to see you.

Lady Belfry I should wonder when nobody answers your door. I've been standing out there banging on it for five minutes.

Mrs. Miner I'm terribly sorry. I've been sitting here in my garden listening to the war from afar.

Lady Belfry Haven't you better things to do with your time?

Mrs. Miner Of course. It's just that my husband and son have been away some time now and well, naturally, I'm worried.

Lady Belfry And what about servants? Haven't you any servants to open the door for you?

Mrs. Miner I'm afraid we had to dismiss them. We simply couldn't afford to keep them now that we're feeling the effects of the war.

Lady Belfry In what sense?

Mrs. Miner Well, there's been very little work for my husband lately. He's an architect and people don't want to be building things when there are bombs dropping around us day and night.

Lady Belfry Ach, those wretched Germans. You wait until we pay them back in kind, that'll teach them for listening to that pathetic little man with the Charlie Chaplin moustache. And where is your husband now?

Mrs. Miner He's the captain of one of the local patrol units. He's out now because a German pilot was seen parachuting a few days ago in this area and they're looking for him.

Lady Belfry I'd like to see this pilot try to walk into my house. I'll set my dogs on him in no time. But all this is beside the point. Mrs. Miner, I've come to discuss a very important matter that concerns the both of us.

Mrs. Miner Won't you sit down? (*They both sit.*) I know why you've come. I've even been expecting your visit.

Lady Belfry In that case, why haven't you called upon me instead of forcing me to have to make the trip to see you? I am, after all, a bit older than you.

Mrs. Miner Excuse me, Lady Belfry, but I wanted to make sure I had done my research before paying you a call.

Lady Belfry Research? Why on earth would you need to do research before coming to see me? I'm not all that difficult to figure out, am I?

Mrs. Miner No, but it is a very important matter and it's best if we put all the facts on the table.

Lady Belfry I couldn't agree more. So let's have it then: What has your research turned up about me?

Mrs. Miner Nothing terribly scandalous, you can be sure. Just something about the thirteenth Lord Belfry losing his head.

Lady Belfry Nothing special there. The second, fourth, seventh and tenth Belfrys also lost their heads. Traditions run strong in our family.

Mrs. Miner And then there was the small point about Belfry wives being married off at an early age.

Lady Belfry I beg your pardon. We were not married off as if we were livestock being sold at an auction. Breeding is very important in the best families, that's all. If the women were young, it's because the circumstances dictated that they be married young. I myself got married at fifteen because my husband was a soldier and at that time he was on his way to Africa. There was always the chance he might not return. And he didn't.

Mrs. Miner I'm terribly sorry, Lady Belfry. I didn't mean to insinuate...

Lady Belfry Well, you did. And frankly, I don't see how any of this is connected to the matter at hand.

Mrs. Miner It's just that the circumstances seem so familiar. Young girl and boy in love, boy going off to war. You better than most people should understand how they feel.

Lady Belfry Mrs. Miner, will you please tell me what it is you're talking about? I came here to discuss our cathedral's bell ringer trying to subvert my flower contest.

Mrs. Miner The flower contest? Oh dear, I thought we were talking about Karen and Biff's plans to get married.

Lady Belfry Well, there you go. More proof that the classes of England need more than just a common language to be able to communicate with one another.

Mrs. Miner So then you already know about their intentions?

Lady Belfry Of course. What, you think my granddaughter and I only speak about flowers at home?

Mrs. Miner No, it's just that...so then, you're not against the marriage?

Lady Belfry I most certainly am. I think she would find a better match in Lord Bearclaw's son. I've always feared that some people will use this war merely as a pretext to jump beyond their station in life.

Mrs. Miner I can assure you Biff is not like that.

Lady Belfry Be that as it may, Karen intends to do what she wants no matter what I say. She goes to the slums whenever she feels like, brings home whatever boy she feels like. She was always that way.

Mrs. Miner But she's a lovely girl and we're looking forward to welcoming her into our family.

Lady Belfry I assure you your son will receive something of the sort from our side as well. In any case, I came here to discuss my flower contest.

Mrs. Miner Yes, how can I be of assistance?

Lady Belfry Easy. Have that dreadful little bell ringer withdraw his flower. Word has come to me that he planned to enter a rose in last year's contest, but that you had persuaded him not to. Now, I would like you to do the same for this year's contest.

Mrs. Miner I don't know if that will be possible, Lady Belfry. You see, last year the war broke out right before the contest and, well, he agreed there were more important things to take care of at that time.

Lady Belfry Are you suggesting that my flower contest is frivolous? I didn't cancel it last year for the same reason I'm not cancelling it this year. I'm not going to let those impudent Germans turn life upside down here.

Mrs. Miner Of course, your contest isn't frivolous. In fact, it's very important to many people here, including the bell ringer.

Lady Belfry So why does he insist on ruining it by competing with me? The thought of a Belfry rose standing alongside a bell ringer's rose...

Mrs. Miner His roses are quite nice. Are you afraid you might lose?

Lady Belfry Certainly not. The judges work for me. They wouldn't dare see things any other way.

Mrs. Miner There you go. As for myself I...*(Looking over Lady Belfry's shoulder)*

Lady Belfry Well, what is it then?

Mrs. Miner I believe I see the bell ringer coming now and he's with...good lord, is that a German pilot? *(Standing)*

Lady Belfry What? *(Looking behind her. The pilot enters with the bell ringer behind him holding a rifle.)*

Bell Ringer Good afternoon, Mrs. Miner. Good afternoon, my Lady. I'm honoured to meet you here.

Lady Belfry I can't say it's the same honour for me, Bell Ringer. What on earth did you bring that pilot here for?

Bell Ringer I found him in the weeds down there by the river. I thought we could call for the home guard from your place, Mrs. Miner.

Mrs. Miner Certainly. (*She stands there gazing at the pilot.*)

Lady Belfry Well, what are standing there for? Are you going to call the home guard or are you going to invite this wretched gentleman to tea?

Mrs. Miner It's strange, but I would swear he resembles our own vicar quite a bit.

Bell Ringer Right you are, Ma'am. I thought the same thing when I picked him up out of them weeds.

Lady Belfry Oh nonsense. The resemblance is slight at most. In any case, it doesn't answer the question as to what you were doing in those weeds in the first place. You wouldn't happen to have been snooping in on our conversation, would you?

Bell Ringer Of course not, my Lady. I'm on river patrol right now.

Lady Belfry I see. Well, since we have you here, Bell Ringer, there is something Mrs. Miner and I have to ask you.

Mrs. Miner Lady Belfry, don't you think we should call the home guard now?

Lady Belfry You had your chance. Now it will have to wait. Besides, let the German sit with us a while, maybe he will learn a thing or two about manners in the process. Now, Bell Ringer, do you insist on entering your rose along side mine in the flower contest? (*The bell ringer, pilot and Mrs. Miner take their seats.*)

Bell Ringer With your permission, my Lady.

Lady Belfry Well, you don't need my permission. We live in a free country, don't we? But what I would like to know is why must it be now, when we're in the middle of a war with these barbarians here? Surely, our king deserves a bit of unity from us in this hour of need.

Bell Ringer You're quite right, my Lady. But I'm an old man and I fear I won't outlive this war. It's going to take a long time to push these Jerries back to Berlin.

Lady Belfry I'm not so young myself, but you don't see me upsetting tradition.

Mrs. Miner Bell Ringer, tell Lady Belfry why your rose is so important to you. Maybe it can help explain things.

Bell Ringer You see, my Lady, when I was a young boy, I once came across this beautiful rose. So beautiful she was there in the morning light, and yet a nasty impulse made me want to pick it. So I did and the rose pricked me badly, as well it should have. And from that day on I've tried and tried to grow a rose as beautiful as that one I picked so many years ago. Now I think I finally got it, but who's going to visit a lonely bell ringer to see it? I thought maybe if I enter it in your contest, well, others could appreciate its beauty as well.

Lady Belfry That's not a bad story. How true it is I'm not sure, but in any case...(*The pilot raises his head and starts reciting.*)

Pilot „Half ihr doch kein Weh und Ach, musst es eben leiden, Röslein, Röslein, Röslein rot, Röslein auf der Heiden.“

Mrs. Miner (*After a short pause*) Why, it sounded like a poem.

Bell Ringer Yes, indeed.

Lady Belfry Ach, the nerve of these Germans. What their bombs don't kill, their poetry will.

Bell Ringer I don't know me German, of course...

Lady Belfry And well you shouldn't. Dreadful language. Just listening to it should be inspiration for us all to win this war.

Mrs. Miner I wonder what it was about.

Bell Ringer Like I said, I don't know me German, of course...

Lady Belfry It probably has something to do with how many homes they've destroyed so far.

Pilot I beg your pardon, Madame. That was a poem of Goethe's called the Rose on the Common. It describes a situation similar to what our guard here was saying about himself and the rose.

Bell Ringer Why, he speaks English.

Pilot Yes, as well as any of you, you can be sure. I studied at Oxford before the war broke out.

Lady Belfry A lot of good it did you. Just look at yourself now. Filthy and wet, shivering like a dog that's just had its bath.

Mrs. Miner Oh, dear, I'll go get him a change of clothes. (*She exits.*)

Lady Belfry Oh, let him shiver. He deserves no kindness from us. I don't know why you just didn't throw him in the river, Bell Ringer.

Bell Ringer My Lady, that would be inhuman.

Lady Belfry Well, what of it? You think the British Empire was founded on little niceties? At every turn of the road our men had to face the most barbaric creatures who knew nothing at all about conducting a gentlemen's war. It wasn't enough for the Zulus to merely spear Lord Belfry, they had to hack him up as well. That's why he's still buried on that deplorable continent instead of lying reposed in our family cemetery.

Pilot Excuse me, Madame. Your husband was the Lord Belfry, one of the British commanders at the Battle of Islandlhwana?

Lady Belfry Well, there's some hope yet for the savages of the world. You've heard of him then?

Pilot Yes, we studied that battle during our military training.

Lady Belfry But you're a pilot. That battle was fought on the plains of Africa over sixty years ago, well before there were any planes.

Pilot We've studied lots of battles from history, for their tactical purposes.

Lady Belfry I see. And what did you learn about my husband's leadership at the battle of... I could never pronounce that awful word.

Pilot That he was a complete and utter fool.

Lady Belfry (*Indignant*) How dare you talk that way about Lord Belfry!

Pilot I'm sorry, Madame, but the fact is he stretched his line of defence too thin. A tighter formation could have probably kept the Zulus at bay, at least until reinforcements arrived.

Lady Belfry You don't know what you're talking about.

Pilot Since the British had repeating rifles and the Zulus had only spears, they were slaughtering them at a rate of five to one. But all it took was for the Zulus to exploit those huge gaps in defence and it was all over after that.

Bell Ringer I never knew that.

Lady Belfry Of course not. It's all rubbish. The Germans have devised this fictionalised account of the battle simply to belittle our glorious military history.

Pilot Quite the contrary, Madame. I have the utmost esteem for your military leaders, like Churchill and Wellington.

Bell Ringer How do you like that? The German here likes our own Winston.

Pilot Not that Churchill. I mean John Churchill, the Duke of Marlborough. Your Winston is as big a fool as Lord Belfry was.

Lady Belfry I've had enough of your insults about my husband! (*She stands and hits him over the head with her handbag.*) Take that, you Hun! (*The bell ringer restrains her. Mrs. Miner comes in with the clothes, some bread and a bottle of milk.*)

Mrs. Miner Lady Belfry, what's going on here? (*They all sit down.*)

Lady Belfry This insolent German has insulted the honour of Lord Belfry, so I gave him what he deserves. Did you call the home guard?

Mrs. Miner Yes, they're on their way. My husband's with them.

Lady Belfry Good, I'd like to see you try to insult Mrs. Miner's husband as well, in his own garden. He'll show you.

Mrs. Miner (*To the pilot*) Here, you must be hungry. Take this.

Lady Belfry Ach, such kindness to these people I can't understand.

Pilot Thank you. (*He takes the bread and rips a bite out of it.*)

Lady Belfry He even eats like an animal. (*The pilot drinks eagerly from the bottle of milk and part of it spills over his uniform.*) Oh, this is disgusting! To think we're losing the war to these brutes. Keep a tight guard on him there, Bell Ringer.

Bell Ringer I will, my Lady.

Mrs. Miner Please, I want to ask you: What was that poem you recited about?

Pilot (*Swallowing*) It is about a boy who sees a beautiful rose. Although he admires it, he maliciously tells it that he will pick it. The rose warns him not to pick it, else it will prick him. The boy does so anyway and the part I recited would mean something like this in English: "No cries or complaints could help her, she must suffer just the same, little rose, little red rose, little rose meek and tame."

Lady Belfry As I suspected. It is only a passing reference to the bell ringer's story. Its real purpose is to put their poetry to work in the service of crushing one nation after another.

Bell Ringer I'm not sure that's how I understood it, my Lady.

Mrs. Miner Me neither.

Lady Belfry Ach, what dreadful little people you are. Can't you see he's trying to justify their barbaric war with this bit of poetry? (*She stands and hits him over the head again with her handbag.*) Take that, you Hun! (*Mrs. Miner and the bell ringer restrain her. In the ensuing scuffle, the pilot takes the bell ringer's gun.*)

Mrs. Miner Oh, dear.

Pilot Now everybody just sit down and relax. (*They sit down, the pilot remains standing.*) I've enjoyed our afternoon conversation, but I really must be going now. I'm a little disappointed that the prim and proper English didn't offer me a bit of tea, but I thank you just the same for the food and clothes. I'll see you get them back, Madame, if circumstances shall permit it. I bid you all adieu and may we meet again after the peace treaty. (*The pilot exits over the wall.*)

Mrs. Miner Oh, dear, what shall we do now?

Lady Belfry Why, it's obvious. After him, Bell Ringer!

Bell Ringer But my Lady, he took my gun.

Lady Belfry Well, next time don't be derelict in your duty. (*Mr. Miner enters. He runs up and hugs Mrs. Miner.*)

Mr. Miner Dear, are you all right? Where is he?

Mrs. Miner Yes, I'm all right, but I'm afraid the pilot got away. He leapt over our wall there.

Mr. Miner Don't worry, we'll get him. (*He turns to leave.*)

Lady Belfry Mr. Miner, aren't you forgetting your manners?

Mr. Miner (*Stops short*) I'm terribly sorry. Good day, Lady Belfry.

Lady Belfry Good day. (*Mr. Miner leaves as Mrs. Miner looks after him.*)

Bell Ringer I do hope they catch him.

Lady Belfry You'd better, Bell Ringer. It wouldn't do for the judges at the flower contest to find out that one of the contestants had let a German run free in their midst, now would it?

Scene Three

The Belfry garden, which looks an awful lot like the Miner garden. It's the flower contest and Lady Belfry is sitting impatiently next to the Miners.

Lady Belfry Confound those judges, what's taking them so long? And where are Karen and her new husband? She told me they would be here in time for the awards.

Mrs. Miner They'll be here, Lady Belfry. It's a long way from Scotland and you know how trains run during wartime.

Lady Belfry Wartime nothing. They run poorly all the time. Mr. Churchill should be reminded from time to time that running a country involves more than just waging war.

Mr. Miner Lady Belfry, I must ask you again to call off the show. It's too dangerous.

Lady Belfry Call off the show? Are you mad? The weather is absolutely perfect today. It could be months before the sun shines this gloriously again.

Mr. Miner That's precisely my point, Lady Belfry. It's perfect weather for an air raid and you can bet the Germans will take advantage of it.

Lady Belfry Then let them. How many times do I have to tell you people we're not going to sacrifice our quintessential Britishness on account of those Huns across the channel. But since you brought it up, Mr. Miner, why aren't you on patrol looking for that dastardly German pilot who got away from the bell ringer?

Mr. Miner Oh, I've got plenty of patrols out looking for him, don't you worry. They'll find him.

Lady Belfry I do hope the bell ringer is among them. After all, he's the one who let him get away.

Mr. Miner To be honest, Lady Belfry... *(The bell ringer enters holding his rose.)*

Bell Ringer Good afternoon all. Good afternoon, my Lady.

Lady Belfry Well, I'll say. Why are you here, Bell Ringer, and not out there looking for that pilot?

Bell Ringer I was, my Lady. But Mr. Miner here told me to turn over my patrol and get here on the double with my rose.

Lady Belfry (*Looking at the Miners*) He did, did he? (*Back to the bell ringer*) Confounded, man, what are you standing there for? Put your rose up there so the judges can have a look at it.

Bell Ringer Of course, my Lady. (*The bell ringer exits.*)

Mrs. Miner Lady Belfry, try to understand...

Lady Belfry You needn't explain, Mrs. Miner. It's all very clear to me. There's a conspiracy at work here.

Mr. Miner Lady Belfry...

Lady Belfry A conspiracy by the Miner family to undermine the prestige and dignity of the Belfrys.

Mrs. Miner Really, Lady Belfry...

Lady Belfry First, my granddaughter marries your son, an ordinary commoner and an upstart one at that, then you work behind my back to have that wretched little man take the award for best rose from me. Well, if it's a fight you want, it's a fight you shall have. Lord Belfry didn't flinch in the face of 25,000 Zulus and I'm not about to flinch in the face of the local petty bourgeoisie. (*She stands up and exits.*)

Mrs. Miner Cliff, what was that all about?

Mr. Miner I don't know, dear. But since we're enemies now, I will go ahead and close down the show on my own authority.

Mrs. Miner Don't do that. Didn't you see the bell ringer's rose? It's an absolute beauty. It would mean so much to him to have the people here admire it. Besides, look, there's Biff and Karen coming. Surely if there was sign of an air raid, Biff would have been called to his unit by now.

Mr. Miner I suppose you're right. (*A uniformed Biff and his new bride Karen enter.*)

Mrs. Miner/Mr. Miner Hello Karen, Biff.

Biff/Karen Hello, Mum, Dad.

Mrs. Miner How was your honeymoon?

Biff Just wonderful. It rained the whole time.

Karen It was such a mess getting back here on the train. I was worried we wouldn't be in time for the flower show. Where's my grandmother?

Mrs. Miner She went to have a look at the flowers. Come, sit and tell me all about your trip.

Mr. Miner Yeah, Biff, let's go help ourselves to some punch while the women talk.

Biff Okay, Father. (*They exit.*)

Karen (*Looking after Biff*) Oh, Mum, doesn't he look magnificent in his uniform?

Mrs. Miner Yes, he's grown up to be quite the young hero I imagined he would be.

Karen Yes, he's already shot down six enemy planes. (*Looking at Mrs. Miner with tears in her eyes*) Oh, Mum. (*She collapses in her lap crying.*) I love him so much. There's always the chance when he goes up that, well, I might not ever see him again.

Mrs. Miner Karen, dear...

Karen But I'm prepared for it. My grandmother lost her husband in action just after they were married, when she was as young as I am now. For sixty years she's had to live the life of a war widow. Honoured by all until...until the next war came along and the new widows took her place. After that, nobody much cared to hear her stories of her husband, how he gave his life for the empire. She's had such a bitter and cruel life, Mum. And if the same fate should befall me...

Mrs. Miner Karen, don't think like that.

Karen But I must. I must. And I'll go ahead and say it. If Biff should die, well...let's just say he doesn't want me to suffer like my grandmother has all these years.

Mrs. Miner You mean you will marry again? Oh, Karen, don't talk about such things. The weather is absolutely gorgeous today, we have all these beautiful flowers around us. The war is a million miles away.

Karen Yes, you're right, Mum. I'm so happy now, so truly happy. That's all that matters.

Mrs. Miner Of course, dear. *(They give each other an English peck on the cheek. Lady Belfry enters.)*

Karen Grandmother, how nice to see you. *(She greets her also with an English peck.)*

Lady Belfry I'm glad you're home, my dear. Frankly, I don't know why you had to travel so far as Scotland for your honeymoon. The Belfry manor was good enough for me and the lord.

Karen But it's so beautiful up there, Grandmother. As we were looking out over the moors, Biff got all choked up and said he finally understood why such a land is worth dying for.

Lady Belfry You should tell him not be talking too much about death. Lord Belfry did it all through our honeymoon and look where it got us. Where is your young warrior anyway? They're going to start announcing the winners any minute.

Karen He's over by the punch bowl. I'll go get him. *(She dashes off.)*

Lady Belfry You needn't bother. *(There's an awkward silence between Lady Belfry and Mrs. Miner.)*

Mrs. Miner Karen looks lovely, Lady Belfry.

Lady Belfry Naturally. It comes with good breeding.

Mrs. Miner She seems so happy. *(The voice of the Vicar can be heard starting the announcement of the winners.)*

Vicar off-stage And now we'll begin the announcement of the winners of this year's Belfry Flower Contest. For the best Chrysanthemum, the winner is....

Mrs. Miner I only wished there was a way...well...a way to...perhaps...

Lady Belfry Well, out with it.

Mrs. Miner A way to make you happy as well.

Lady Belfry Of all the nerve. Are you suggesting I'm unhappy?

Mrs. Miner Not in so many words, but...

Lady Belfry Mrs. Miner, you seem to be going out of your way to get on my bad side.

Mrs. Miner But I'm not really. I want us to be friends. After all, we are family now.

Lady Belfry And what family. If my Karen had followed my advice and married Lord Bearclaw's son, I wouldn't have to sit here and subject myself to your conspiracies and insults.

Vicar off-stage For the best violet, the winner is....

Mrs. Miner Lady Belfry, all I'm saying is that your happiness is now my concern as well.

Lady Belfry There you go again insinuating I'm not happy.

Mrs. Miner What I'm saying is I see no reason why you shouldn't win the award for best rose this year. Your rose is as beautiful as the bell ringer's rose.

Lady Belfry You just don't know when to give up, do you? What you mean to say is his rose is as beautiful as mine, and if anyone will get a sympathy vote it will be the bell ringer.

Mrs. Miner Of course, that's what I'm saying. You and the bell ringer should both win the award.

Lady Belfry Have you gone mad? Do you really expect me to stand up there and grip the trophy together with the bell ringer?

Mrs. Miner I wouldn't put it past you.

Lady Belfry Well, do so because it's not going to happen. And quit giving me that queer look of yours. (*Karen, Biff and Mr. Miner enter.*)

Vicar off-stage For the best daisy, the winner is....

Karen Oh, Grandmother, I just had a look at your rose. It's so beautiful.

Lady Belfry Thank you, dear. I'm glad to see someone here hasn't lost her manners.

Biff Yes, Grandmother, it's quite a nice rose.

Lady Belfry I'm not your grandmother, young man, but I'll take your compliment just the same.

Biff Of course, the bell ringer's rose is also quite nice. I wouldn't want to be one of those judges right now.

Lady Belfry Rest assured you never will be.

Biff You're probably right. I've always had a problem accepting orders. Sometimes I think my flight commander would ground me if there were more pilots available. (*A slight chuckle from the others.*)

Lady Belfry Are you suggesting this contest is rigged? That I give the orders as to who wins and who doesn't?

Karen He didn't mean that, did you, Biff?

Mrs. Miner Of course, he didn't.

Mr. Miner Sure he didn't.

Lady Belfry Then what did he mean by it?

Biff I only meant, Lady Belfry, that the people here are going to think the contest is rigged simply because they are not used to competition. Just the thought of the bell ringer challenging you makes a lot of them angry.

Lady Belfry What a pity the Miners have learned nothing from them. In any case, I was prepared for impolite little comments like yours. That's why I asked the vicar to not only announce the winners, but to serve as one of the judges as well. Surely you wouldn't accuse him of corruption.

Biff I'm not accusing anyone of corruption. It's just that a new day has dawned here today and who knows what it will bring.

Lady Belfry A good deal of my impatience, I can assure you all that. I don't know why the vicar is dragging this thing out.

Mr. Miner Yes, it's much too dangerous under these conditions.

Lady Belfry Oh, stop it, Mr. Miner. Those wretched Germans wouldn't dare bomb my flower contest.

Vicar off-stage For the best sunflower, the winner is....(*The bell ringer enters with a note.*)

Bell Ringer My Lady, the good vicar asked me to bring you this note with the winner of the best rose. He says he wanted you to see it before he made the announcement.

Lady Belfry Why did he ask you to bring it? Did you look at it?

Bell Ringer On my word, my Lady, I didn't. He only asked me to bring it because I normally run all his chores for him.

Lady Belfry (*With a smirk*) I wonder. (*She opens the note and looks at it.*) Very well, Bell Ringer, you may return to the vicar. (*The bell ringer exits, the others are staring at Lady Belfry.*) What are you all gawking at? It's my contest, so it's only right that I know the winner in advance. The rest of you will just have to wait for the announcement. (*She puts the note in her bag.*)

Karen We're all behind you, Grandmother.

Mrs. Miner Yes, of course we are. (*Lady Belfry smirks again. The vicar enters, standing before the others.*)

Vicar For the announcement of the winner of the best rose, I would like to share a word or two with you beforehand. (*Lady Belfry and Mr. Miner show their discomfort.*) There has been a lot of controversy surrounding this year's selection of the best rose. I fear it has come to such a head that we're reliving the Wars of the Roses all over again. (*Slight chuckle from the crowd. Lady Belfry doesn't find it amusing at all.*) Of course, we're not. We're living through another war right now, but I needn't remind you of that fact. Instead I would only like to remind you that roses have always shared a special place in the human heart. They have long inspired artists like our own Shakespeare and the enemy's own Goethe to some of their most tender and moving words. Yet even they barely convey the full shape, colour and scent that make the rose among the loveliest of God's creations. Let us remember that no matter which rose walks away with the prize

today, the other one will smell just as sweet. And now for the best rose. The winner is...our very own bell ringer. (*The Miners are pleasantly surprised, Karen shows no emotion, Lady Belfry is seething. The bell ringer enters to receive his cup. Lady Belfry jumps up.*)

Lady Belfry What is the meaning of this, Vicar?

Vicar I don't understand, Lady Belfry. What do you mean?

Lady Belfry You know perfectly well what I mean. Barely a moment ago the bell ringer brought me a note from you that stated my rose had been judged the best. (*She reaches into her bag for the note. Air sirens go up. The others jump up out of their seats.*)

Mr. Miner I knew it. Come, everybody, we must get to safety.

Biff I better get to my unit. (*He starts to leave.*)

Karen Biff, don't I even get a kiss?

Biff Oh, sorry. (*He kisses Karen.*) Bye, darling. (*He kisses his mother.*) Bye, Mum. Bye, Father. Don't worry about me. (*He exits.*)

Mrs. Miner Bye, Biff. Be careful.

Mr. Miner Bye, Son. All right everyone. Follow me.

Lady Belfry (*Still searching for the note*) I'm not going anywhere. Not until I find that note.

Mr. Miner But, Lady Belfry, we're in danger out here in the open.

Lady Belfry I don't care. Somebody is trying to make a fool out of me here and I won't have it.

Vicar Lady Belfry, I apologise if there has been some kind of mix up with the announcement of the winner. But really, we must take shelter now. (*He attempts to move her along, but she won't budge. The roar of planes gets louder.*)

Lady Belfry Confounded, where is that piece of paper! Bell Ringer, did I give it back to you?

Bell Ringer On my word, my Lady, no.

Karen Grandmother, we must go!

Mrs. Miner Please, Lady Belfry!

Mr. Miner There's no time. (*He attempts to grab her by the arm.*)

Vicar Lady Belfry, as a man of God, I can assure you...(*Machine gun fire suddenly strafes the flower show. All the characters go down. The lights go off and bombs are heard exploding. Smoke fills the air. The explosions continue until the next scene is ready to open.*)

Scene Four

The scene opens inside a half-destroyed cathedral. Two aisles of three chairs each are set on the right side of the stage. A pulpit stands on the left. The Miner family is standing in front of the chairs farthest from the audience.

Mr. Miner It's my fault, my fault, my fault.

Mrs. Miner No, it's not, Cliff.

Mr. Miner Yes, yes it is. I should've closed down the flower show while there was still time.

Mrs. Miner You did what you could, darling.

Biff She's right, Father. The blame is all mine. If I had been at my station, ready to go up at a moment's notice, then Karen would be alive today.

Mrs. Miner But, Biff, you couldn't have known that the early warning radar system would be down that afternoon.

Biff The fact is, Mother, I had no business being at a flower show in the middle of a war.

Mr. Miner None of us had any business being there on such a beautiful day.

Mrs. Miner You're both being too hard on yourselves. Let us worry now about how we can help Lady Belfry. The poor woman is all alone. Biff, after the vicar escorts her to her pew, go to sit beside her. In a way, you're the only family she has left now.

Biff Of course, Mother. *(A silence ensues.)*

Mrs. Miner How terribly quiet it seems here without the bells ringing anymore.

Mr. Miner Don't you worry, Layla. We're going to rebuild this cathedral. It'll take some doing to get the bells up again, but they will ring once more before this war is up.

Mrs. Miner I know, dear. And yet somehow it will never seem the same again without the bell ringer ringing them. *(Lady Belfry enters leaning on the arm of the vicar. She stands before a chair on the opposite side. Biff goes over and stands next to her. They*

look at each other without emotion. The vicar takes his place before the pulpit. The cast take their seats.)

Vicar I will read to you from Psalm 37: “Consider the blameless, observe the upright; there is a future for the man of peace. The salvation of the righteous comes from the lord; he is their stronghold in time of trouble.”

My friends, a deadly scourge has swept across our land. It has laid waste to homes and hearts alike, scoured our faith and humanity, and has brought its mighty claw down on our quiet little corner. We have suffered the loss of many who were dear to us. Our own bell ringer, who only moments before his untimely domain had shared with us the fruit of his life’s work, an exquisite rose that now adorns his final resting place. And all of us have wept with the families of Karen Miner, who was married here, then buried here, in less than a fortnight. An old man and a young girl, the casualties of war. Why? Surely you have asked yourselves this question. Why must they suffer? Why must they be sacrificed? I will tell you why: Because this is a new kind of war, a war unlike any other in our recent history. Armies still clash over battlefields wrought with the ruins of churches and schools as they have always done, their innocents smouldering within and without. But as long as we remained loyal to our king, our shores had always kept this bounty at bay. No more, I’m afraid. Modernity has breached our inviolability, has enabled pestilence to rain down upon us from the heavens themselves. We too must now pay for the cost of war with the lives of our innocents. We too must now wage a war of the people.

But we lack the experience of our brother nations to wage such a war, for it demands that it be fought in the heart with a resolve to subject everything to its final victory. I fear we shall not come by such resolve so easily. As I look upon you today, I see a congregation full of stiff upper lips. When our own Lady Belfry mourned for her husband in this cathedral sixty years ago, what was wanted from her was that stiff upper lip, that determination to carry on with life despite her loss. That she has done admirably. And since our cathedral now lies in ruins, she has become, in a sense, our new cathedral, a walking cathedral, imparting her strength, refinement and eternal faith upon us all. We shall need it too if we are to carry on as she did before us, only with one small change. We shall carry on with war in place of ordinary life. And to do that, we must loosen our upper lips. We must do that one thing which has always been forbidden in our society. We must let our feelings out! We must cry when it hurts, like it hurts now, and only then will we show ourselves up to the task of winning this new and terrible kind of war. So please, let us stand, and let us cry. (*The Miners look at one another confused, then at Lady Belfry. Anger is coming over her.*) Please, let us stand. (*Lady Belfry stands, the other follow suit.*)

Lady Belfry Vicar, what on earth are you talking about? Do you really expect us to start blubbing here?

Vicar Not you, Lady Belfry. You are our cathedral exemplar. You must keep your stiff upper lip. The others in our congregation are being asked to make this sacrifice. They must do it for the war effort.

Lady Belfry They mustn't do anything of the kind. We've come this far with our empire because we never succumbed to our emotions as you suggest we do. If I had made a big fuss when they brought me the news about Lord Belfry, paganism would be running rampant in our village today.

Vicar Of course, Lady Belfry, and the stoicism of you and all the other war widows was the rock upon which our empire was built. But now it is the widows themselves who are under attack.

Lady Belfry But the rock won't crumble, so long as we maintain our composure and everyone knows his place. You would do well to show yourself a good example of that now, Vicar.

Vicar All I'm saying is we have a new challenge that we are ill equipped to meet. Won't you help us meet that challenge?

Lady Belfry I certainly will, but not at the expense of being quintessentially English. To start wailing away the way they do across the Atlantic is tantamount to treason in my book.

Vicar Mrs. Miner, you have shown remarkable composure in this hour of sorrow. Surely, there are feelings inside you about to burst forth.

Lady Belfry On my word, you leave that poor woman alone.

Vicar Mrs. Miner?

Lady Belfry Vicar!

Mrs. Miner Lady Belfry, you have been such an inspiration to our community. You are truly indeed a walking cathedral among us and I would never do anything to hurt or disappoint you. But...whenever I think of Karen lying in those daffodils, I...I...(she starts sobbing) I just can't help myself. (*Mr. Miner hugs her. The vicar approaches and puts his arm on her shoulder.*)

Lady Belfry Compose yourself, Mrs. Miner. We've a war to fight, a war we will fight as we have fought all our wars. With our eyes dry and chins up high! What the vicar is saying is complete nonsense.

Vicar There you go, Mrs. Miner. Let it out. (*Her crying intensifies.*)

Lady Belfry Mr. Miner, control your wife. We're in the cathedral, for God's sake.

Mr. Miner I'm sorry, Lady Belfry. But it's all my fault for not closing down your flower show. (*He starts crying into his wife's hairdo.*)

Lady Belfry Well, I never! This is disgraceful!

Vicar That's it, Mr. Miner. We're here for you.

Lady Belfry (*Pushing Biff*) Young man, get over there and knock some sense into your parents. You're a warrior. Show them how to behave properly.

Biff (*Biff starts to them, then turns back around to Lady Belfry.*) Oh, Grandmother! (*He wraps his arms around Lady Belfry, who uses all her might to push him off.*)

Lady Belfry Get off of me, you snivelling sop! Ach! What my granddaughter could have seen in you defies all reason. You wouldn't find Lord Bearclaw's son here moaning the way you and your wretched family are now (*He limps over to his parents to cry with them.*)

Vicar It's not just the Miners, Lady Belfry. The whole congregation has taken up this new call to arms. (*Lady Belfry turns around and is aghast to see the entire congregation crying.*)

Lady Belfry Well...! Stop it! All of you stop this bawling right now! Do you hear me?!

Vicar Please, Lady Belfry, this is for the good of the nation.

Lady Belfry I beg to differ. It's treason, plain and simple, and I shall report you to the archbishop. I don't know what has possessed you, Vicar, to put on this revolting spectacle. The vicar I know would have aroused the people to take the fight to the enemy, not have them weep and wail in what is supposed to be their finest hour. There is something amiss here.

Vicar Lady Belfry, try to understand...(*He puts his hand on her arm, she pulls it away.*)

Lady Belfry Take your hands off me. I...*(looking him hard in the eyes)* Now I see what's going on here. You're not the vicar at all. Why, you're that insolent German pilot the bell ringer found! The one who kept insulting my husband in Mrs. Miner's garden.

Vicar Please, Lady Belfry...

Lady Belfry Mr. Miner, Mrs. Miner, young man. It's him. It's that German pilot. Seize him, take him away! Quickly!

Mr. Miner *(Looking up and wiping his eyes)* What is it, Lady Belfry?

Lady Belfry The vicar! He's not the vicar. He's that German pilot. Mrs. Miner, you yourself said how much that pilot resembled our own vicar.

Mrs. Miner *(Wiping her eyes)* I'm sorry, Lady Belfry. What's the problem?

Lady Belfry For the love of God! This man is not the vicar! He probably killed our vicar and took his place so he could carry out this absurd display of emotion, to make us lower our guard. This is nothing less than an act of espionage!

Vicar Please, good people, Lady Belfry has suffered a tremendous shock this week. First she lost the flower contest and then her granddaughter. She's not well. Won't you help her to her manor?

Lady Belfry How dare you imply I'm not well! *(She hits him over the head with her handbag.)* Take that, you Hun! *(The Miners restrain her.)* Take your hands off me. He's a German spy I'm telling you!

Mr. Miner Biff, take her out to her car. Darling, go with them to calm her down.

Mrs. Miner Yes, dear. Come now, Lady Belfry.

Lady Belfry You fools! Don't let him get away. *(She keeps wailing away as Biff and Mrs. Miner escort her off the stage.)*

Mr. Miner I'm terribly sorry about that, Vicar.

Vicar It's all right, Mr. Miner. She's had such a long, tragic life.

Mr. Miner They say she never really got over the loss of her husband all those years ago in Africa.

Vicar Yes, at Islandlwhanna.

Mr. Miner Oh, you know the battle then?

Vicar We learned something about it at Oxford. Now, if you'll take your seat, we'll commence with the Lord's Prayer. (*Mr. Miner goes to sit down as the vicar opens the Bible. Curtain.*)