

The Invalid



The Invalid

from the First World War

by Christian Lanciai (2005)

Dramatis personae:

Oscar Wilde
Godfrey
Richard, his son
Marquess of Queensberry
Lloyd George
Winston Churchill
Another club member
Moses
Peter
Gordon
Muriel
Lord Kitchener
William Butler Yeats
Wilfred Owen
Sigfried Sassoon
Wolf
Romain Rolland
Stefan Zweig
Romola Nijinska
Vaslav Nijinsky
Erich Maria Remarque

other pub, club and party guests

The action is in England, France and Switzerland
before, during and after the First World War.

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Act I scene 1.

Oscar Don't worry, Godfrey. Nothing serious could ever happen to me.

Godfrey You don't know that until something happens. I am only cautioning you to be more discreet.

Oscar Should I have anything to fear from these stale goats of hypocritical Victorians going at any length of double standards, this conceited people of faked nobility and imagined superiority, this artificial society of superficiality, these humbugs in tails and posing puritans with profit interests in brothels, this grotesque comedy of a screwed up establishment of lies, dominating the world with its counterfeit presumption?

Godfrey Oscar, you have enemies.

Oscar What artist hasn't? All uncreative people must envy his creativity and brand it as something abnormally anomalous and sick, as they themselves imagine to be well and normal in their voluntarily blindfolded ignorance.

Godfrey But you could tread your path more discreetly.

Oscar I love the theatre. It's the only free realm of love in the world, for only in the theatre you can be exactly anyone behind any mask and even yourself, which no one can be outside the theatre. My friend, the theatre has always been maintained by idealists of love who never enforced any restrictions on love's independence of gender. An actor or playwright who isn't spiritually both bisexual and androgynous is almost unnatural and abnormal.

Godfrey The problem is that society does not embrace the same liberalism.

Oscar And that's why the theatre must ignore society. It's better than society and therefore sometimes has the thankless task to enlighten, lead and educate society. If then society refuses to swallow strong medicines and bitter truths, the fault is not with the theatre. Should teachers stop and retract their lesson because some pupils can't follow? Pupils lagging behind is entirely the fault of the pupils, not of the professors.

Godfrey I just advise you not to flaunt and boast your unorthodox ways.

Oscar You talk like a worried wife. Your words would have been in the mouth of my wife if she had dared. Don't you know that I have two legal children with her and that my position is the safest in London? Nothing can harm us and love least of all.

Godfrey Here is one of those trouble-makers I wanted to warn you against.

Oscar The angry Marquess of Queensberry. Let him bark. He doesn't bite.

Marquess (enter) The damned scoundrel himself! Now he shall have it! You reckless villain, aren't you ashamed to be the worst sodomite in the British Empire?

Oscar Weigh your words, old man. I never troubled you with any impertinence.

Marquess All society is disgusted by the stench of your conceited smugness which your complacency can't conceal from the filthiest pimp to walk on two legs!

Oscar Sir, you don't know what you are saying.

Marquess And you don't know what you are doing, when you like a vampire seduce all the finest youth of England!

Oscar You surely have no part of that youth and then should have nothing to complain of.

Marquess But I have a son whom you have ruined!

Oscar Is it my fault that he adores me?

Marquess Yes, it is, for without you he wouldn't!

Oscar A very peculiar logic. So it's the sun's fault that we have nights, because without the sun we would have no nights. Do you mean to reason thus, Sir?

Marquess You just worm your way out of anything and think you can talk yourself out of any jam, but I will be straight and claim, that you have taken my son away from me and ruined his life and reputation by seducing and turning him into a damned sodomite!

Oscar Perhaps he was like that from the start. You don't know that. And if he is your son he must have something of you.

Godfrey Come, Oscar. Let's go before it gets worse.

Marquess It can't get any worse! I accuse you to all society of being a damned sodomite ruining our sons by unnaturally infecting them!

Oscar (calmly) In that case, Sir, I must sue you for libel.

Marquess Go right ahead! I shall answer! I shall drag out every queer from every gutter whom you damaged for life! (*leaves, all beside himself*)

Godfrey Don't do it, Oscar.

Oscar I must. He gives me no alternative. If he insists on a vilification campaign by barking so openly to all society, I must defend myself, my wife and my two children.

Godfrey Can a creative artist defend himself if someone attacks him? Can he go through with it? Is it compatible with his creative nature? I am thinking of Jesus and his recommendation to turn the other cheek.

Oscar I can't allow that mad dog to dishonour my family by libelling me. We artists at least have the right to defend ourselves against transgression.

Godfrey I will always stand by you, Oscar.

Oscar Thank you. I might need it. But if society chooses to attack me for the sake of my love, that society will not be able to survive for long.

Scene 2. 15 years later.

Godfrey My son, I want to do everything for you, and I promise to do everything for you. On return I ask you of only one thing, never disgrace your family.

Richard How could I disgrace the family?

Godfrey There is really only one way that I fear. Your schooling has been brilliant all the way, that I gave you the possibility of the best possible education in

the country you have availed yourself of in a perfect way, and you could practically become anything, you have already acquired a consummate network both in politics and in the field of humanities, since you are almost too brilliant. Only because of that I dare to be a bit worried.

Richard What is worrying you, father?

Godfrey As you well know, I was good friends with Oscar Wilde. That's twenty years since, but his case has never ceased to trouble me. He was probably the most brilliant genius in England, all the others, like Tennyson and Swinburne, Hardy and even Stevenson and Kipling were outwitted by him, and from sheer artistic hubris he dared to cross the limits of decency, believing himself to be able to take any liberties without consequences by the security of his position. Even he could have become a brilliant politician, but instead he scandalized himself in flagrancia from sheer presumptuous arrogance. I could never forgive him for that, for I never got over it, since there was no one more promising and admirable. His fall ruined him, and when I visited him five years later in Paris he lived in ignominious poverty like a decayed pathetic caricature of his former self, living on withering lost glories. You have the same splendid expectations and possibilities of a great career as he, and I would do anything to help you achieve them, and I only ask you of this one thing: never make a fool of yourself.

Richard I don't think it's in my nature, father.

Godfrey I actually believe the same thing, and I hope we are right. But there will be temptations sooner or later, and you never know from where they will appear until you meet them. Can I trust you, my son?

Richard I hope so. I can't do any better than my best.

Godfrey And that's good enough for our family. Let's try to get you into parliament, then.

Scene 3. The Club.

Lloyd George Shouldn't we get him in, Winston? He is on our side in everything.

Churchill But he is still so young.

Lloyd Aren't we also?

Churchill Yes, but we have been in it for some time.

Lloyd Do you find anything wrong with him? He is almost of as good a family as you. His father's name and reputation stinks of honesty. There is not a more honourable name in London. And his talents are as good as yours or mine or better.

Winston I admit he has excellent qualities and that he is our man. We could make a brilliant trio. But what does he really want?

Lloyd Why don't you ask him yourself?

Winston What do you really want, Richard?

Richard Are you asking about my ambitions, what use I want to make of them, or what I really want with my life?

Winston You are welcome to answer both.

Richard I want to do what I can for the world. We live in a wonderful period of peace, which it's in the interest of everyone to carry on in a common development with all other nations towards a universal brotherhood between all peoples and races, all languages and cultures and all religions.

Lloyd It's obvious that he has been with Colonel Younghusband.

Winston And the dangers, Richard? Are you aware of them or as blindly naïve in your idealism as the colonel?

Richard What dangers are you suggesting?

Winston First of all the European tensions, as two alliances stand against each other, the triple entente and the axis. No one in the entente desires war, but there are warmongers in the governments of both Germany and Austria.

Richard Do you mean the ridiculously conceited emperor?

Winston The Austrian secretary of state Berchtold is considerably more dangerous.

Richard But he is only a minister. The emperor is commanding, and he is the oldest prince of Europe who has been through the hardest trials. Austria is the only non-colonial power of Europe, and they have a capital of music. How could they start a war or even desire it?

Winston Then we have the increasing military power of Germany with an appetite for armament and militant colonisation with the cold steel war machinery of Bismarck for a backbone.

Richard The German emperor may be a vain braggart, but he never wants war. He is also cousin with both the Tzar and King George.

Lloyd And can you see no threat in the growing revolutionary movements of Germany and Russia?

Richard Only some drastic crisis could make them break out.

Winston A correct appraisal. You have also been to Tibet and have a closer experience of the Russians than any of us. As you know, the Tibetan expedition was mainly launched to eliminate Russian influence in the Himalayas.

Richard Pure paranoid propaganda. The Russians never had a foot in Tibet. That the Tzar received a Mongol in Petersburg doesn't have to mean that they have interests in Tibet, which they never had. Nothing surprised Colonel Younghusband as much in Tibet as not to find any trace at all of any Russian.

Winston We fought about Afghanistan thirty years ago.

Richard Neither Russia nor England can cope with Afghanistan.

Winston Yes, that was a hard lesson.

Lloyd What do you say, Winston? Shouldn't we let him in? He has visions and is an altruist unlike us but is at the same time well oriented and realistic.

Winston It's obvious that we could make good use of him.

Another Did you hear about the disaster?

Winston What disaster?

The other The *Titanic* has foundered.

Winston Preposterous. Impossible.

The other But true. (*tosses a paper to them and leaves.*)

Lloyd It can't be true.
Winston It seems to be true nevertheless.
Lloyd It mustn't be true.
Richard But it is true.
Winston This will be difficult to swallow. Wasn't she the safest ship in the world?
Richard And largest.
Lloyd This is the shipwreck of security against destiny.
Richard No, it's the defeat of science against the natural powers. Don't forget that also the ideal society and world of Atlantis perished with men and all.
Winton The *Titanic* is not Atlantis, though.
Lloyd But maybe an omen and warning?
Winston For what?
Lloyd Well, it's not exactly any good news.
Winston We shall probably read much about it the coming days.
Richard It's inconceivably terrible.
Winston To state it mildly.

Scene 4.

Godfrey This bodes no good, my son. Churchill was right. The Austrian secretary of state is not to be trusted. He has made himself guilty of the hardest ultimatum of all times against Serbia just to force them into war.
Richard I don't think Serbia will let themselves be forced to war.
Godfrey How can they avoid it?
Richard I know that the Tzar has advised Serbia to agree to all the Austrian demands, and I think Serbia will.
Godfrey But they are monstrous and absurd! The murder was on Austrian ground without Serbia having anything to do with it! A Serbian nationalist fanatic throwing bombs also has nothing to do with Serbia! Still Austria is blaming Serbia!
Richard Yes, it's the only difficult point. All the other terms are acceptable to Serbia.
Godfrey And behind Serbia there is Russia. If Austria from pure national egoism and imperialistic greed forces Serbia to war, Russia will not let it happen.
Richard So there could be a general war?
Godfrey Yes, for Germany would never let Russia attack Austria without intervening, which would force us and France to attack Germany.
Richard The worst possible scenario.
Godfrey For Europe. For the world it might do some good if an empire or two were disarmed.
Richard It could never be done without force of violence, and all violence is wrong. Peace is the only applicable instrument for the constructive evolution of the world.
Godfrey I am afraid you are correct, my boy.

Act II scene 1.

Winston It's all the fault of that damned German emperor.

Lloyd The war hasn't started yet, Winston.

Richard We could still all join in an effort to stop it.

Winston Do you think anyone would be willing except you? You have the whole world against you, Richard. Everyone has contributed in starting the war, everyone could have avoided it, and no one even tried. And now the German emperor blames his generals for making him start the war.

Richard It's still not hopeless.

Winston Unfortunately, Richard, the world is even worse than we thought. The Austrians did all they could to force the war upon Serbia, only the branded villain Serbia of the drama tried to avoid it by agreeing to every point in the Austrian ultimatum except one, which was the only unreasonable one: that Serbia would accept the blame for the murder on that blasted archduke. Quite correctly Serbia wanted the issue to be settled by an international court, which the doomed Austria used for a pretext to declare war. That ruined the case, Russia gave order of mobilization, Germany demanded Russia to demobilize when it was too late for the Tzar to revoke it, he tried all the same but was powerless as the weakling he is, and so Germany starts a world war and blames it on his generals. And so we all go down and perish together in a cataclysmic universal shipwreck much worse than that of the *Titanic*.

Richard Could it have been avoided?

Winston No, it could not have been avoided, because the emperors of Germany and Russia are bonkers and the Austrian emperor is senile.

Lloyd It's a bit thick.

Winston To say the least.

Lloyd Which means that you, Richard, as an officer are sent to the front, am I right?

Richard Yes.

Winston Unfortunately we couldn't get you enough established in parliament first. As a minister you would have been kept out of the war.

Richard As the situation is, I am afraid that none of us will be able to keep out of the war. Like Churchill said, we are all going down with it.

Lloyd We can always make the best of it, make it the final war to end all wars and get some fair damages afterwards from Germany when we've settled with the emperor.

Winston Do you think it will be that easy?

Lloyd You can always hope. And we Welshmen are stubborn enough to never give up.

Winston Italy will gladly join in the slaughter of Austria, but I am afraid our French brothers will have to stand up to some hard blows from the Prussians.

Lloyd We must help them.

Winston Of course. This is their chance to get even after their last war.

Lloyd That was Bismarck's war. Now there is a presumptuous youngster in his stead, and he was unwilling to start it.

Winston I don't think so. More likely he was appalled when he saw what he had done.

Richard How long do you think the war will last? How many casualties?

Winston Some hundred thousand at most, and mostly Russians.

Lloyd A year at most, probably less.

Richard Shall we bet on it? Do you dare?

Winston (more cautiously) No.

Lloyd You will be the Navy, Winston. Perhaps you can finish the war by the sea?

Winston Not even Nelson's victory at Trafalgar brought any end to Napoleon in ten years, and still he sacrificed his life in the process. No, I am afraid this war has to be settled on land.

Richard I am afraid that none of us can imagine what's ahead of us.

Lloyd You will be the first one to see it, for you will be the only one of us to be sent to the front.

Scene 2. In the trenches.

Moses How many died today?

Peter Only half the company.

Moses That's unusually few.

Gordon Statistics are heading down.

Peter Or up, depending on how you look at it.

Moses Do you think Lloyd George and the others wanted it like this? Do you think the emperors had the intention to butcher all Europe?

Gordon Maybe. Why else would they have started the war? That's their only result so far.

Peter You get your undeniable suspicions when it never ends.

Moses Shouldn't it have taken a year at most?

Richard That's actually what the politicians thought.

Peter So they made a mistake and waged on a phoney plan but remain in office while we pay for it with our lives.

Moses But politicians are needed to keep the war going. Only they are indispensable in the war.

Peter Let them know it, Richard, when you meet them sometime.

Richard What?

Moses That the politicians who started the war can't finish it and still remain in office.

Peter I imagine they remain in office because they imagine they can win.

Gordon It's rather like they refuse to lose until everything is lost, that is until they haven't any soldiers left to send out to fight for them.

Peter Your logic is as inexorable as it is true.

Moses So we will all die.

Gordon That's the simple fact.

Richard Don't be so pessimistic. We who are here are still alive, and we will remain as long as we survive.

Gordon What he means is, that if there is anything you learn at the front it is to survive.

Peter You learn as long as you live, and then you die.

Moses Do you have some more of those stuffed rats we shot yesterday to compensate our meat shortage?

Peter We have rats enough to keep them rotting by waiting to be cooked. It's only preparing them that's nauseating.

Moses But we have splattered intestines all around every day.

Peter But the rats have disgusting tails that even dead people fortunately lack.

Moses So you don't want to eat rats because they have tails.

Peter We must eat rats. We need their meat. We also eat horses and dogs, and rat meat is not very different from dog's meat. I am only disgusted by the tails of the rats even when they are dead.

Richard They are more disgusting alive.

Peter Of course. That's why we have to kill them. They are eating our food.

Moses We get it back when we eat them.

Peter I just wish we didn't have to eat rats.

Moses We can't have the king's menu every day.

Gordon At least we don't have to eat Germans.

Moses It's not far from it sometimes. You remember what the Frenchies did with those Germans who used grooved bayonets?

Peter That was worse than eating them.

Richard Could anything be worse than death?

Gordon Yes, to live although you are dead.

Peter How do you mean? Like a zombie?

Gordon Or like an invalid. If I lose a leg or an arm or my sight, I would rather die than go on living.

Richard I think it's best to postpone that decision until you are there.

Peter May we never get that far.

Gordon My reasoning is, that no death could be worse than a prolonged one. As an invalid some part of you is dead already, and then you'll never get out of that downhill course, which must get worse the longer it lasts.

Peter The blind can develop a sixth sense for some compensation. For lost limbs and arms there are crutches and prostheses.

Moses Don't try to be funny.

Peter I am just stating the facts. It's Gordon who keeps speculating in fantasies.

Moses He is right. Rather a prosthesis under constant protest than to give up life before it's necessary.

Richard Exactly.

Gordon We'll see when we get that far. The first one of us to become an invalid will tell us how it is on the other side of wholeness.

Moses Shall we bet on who it will be?

Gordon He must survive. Or else he is out.

Moses Great. I suggest that we all bet a handsome share as a prize for the first one of us to become an invalid.

Peter What about second and third prize?

Gordon The thing is to never reach the end.

Moses Let's make it a tontine. We all wage equal shares, but if anyone of us dies his share goes to the others and first of all to the invalids. Last one of us to survive will get it all.

Gordon And if all of us die?

Moses Then we have all lost, but there are other soldiers and invalids.

Richard Great. I am on.

Peter Me too. How much?

Moses What about a hundred pounds each?

Richard If we all can afford it I have nothing against it.

Gordon You are the only rich one of us. You may give more if you want.

Richard If you all give a hundred each, I will give two hundred.

Gordon You are a gentleman. Only because of that I agree.

Moses Remember he is an officer. He has greater chances to survive than we.

Gordon That's why I suggested him to give more.

Richard I find that reasonable enough, although I think we have equal chances. Nothing is more capricious than the war with its hysterically exploding bombs and grenades everywhere at random, which the longer the war keeps going on makes our chances diminish day by day, and in the long run none of us has any chance to get out of it undamaged, and judging from the present situation, the war could well go on until the end of the decade.

Peter You are the only realist among us.

Moses I think we all will survive, for someone has to be the only optimist.

Gordon I think we all will end up as invalids or die or at least get wounded. Or else it would seem unreal.

Moses What do you think, Peter?

Peter Nothing, but I will keep watching and open to all possibilities.

Moses Except for rat's tails in the soup.

Peter Yes, all except that.

Scene 3. A room somewhere.

Muriel Why don't you never end the war?
Richard Don't you think we are trying?

Muriel Yes, you try to remedy a universal madness by making it worse in sacrificing an entire generation as fuel on the fire.

Richard I know, Muriel, there is no excuse for it, but we do what we can.

Muriel I doubt in any good will in that direction with the generals and politicians. You know them. You live with the casualties in the slaughterhouse trenches. Can't you convey the irresponsible authorities any enlightenment of reality?

Richard Churchill has no influence any more after the disaster at Gallipoli. Lloyd George is lashing the government to make an end of the war. We all desire it anxiously. But the world has somehow ended up in a vicious circle of a squirrel's wheel which it can't get out of.

Muriel What people can start and create, only people can finish.

Richard It's such a extensive and all encompassing machinery that it will take time to put an end to it. The new argument advocated by all politicians is that this will be the ultimate war to make all further wars impossible.

Muriel A political gimmick like all the others. There will always be politicians who want war, and there will always be politicians to take advantage of their position to start it.

Richard Believe me, Muriel. All are convinced that this is the ultimate world catastrophe. It will be brought to an end and never repeated.

Muriel Are you so ignorant of human nature? With all your experience of politics and war, don't you know since of long the hopeless incorrigibility of man? In twenty years from now the world will laugh at your words. What do you think this war is cultivating if not new motives for wars in the future? Why do you think the French went to war so enthusiastically if not to have retaliation for 1870? The war against the war! You managers of the world order carrying through this war are like a puppy chasing and biting its tail and can't let go of it!

Richard You are right, Muriel, but who are we to influence the generals and the emperors? You who dwell here in the bottom of the swamp of soldier brothels and get to know the souls of the deepest fallen souls of soldiers, and I who live with them in the trenches know what it is all about, but we have no say, for the generals and emperors have nothing to do with people like us. They are stuck in the soul-devouring blind alley of the self-destructive squirrel wheel of power and are so mixed up with that problem that they can only listen to those who are in for speeding up the wheel. You and I are innocent. They will get the blame after the war.

Muriel Even Clémenceau and Lloyd George?

Richard No, they will manage, for they are democratically elected. But you can bet on that all the emperors will fall.

Muriel That's something at least. I wish the generals could go with them, for they are the ones sacrificing millions of innocents.

Richard I will speak with Lloyd George. The problem is that he is on my side but can do as little as I about it.

Muriel Is he also then a victim to his generals like you?

Richard No one can be held accountable for this war, for everyone and no one wanted it, and we will all end up its victims. If anyone will be held responsible for it, the mere procedure will be a judicial murder which only can result in injustice and motivation for revenge and, as you said, even for new wars.

Muriel There you are.

Richard The whole world has this difficult crisis to fight, and your share of it is to receive and comfort all those poor devils who find their way to you after having lost their souls, their youth and everything they lived for in the war.

Muriel I wish I could do some more.

Richard We all wish that.

Muriel I wish I could drown the war in my love.

Richard It would deserve such a death by drowning.

Muriel How can we effectuate such an efficient blow against the war?

Richard We only have each other. We can at least renew each other's powers and support each other morally in our great scheme.

Muriel You give me the honour of a moral influence?

Richard Indeed I do, for you are a woman. The war is only the men's business.

Muriel But I am a fallen woman.

Richard That doesn't make you less a woman but rather even more of a woman, and the world is full of fallen men who need women of your kind. The fall is mutual and universal.

Muriel I believe you. I believe in all men who realize that they cannot manage without female influence.

Richard The war is only a symptom of the disastrous mistake of all those men who chose to do without female influence.

Muriel Wasn't it a German who wrote about the 'eternally womanly' as the highest good and supreme necessity?

Richard Yes, but it was actually a travesty of an Englishman's play. Marlowe's "Doctor Faustus" is better than Goethe's.

Muriel You mean that Goethe only copied an original?

Richard And distorted it.

Muriel No wonder then that the Germans got so distracted and confused to start a world war.

Richard It wasn't Goethe's fault. It was Wagner's.

Muriel Are there more such crazy Germans?

Richard Yes, but also wise ones, but they were locked up in asylums.

Muriel How could the world get so twisted that it ended up in a world war without end?

Richard That's an issue no one ever will be likely to be able to answer.

Muriel And I don't think the world will get any wiser for ending the war. Man's folly has always continued to ruin the world.

Richard I am afraid that you may be right. (*They make love.*)

Act III scene 1.

Lloyd Well, my good Richard, you have summoned us. Now you have to give some meaning to our meeting.

Richard I asked for this unique conference of four to try to convince you of the necessity to end the war by any means.

Lloyd Should we then allow the German to win? That's the consequence of your request.

Richard You are all three chronically locked up in cabinets and know nothing of the horrors of hell out there. Are you even aware that 60,000 men were lost only on the first day of the battle at Somme, which then went on for four months?

Churchill I can assure you, Richard, that all responsible powers do their utmost to reach an end to the war, but we can't allow the German to win.

Lloyd We are now experimenting with launching a new kind of weapon, a rolling machinegun tank with a cannon, which would be able to force its way through all barbed wires and trenches without being brought to a halt. We think it might terminate the war.

Richard You appear to forget that the entire eastern front is collapsing. In the battle of Tannenberg only, the Germans succeeded in exterminating hundreds of thousands of Russians. Gentlemen, what the responsible powers sow during the war by mass murders without end will lead to harvests of the most difficult kind for decades ahead.

Kitchener You are accusing us, Richard. Let me then present some defence. No one asked for this war. No one wanted it. Had the Austrian foreign minister Berchtold and the German Kaiser suspected that it would turn into the longest bloodbath in history, they would perhaps have abstained from those measures that started it. As it was, we were faced by it like by an unsurveyable natural disaster. We just have to survive it and make the best of it. That's why we have put so much effort in being positive in our propaganda to keep the spirits up. We all want it to be the last war ending all wars. That's our universal constructive intent.

Richard Such idealism is not compatible with reality. Tens of thousands of Englishmen, Frenchmen, Russians, Germans and Austrians are sacrificed daily for nothing. The world is bleeding to death, and the generation that should have built our future is lost, while you try to maintain that the war is constructive.

Kitchener Let's for a moment consider another view of the matter. What if the war hadn't broken out? The aggressive economic and military development of Germany would sooner or later have led to military conflicts anyway. The tensions before 1914 were constantly building up, like a pressure cooker with a closed valve. Sarajevo opened the valve, and then nothing could stop the release. You must excuse me, Richard, but I have been in the line for long and seen many conflicts. The nature of humanity needs some refreshing fights now and then, or else it will get bored and stifle in stagnation. No one ever won a war, but all wars have brought some wholesome and necessary cleansing. Observe the ways of the youth before the war.

Their great leader was Oscar Wilde, who did anything not to get bored. The entire following generation risked getting stuck in the bog of stagnation, and many longed for a war that could raise them up. This war has raised the whole world, and maybe it was needed. It might upset and erase some decaying imperial houses as well, to get some fresh democracies instead, which certainly would be needed. I wouldn't miss the Romanovs, the Habsburgs or the Hohenzollerns if they vanished, and few others would. I am only trying to give you another perspective to the war than your one-sided view from the trenches.

Churchill If the Gallipoli project had worked as planned, the war might have been over already. Now we have to wait for lieutenant Lawrence's push with the Arabs for the fall of Turkey, but you can be sure that we will ultimately win. And as Kitchener said, victory will definitely free Europe from two absurd empires and an even more absurd caliphate.

Richard So you don't want to end the war.

Lloyd We have to win it first, Richard. It's as simple as that.

Richard I tried to convince you of the necessity of peace at any price at once without cessions of territory with a return to status quo before the war but failed, because you, Winston, haven't learned anything from your self-made disaster at Gallipoli, because you, Lord Kitchener, are hopelessly drunk with the success you always had as a chauvinist, and because you, Lloyd George, from sheer Welsh stubbornness can't give way until you've murdered your imagined enemy. I deplore you, gentlemen, but I did try, and I hereby renounce all political responsibility for the future. (*gets up and leaves.*)

Lloyd What will he do next?

Winston He will return to his reality in the trenches. He wants nothing else.

Kitchener Pity on such an excellent promise for a prime minister.

Lloyd If he had been firmly established in politics before the war, he might have averted it or at least postponed it.

Winston Even if he had, he would sooner or later have been overrun by the rest of the world political league.

Kitchener Do we then have a world order only for driving over honest people?

Winston That question would be politically best left unanswered.

Lloyd You mean, it's better to be among the overrunners than the overrun?

Kitchener I doubt it would be any better, for the accusations of the overrun will last longer than the triumphs of the overrunners. Rudyard Kipling has lost a son, and world literature is accusing us already for having tricked a generation to destruction.

Lloyd So what shall we do? Discontinue the war or go on? Go conscientious and let the Germans overrun us? Ask all the casualties of forgiveness, take on the blame and leave France and Russia to their fates and resign?

Kitchener You know it can't be done.

Winston You ask leading questions. We have no choice. Unfortunately we have to disregard Richard's objections. May they then sound the sharper and more insistently survive every war.

Kitchener Yes. May Richard's and Kipling's and the voices of other accusing poets resound forever when the war is brought to silence.

Scene 2. Craiglockhart's psychiatric hospital.

Richard Why did you ask me here?

Yeats I wanted you to meet two good friends of mine.

Richard Don't you think that I know what it is all about? Don't you think I know all about grenade shocks already? Don't you think I've seen enough of both folly and madmen in the war?

Yeats These are different. (*shows Richard to a room with two patients.*)

Owen Cheers, William!

Yeats How are you today?

Owen My head is echoing and vibrating and screaming less than usual, so they will probably soon send me back to the trenches.

Sassoon Who is with you?

Yeats One who is on our side. May I present Wilfred Owen and Sigfried Sassoon. This is Richard.

Richard Why did you want me to meet them?

Yeats They could give you a closer touch with the poetical side of the war.

Richard Sigfried Sassoon, wasn't he the fellow who welcomed the war as a healthy change of existence and a chance to heroic deeds?

Sigfried I was wrong, which rather soon became evident. When I was converted from a convinced chauvinist to a bitter pacifist and hater of authorities I wrote a pamphlet about it, where I pointed out the unacceptable inhumanity and meaninglessness of war and like Kipling accused the leadership to have led the nation astray and sacrificed our generation.

Richard Was that the famous article published in *The Times*?

Sigfried Yes. It was even read out aloud in Parliament. As a result I was confined here by the prompting of the expertise.

Richard The expertise would then be the establishment that knows nothing about the war.

Yeats These are both colleagues of mine and as distinguished poets as I. Richard, I ask you, what could possibly become of an England that sends its poets out to a war of the trenches where they either must be lost as casualties or as mental cases confined in hospitals for human wrecks?

Owen There is nothing wrong with me. I will gladly return to the trenches. It's better to be there than here, for there at least you have comrades to die with.

Richard What is your own opinion?

Yeats As an Irishman I mean that this can't go on. London is sending out the flower of Irish youth to die for nothing with orders to butcher unknown German comrades, but the flower of Ireland is more frail than that of England. Our number of

this generation is not large while London seems to take for granted that it's as inexhaustible as that of the Empire. The Irish will never forgive the British for this war. It will be the end of the British Empire when Ireland as a natural consequence will permanently separate from Britain.

Richard I am afraid you are right.

Sigfried If we survive it will only be as the chronic bad conscience of England for life. This war brings no honour to anyone but only dishonour to everyone. Even the sea is overflowing with rotting bodies just swilling around.

Richard I am as closely familiar with the realities of war as you. You don't have to remind me.

Sigfried (to Yeats) Who is he?

Yeats A former politician and officer who turned against politics and the war.

Sigfried He could be executed for that.

Yeats Not as long as he continues fighting with you in the trenches.

Owen See you there then, buddy. We'll go over the top together and impale Germans on our spits and thus win the war for those squeamish old men in Westminster, who only get bodily damages by blisters in the arse.

Richard I am afraid we have no choice, Wilfred. We have to win the war for them, or else it will never end.

Owen Then at least we have that to look forward to, dying for winning the war.

Sigfried Is it worth dying for?

Owen You have to die sometime anyway. You might as well do it for a good reason. Then you can grin in the Flemish mud for the rest of eternity and silently laugh at all coming wars, for this war against the war is only the first in a long sequence of wars that all must needs extra wars.

Sigfried (to Yeats and Richard) He is prophetic.

Yeats Like all poets.

Richard Thanks for letting me see you. We'll meet again in the trenches, then?

Owen We are looking forward to that with merry hurrahs!

Sigfried If not there, then perhaps on the other side.

Owen We will all meet there, and not until then we'll meet our generals. Pity that the first real officer I met had to be an almost discharged one.

Richard I am not finished yet.

Yeats We will make it yet and get through with it, if not for anything else then at least for defeating the war and afterwards the English.

Owen When we have beaten the Germans.

Sigfried It's a Greek tragedy. The European royal houses were all closely related with each other, and a small political hitch imported such a division in the family that it pulled the whole world into a world war which the whole world can't finish. Isn't it something of the greatest family quarrel of all times?

Richard See you again, gentlemen. I will never forget you.

Sigfried May the world never forget us...

Owen ... but may it forget the war, if possible.

Richard No. Such a war as this must never be forgotten.
Owen Don't worry. There will be more.

(Richard leaves with Yeats.)

Scene 3. In the trenches.

Peter He is finished.
Moses No one is ever finished until he is dead.
Gordon I knew he had to be the first of us to become an invalid.
Moses How did you know?
Gordon We never exposed ourselves. He always did.
Moses May he keep his leg?
Gordon Probably not. The doctors have no time for operations here, only amputations.
Moses Now we shall hear about the prospect of living on only as an invalid.
Peter He must make it. He still has a future.
Gordon That depends on if they take the whole leg or only half. And none of us has any future. The destruction of war will make us all mentally incapacitated.
Moses We can always get drunk after the war.
Gordon If we live that long.
Wolf (enter) I come from Richard. He will make it. They will only cut below the knee.
Gordon What's the use of a knee if you lack the rest of the leg?
Moses Is he awake?
Wolf Yes, he has come back to reality.
Moses Let's go and visit him.
Gordon You mean he will need some cheering?
Peter He needs company. Moses is right.
Moses Let's go.
(They enter the hospital tent, opening up with all kinds of bleeding wounded.)
Peter How shall we find Richard in this crowd?
Gordon We'll have to search. He will be the one who is alive and awake.
Wolf I know where he is. *(They reach Richard's bed.)*
Moses How does it feel, old boy?
Richard It doesn't feel at all. They've given me painkillers.
Gordon What do you prefer? Wheelchair or crutches?
Richard First I must get out of bed.
Gordon Do you think you will ever get out of bed?
Peter Gordon, stop it.
Moses Of course we'll get you on your feet, old boy.
Gordon He means, on your legs.
Richard So they decided on amputation?

Gordon They have no time for alternatives.

Richard I am sorry, boys, that I became the first one to fall, but I am still in the race.

Moses You will still get far, old boy, perhaps further than all of us. You actually got out of the war alive.

Richard Only half way. Now we'll see how it will be to live as half a human being. At least I will try.

Gordon You only started your fall, old boy. You are a square table on three legs. You can never get straight any more.

Richard So my fifth limb doesn't count?

Gordon Ask your first hooker how she fancies being screwed by someone with a wooden leg. Perhaps she will find it original but hardly funny.

Moses You count him out too soon. Gordon. He *will* try.

Wolf They are constantly making better prostheses.

Gordon Don't crack such cruel phoney prospects, Wolf. You will only be called a deceiver.

Richard I will try both crutches and prostheses and a wheelchair only if they don't work. It depends on how much they will take away of the leg.

Wolf If they cut below the knee you will manage with a prosthesis. If they cut above the knee you will need crutches. Or else you will need a wheelchair.

Richard What do you mean?

Wolf If there is gangrene they might take the whole leg.

Doctor (intervening abruptly) Away with you! What are you doing here? You have no permission to be here. This patient is for operation!

Peter The sooner the better, doctor. He longs to get out of bed.

Moses If he may keep the leg it's even better.

Doctor Impossible. There is gangrene in it already. Roll him out! (*Some nurses roll out Richard's bed.*)

Richard See you later, friends!

Gordon Hardly any more in the trenches.

Wolf But perhaps on the other side.

Richard When we'll meet again we'll smile indeed, but that is for certain. (*is rolled out*)

Moses At least he will live.

Wolf I heard about some kind of bet among you, that he who lives the longest will get all the wages. May I join?

Moses Of course. The stake is only a hundred quid.

Gordon Why do you want to join?

Wolf You'll need something to live for.

Moses That's the right spirit, my boy. You are on.

Gordon You will take Richard's place among the living.

Wolf Is he out?

Moses No, only out of the race.

Wolf What race?

Moses The race against death that we all want to leave but no one can leave. It's about being the last to reach the goal. Richard is already happily left far behind.

Wolf I understand. It makes sense.

Moses You are one of us. Come, let's get over with the formalities!

(Moses takes him around the shoulder. They all go out, arms around each other.)

Act IV scene 1.

Godfrey Welcome home, my dear boy! Did you hear about Lord Kitchener?

Richard (in a wheelchair) Yes, I heard he went under with men and all like everyone else in this war.

Godfrey You have changed, Richard.

Richard Is that so strange? It's enough to get down in the trenches the first time, and you become an entirely new person.

Godfrey Weren't the prothesis and crutches good enough?

Richard As you can see, father, I stick to the ground and keep rolling on. The prothesis only made me stumble and fall, and the crutches were only in the way. I prefer using two arms and no legs to one leg and one arm.

Godfrey You are not sober.

Richard I will never be sober any more. The first thing soldiers in the trenches will have to learn is that the only thing that helps against the war is drunkenness. If they survive the war it will be as alcoholics.

Godfrey It's as if you had grown a hundred years older.

Richard I am still young in years but older in the soul than what anyone could survive.

Godfrey Still you survived, for which we are grateful. You have done well and sacrificed more than what anyone asked of you. You are free for the rest of your life. What will you do?

Richard Indirectly you mean, father, that politics are closed to me because of my invalidity?

Godfrey Not only because of that. You have publicly sided with Sigfried Sassoon, William Butler Yeats, Bernard Shaw, Bertrand Russell and the other pacifists and conscientious objectors.

Richard They will prove right while the warmongers will be force-fed with the war until they die.

Godfrey Lloyd George's war policies will win, and no opposition against him will work, least of all when the war is over.

Richard I don't care.

Godfrey That's why I ask you again: what will you do?

Richard What can I do? Nothing as long as the war goes on. After the war I would like to travel and see what's left of Europe and how it will manage. But most of all I would like to never be sober again.

Godfrey Chesterton says, that the only ones who kept sober during the war were all the madmen and drunkards who preached against it.

Richard You said it.

Godfrey You will get what you want, my son. I always granted you anything, and you always did well, until the war came, which wasn't your fault. Whose fault it really was I guess we shall never really know. Neither was it your fault that you got amputated. I am glad that you at least want to make the best of it. I will let you travel wherever you want as much and as soon as you wish. No one can stop you from drinking, but you always carried your liquor well, and it has never happened that you abused alcohol or went to any extremes. Perhaps you could devote yourself to writing?

Richard Bitter poetry about the war, like Sigfried Sassoon and Rupert Brooke, Wilfred Owen and the other everlasting victims? No, Yeats was right. Passive suffering is nothing to write about.

Godfrey If you travel it might give you interesting ideas for travel stories?

Richard We'll see. Let's first await the longed for ending of the war. Give me a drink while we wait, father. My lost leg hurts like hell. (*Godfrey serves him a drink.*)

Scene 2. A pub, November 11th 1918. Ebullient celebrations.

Yeats It's peace, Richard, it's peace! Aren't you happy?

Richard Peace comes four years too late.

Sigfried Now is the time for the pains to set in, Will. Not until now we can start treating what we have been through. Now we can start mourning our comrades for serious. Now is the time for the real war to start, the battle against your own past to maybe save your soul.

Richard I heard that Wilfred Owen finally went down?

Sigfried Also Rupert Brooke. Now when they are fallen the whole world makes them right, while they were sent to the madhouse for their beautiful poems when they were active.

Yeats You are completely way out. Pardon me, but I must be allowed to celebrate with the rest of the world. Now the real fight for Irish liberty begins. You will have to cry alone without me. (*leaves them*)

Sigfried What about your famous tontine? Did anyone miss the goal except you?

Richard Moses went down first. Gordon followed shortly after. Peter got a grenade shrapnel into his head and lies hospitalized for the rest of his life at an asylum for psychiatric war casualties. Only Wolf made it perhaps, but he is lost, reported missing.

Sigfried There are many cases like that. Rudyard Kipling never found his son.

Richard There are many such fathers and mothers and widows. Our world will never again be sane or human. The lost generation can never be restored. We who

witnessed the upheaval and the total transition for the worse can only drink to try to forget how it happened.

Sigfried Do you think it will work?

Richard You could always try. If it doesn't work, you could try some more.

Sigfried At least you keep on living.

Richard You too.

Sigfried I am only good for writing, and after the war I am good at writing against the war.

Richard Do so and live as long as possible. Lash humanity and England for what they have done. Russia and Germany will never be able to rise again from their total apocalypse. They are both humiliated to irrecognizability as nations forever.

Sigfried Lloyd George will only make matters worse if he insists on indemnity.

Richard He has the power and is sure of it. That's why he has to make matters worse.

Sigfried Then Germany will never rise again.

Richard Except by force.

Sigfried I fear that the great war was only an introduction.

Richard Yes. After the best of all ages, which was our youth, the world war has now introduced the worst of all ages. Fortunately we can at least drink to it.

Sigfried Most people drink to peace and never any war again, but we who know better drink to those who knew better and who perished for it.

Richard To the judicial murder of the phantoms, Sigfried.

Sigfried To all the unblessed victims sacrificed for the world order of hell.

(They drink deep.)

Scene 3. Switzerland.

Rolland Imagine that our inefficient pacifism would result in such a lasting world interest!

Zweig You worked hard for it, and it made you deserve your Nobel prize.

Rolland Don't mention it. I am almost ashamed of it. I wouldn't even have become an author if I were not a musician to begin with. But what do you think about our visitor?

Zweig An ardent and honest pacifist arriving too late.

Rolland But those who survived the war after having realized its universal death trap should never fall silent but always keep on warning.

Zweig It will be long before the next war, and when it comes, all pacifists will just be overrun again.

Rolland Sometimes a pacifist must allow himself to be run over to be noticed at all.

Zweig Here we have our wheelchair visitor.

Rolland I didn't know he was in a wheelchair. Then he has something to tell.

Zweig They say he is only good at drinking, like Erich Maria Remarque.

Rolland We are all in the same boat.

Richard (rolling in) Gentlemen, please don't get up for my sake, although I remain seated when I should get up for you.

Rolland What gives us the honour of your visit?

Richard Only you did any good during the war by driving its only efficient pacifist offensive.

Rolland Bertrand Russell and Bernard Shaw did the same in England.

Richard But only in England. Your message reached the ends of the world and raised joy, admiration and hope in the hearts of all thinking people. I necessarily wanted to see you just to express my admiration and gratitude.

Zweig You have done so now. What can we do for you?

Richard You are both professional writers, but I could never reach your level. What advice could you give me to be of assistance in continuing your work for peace?

Zweig You couldn't have asked a more difficult question. Wilson's European democratization program has already failed. More and more dictatorships in one form or another, either of the extreme left or right, are sticking up their ugly faces to threaten peace in the future. Germany is the worst example, where an inflation running wild risks the collapse of their entire society. Anything could happen there.

Richard Our country is much to blame for that, since my friend Lloyd George insisted on unreasonable war damages.

Rolland You know Lloyd George?

Richard I used to. He doesn't know me any more.

Zweig (aside) One of those foundered idealists crushed by the war and forced off course so that the world never could be saved any more.

Rolland That was really stupid of him. Germany will only survive by its unquenchable desire for revenge.

Richard Tell him.

Rolland I am myself rather resigned at the sight of the ruins of Europe. I believe that only a higher moral renewal and revolution could save the world. That's why I give my faith to Hinduism. There you find a spirituality which can defy and overcome all the harmful and menacing materialism of the world.

Richard So you are religious?

Rolland Yes.

Richard Hinduist?

Rolland Yes.

Richard And you?

Zweig Humanist. I still believe in humanity.

Richard That's maybe what's needed: a qualified leading writer to bring humanity back on a humanly decent track.

Zweig A consummation devoutly to be wished, as your poet expressed it.

Richard Whoever it was. After the bankruptcy of nationalism, his identity has raised some serious doubts.

Zweig So you travel around visiting people of interest to you who could help humanity out of the world war trauma?

Richard Yes, that's about it.

Zweig Then you should visit the dancer Vaslav Nijinsky, who also lives here in Switzerland. He could give you an entirely different view of the war.

Richard He was not in it, was he?

Zweig Not at all, but he got himself more deeply involved than most.

Rolland You shouldn't have given that recommendation, Stefan.

Richard Why not?

Rolland As you heard, Nijinsky represents a totally different side of the war.

Richard Wasn't he the greatest dancer in the world until he broke with Diaghilev?

Zweig He is still the greatest dancer in the world. It was Diaghilev who broke with him because he married.

Richard May a dancer not get married?

Zweig Not according to Diaghilev if the dancer is Nijinsky.

Richard Nothing interests me more than artistic concepts and results of the war, since art always goes deeper into man and has a more lasting influence than politics.

Zweig We also share that insight. That's why we try to be authors.

Richard I will not take up your time any more. Thanks for receiving me. I will promptly follow your recommendation and pay the great Nijinsky a visit.

Rolland Thanks for your visit, and always feel welcome back.

Richard Thank you. (*rolls out*)

Rolland Why did you have to mention Nijinsky?

Zweig He is an interesting phenomenon.

Rolland You should at least have warned him.

Zweig The effect will be more efficient if he doesn't know.

Rolland Your psychology is not always quite pleasant.

Zweig What psychology is? What reality is? Realism is my only religion. You alienate yourself from reality by your Hinduism.

Rolland You can do that now when the war is over and you don't have to strain yourself any more in fighting it.

Zweig The fight has only begun. As pacifists we will never get out of it.

Rolland You are younger than I. You may fight. I am satisfied enough to just observe.

Zweig You leave the peace war to a Jew like me, an invalid such as this fallen political genius, an alcoholic like Remarque and decadent leftists like Heinrich Mann and Rosa Luxemburg besides dreamers like the theosophists. Whatever will then become of peace? Who can take it seriously?

Rolland The responsibility is yours. From now on I will stick to spirituality.

Zweig That is no answer to the problem of materialism.

Rolland What is the problem of materialism?

Zweig That it exists.

Act V scene 1.

Romola Have you come all the way just to visit Vaslav?

Richard Yes. Is it possible?

Romola He isn't quite as he used to be.

Richard I know. He doesn't dance in public any more. I saw him once as a young man in Paris, but I didn't come here to see him dance. I just wanted to see him, backstage, so to speak.

Vaslav (behind the scene) Let him come, Roma.

Romola If you wish...

(The scene is opened to another room, where Vaslav is sitting simply at a desk.)

Vaslav I see that you also were marked by the war.

Richard Who hasn't been? But I can't see that you would have to stop dancing as a consequence of the war.

Vaslav No, it doesn't show. The more it hurts within.

Richard How so? What damage could the war have given you?

Vaslav It was all my fault.

Richard How so?

Vaslav I am God who caused the war and sacrificed millions for it. That's why I never perform any more, for I can only dance the war and its horrible guilt, which I accepted since no one else did.

Romola Perhaps you had better leave, Sir.

Vaslav No, let him stay if he can bear with me. And if he endured the war and accepted a life in a wheelchair, he could probably endure me as well.

Richard But how could you alone feel guilty for the entire war, a completely innocent artist and ballet dancer, who probably couldn't hurt a fly and who not even said anything pacifistic...

Vaslav That's the very reason why, for as a musical artist I belong to the most sensitive kind, and since the insensitive indifferent keepers of power never take any responsibility but only get away with it, we the humblest servants of mankind the creative artists have to assume it instead, like Jesus on the cross took the sins of the world upon himself.

Romola Now he is mixed up with Jesus again.

Richard So you mean the only crime and guilt of humanity is to what extent it made itself guilty of insensitivity and indifference?

Vaslav Yes, exactly.

Richard But why would then the sensitive ones be the more guilty instead?

Vaslav Because they feel the guilt.

Richard But feeling guilty doesn't have to mean that you are guilty.

Vaslav Yes, if you know God, for God is guilty of everything. To the same degree that you know God you are part of God and feel God's responsibility and guilt for everything that happens in the world. Call me possessed by God if you like, as my wife does, but it's only by my sensitivity.

Richard To me you appear more and more as one of those cases who by their opposition against war are branded by psychiatrists as mental cases.

Romola Vaslav is declared a schizophrenic.

Vaslav The most ill defined of all illnesses, since those limited pedantic brains confined to crass science who invented the condition never can understand God or even common human spirituality.

Romola I have heard from others that Vaslav is the wisest of all men.

Richard He must be if he is God.

Vaslav Only part of. No one can grasp God entirely with his limited human understanding.

Richard What quack did this genius get into the hands of? Has he been subjected to treatment?

Romola I didn't know what to do when Vaslav transcended the limits for human comprehension, so I took contact with a doctor who diagnosed schizophrenia and took care of him.

Richard Poor woman! Vaslav is an artist! Was there no colleague of his you could contact, so that at least he could communicate with an equal who could understand him?

Romola You are the first one.

Vaslav I am very grateful for your visit. Perhaps you could understand me.

Richard I understand you all too well, especially after having met with Romain Rolland. You are on the track of the very secret of life and hold perhaps its key in your hand without being aware of it. You could even make out the evidence of God's existence.

Vaslav Schopenhauer thought about the same way as I. He also viewed the world as a phantom fantasy of his own thoughts. Even he thought like God, but he was no schizophrenic. He was only a megalomaniac but at the same time the most respected of philosophers, and he was right. The universe is only one grey cell in God's completely spiritual brain.

Richard A good description.

Romola You mustn't get tired, Vaslav. It's time for your medicines.

Richard Why does he take medicines?

Romola To be able to sleep and not just sit up all nights brooding and mumbling in darkness.

Richard On what grounds did the doctor diagnose schizophrenia?

Romola He read Vaslav's diary in which he claimed to be God.

Richard And the doctor took it seriously! And with what right did he open to read the most personal diary notes of a private citizen?

Romola I gave it to him.

Richard Poor woman. You have betrayed your own husband.

Romola It wasn't me! It was Diaghilev who seduced him and ruined him! He was Diaghilev's bugger boy throughout his career, and for that Diaghilev gave him

his career! Diaghilev ruined all his stars while he gave them their brilliant careers by his second hand!

Richard Evidently that was allowed in Russia. In England Oscar Wilde was prosecuted for it.

Vaslav I have the deepest respect of Oscar Wilde, a brilliant playwright, poet and story-teller, perhaps the greatest talent to come out of England after the great romantic poets.

Richard (to Romola) So you blame Diaghilev for Vaslav's 'illness' and not the war? You mean that Diaghilev scrapped Vaslav because you came between them and you married, why Vaslav's career was interrupted, which was the cause of his illness and not the war? Is that correct?

Romola Yes, just so.

Richard What do you think, Vaslav, about that?

Vaslav If the war hadn't disrupted everything, I could have continued my career even without Diaghilev together with Romola. But the terror of the war ruined everything, all creativity, all beauty, all lust for life, all future and above all, the vibrating oversensitive spirituality of cosmos. The war bereft the world and humanity of their soul, and nothing will be able to restore it, at least not in my lifetime...

Richard (to Romola) Your husband seems to hold a different view.

Romola He always does.

Vaslav I love you, Romola. I never regretted that I spited Diaghilev's supremacy over me and proposed to you. You never obstructed me. On the contrary. Thanks for remaining with me and not turning me over to the doctors, like Clara Schumann did with her Robert. Try to hibernate together with me this new horrible age of only destruction, the continuous universal rape of the soul, inhumanity and denaturalization. Man has turned into a monster, and that's why I have taken my leave of mankind to rather be an outcast pariah and exiled branded outsider with nothing in common with man. Don't fail me, Romola, for you are the only one I have by whom I still have some contact with that reality which I once loved. *(falls into tears in his wife's bosom. She tenderly embraces him.)*

Romola I will never let you down, Vaslav. *(to Richard)* I think it would be convenient for you to leave now. This interview was more than enough, wasn't it?

Richard Indeed. I have been given insights I never could dream of. Thanks for receiving me.

Romola Thanks for coming.

Richard (grasps Vaslav's hand and presses it) Welcome into the eternal lot of the martyrs.

Vaslav Thanks, brother and comrade. I will never abandon you.

(Richard rolls out. Romola continues to solace Nijinsky.)

Scene 2. A dark taverna.

Richard (rolling up to a table where a man is sitting drinking) I was told you could be found here.

Erich Who are you?

Richard A war casualty like yourself.

Erich You are lying. I was the only one of my company to survive.

Richard You must admit though that I can't be anything else than a war casualty.

Erich What do you want with me?

Richard What can we do about it?

Erich And you are asking me?

Richard Just because you were the only one of your company to survive.

Erich I can do nothing about it. All I can do is to write off my experiences and drown the pains and losses of my comrades in wine.

Richard Perhaps what you write could have some positive meaning for peace?

Erich Maybe. But it will take years before I return to life and can get anything properly written. If I try now it will only be incoherent.

Richard Will you then just keep on drinking, suppressing, and get dumb by escaping reality? Is there no better alternative?

Erich There was before the war.

Richard What?

Erich We had a colony before the war at Ascona which we called Monte Verità. It might still be there. The purpose was the concept of Leo Tolstoy to return to a natural life and reject the decadence and corruption of civilisation, its degeneration and denaturalization. We were to live as much as possible in fresh air and prefer vegetarianism, cultivating by ourselves what to live on. Our clothing was to be simple and natural, and there we would find relief and freedom from everything about mankind that went wrong.

Richard Did you succeed?

Erich The mere effort was a success. The war interrupted the continuity, but perhaps it could be given a fresh start now.

Richard Why didn't you return then?

Erich Monte Verità was perhaps my life's only love. The concept felt as the only right thing, but at the same time it was too good to be true. I couldn't quite believe in it. Maybe that's why I was afraid to return. Perhaps I am afraid to find Monte Verità as ruined and destroyed as the rest of the world. My Germany will never be able to rise from her ruins and probably not France either, and I was a child of both. You must understand that I was completely cleft and shattered personally by the war.

Richard You are not alone. Even Americans I met in Paris were in deep existential trouble.

Erich Let alone all your millions of lost countrymen.

Richard The casualties of the war are appreciated at about 20 million, mostly Russians and civilians, the majority lost in famine, illness or bombardment. So there were not only soldiers among the sacrificed innocents.

Erich No. It was our entire generation.

Richard Perhaps next one could find and build a new Monte Verità.

Erich It could only happen beyond the limits of this political world and outside civilisation, perhaps underground.

Richard It would be an interesting experiment to try out.

Erich Shall we start it?

Richard Why not? That's better than just drinking.

Erich Perhaps you are right. Thanks, wheelchair brother, for looking me up.

Richard This is only a beginning.

(They find each others' hands.)

The end

*Kausani, 3.11.2005,
Translated April 2018.*

P.S. Wilfred Owen fell at the western front on November 4th 1918, that was one week before armistice, 25 years old.

Rupert Brooke died 28 years old in Greece in spring 1915.

William Butler Yeats, 1865-1939, became a prominent cultural personality in the free Irish state but never took part in the independence war nor in the First World War.

Sigfried Sassoon survived them all and died 80 years old in 1967.

Romain Rolland (1866-1944), the leading pacifist of the First World War, was awarded the Nobel prize for literature in 1915.

Stefan Zweig (1881-1942), an Austrian Jew, who worked with Rolland in his pacifist struggle during the First World War, committed suicide in exile in Brazil together with his wife one week after the fall of Singapore when the Nazi successes of the Second World War reached their peak.

Vaslav Nijinsky (1890-1950), the greatest dancer in ballet history, was never declared sane after 1917.

Erich Maria Remarque (1898-1970) made a tremendous success with his first novel "All Quiet on the Western Front" 1929 and wrote a dozen other novels.

The pacifists Bernard Shaw and Bertrand Russell both lived well into their 90s and remained alert and brilliant to their dying day.