

The White Feather

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The White Feather

A play for four players.

Cast:

George Shilton ... Young Man 25

Andrew Walker...George's Mate 24

Jenny Seabury...Enlister 40+

May Corfield ...Barmaid 23

(The year is 1915 George and Andrew are in town. It is a Saturday afternoon in winter. They stop to watch a woman speaking on a soapbox about recruiting to join the Army to go to France.)

Jenny

(On her soap box) And I say to you boys, I say, why are you still here? Why are your friends giving all they can in the trenches, daily facing dangers, daily answering the call, daily facing the Hun? I say to you how can you sleep? How do you settle your own mind knowing your duty is being done by others? How do you atone? Do you care? Do you care that our men are dying for your protection? Do you care that they questioned not? Do you see that those left behind are cowards, low lives and cheaters? Yes cheaters, I said. Cheating their country for their right to live here and call themselves English men. When the push comes will you be in that line? Will you be in that line or would you rather there was a hole where you should be? Then through that hole the Bosch will sneak and all will be lost. Do you care? The days of slavery are gone or so they say, if our brave boys weren't on the front line dealing with the privations of war meted out by an evil and corrupt regime, if they weren't there slavery would be knocking on our very door.....I implore you idle men to sign up now. Go and fill those gaps join your comrades already there and go and fight for our right to exist. "Put on your helmet. Grab your gun, step right up to face the Hun." Boys the recruiting office is open. Kiss your sweethearts goodbye. Embrace adventure, revel in the glory of doing the right thing, stand up and tell the Kaiser who we are and tell him he must stop. Who'll do that right now? Who will go right now and sign up. Be seen as a new man in the eyes of your loved ones, families, friends and sweethearts, Join now.....You two men look at you. Both fit for service and doing nothing are you going to sign, are you?

George

Oh yea just on my way. Only got one question though .Who's making your husband's tea while you're out here shouting at us all?

Jenny

(Haughtily) My husband Sir, if he was fit, would be out in France with our other heroes, not hanging around in town on a lazy Saturday afternoon. My husband is where he should be, I have no worries on that score.

George

Wherever he is it's better than being stuck with you that's for sure.

Andrew

You should know better Ma'am; making a fool of yourself. If it meant the Kaiser was prepared to hang up his hat and shake hands, yeah I would go, But.....

George

Yeah, we have vital work.

Jenny

Vital work?

Andrew

Yes stayin' alive seems pretty important.

George

And we are here to pick up with the widows when their soldier boys sleep in the muddy fields. See, that's a finer bet.

Andrew

Yeah

George

Specially the posh ones, eh Andy?

Jenny

You won't be so brave when the boys come back.

George

Better accept that is not going to be the case.

Jenny

Cometh the moment cometh the hour, When we are dancing for Victory in the street, each guilty footstep you take will be will be a step you are unworthy of, each one stolen from a far better man.

Andrew

Shut up and get back to your sewing club.

George

Yes, leave us alone. If all the men went, there'd be no-one here to service you lovely ladies when they don't come marching home.

Jenny

I will not be offended...your words are empty and hollow by your being here you are showing....

George

(Interrupting) Get back to your embroidering....

Andrew

Yeah and anyway who do you think you are shouting at?

Jenny

By being here you are showing you don't care about your town, your country, our history and your fellow men...

George

Aw, shut it love.

Jenny

I say to you enlist now...fight the good fight, your country needs you. *Lord* Kitchener needs youWe don't want to lose you but we think you ought to go.*(She starts to sing Onward Christian Soldiers. Undeterred she ploughs on the boys can improv insults to shout at her as she sings to the heavens.)*

George *(Shouts her down)*

Bugger Kitchener, the Rose and Crown's darts team needs me.

Jenny

Yes you can mock, you can laugh. Do you laugh at the death of young lads; our young lads, do you laugh then, do you eh do you?

Andrew

Well perhaps they shouldn't be there at all.

George

Come on mate I have had enough of this crap.

Andrew.

Yea, fancy a pint?

George

A pint will do nicely I reckon.

(As they turn to leave Jenny shouts from her soapbox)

Jenny

Wait a minute boys.....

(She jumps off her box and runs to the boys, she presents each with a white feather.)

Andrew
What the Hell?

Jenny
You know what they are.

George
How dare you?

(Jenny turns and runs away)

Andrew
What are these for?

George
The white feathers of cowardice. Bloody bitch..it's getting that you can't even walk down the street without somebody having a go.

Andrew
Oh forget it, I'm parched.

George
Yea me too and it's your round I think..

Andrew
And how's that?

George
Who lost at cribbage last night?

Andrew
Oh and that means I buy the beer for the rest of my days does it?

George
Suits me.

Andrew
I'm sure it does.

(Lights fade, they come up and the boys are in the Rose and Crown)

Andrew
Black and Tan yea?

George
No make it a mild.

Andrew
Oh steady as she goes...

George
I'll get a table.

Andrew
Yea, back in a min. Shall I bring the doms over?

George.
Yea we'll have a go. Bob an end?

Andrew
Yea Bob an end. *(He crosses to the Bar)* Hello May.

(May is the barmaid)

May
Oh Hello, usual is it?

Andrew
No, he's slowing down he's on Mild; I'll have a pint of Best though please.

May
One Mild, one Best coming up.

Andrew
Oh we had a laugh down here last night; you know Tommy and Arthur?

May
Yea.

Andrew
You should have seen 'em; Talk about drunk

May
Oh.*(snaps)* More sick for me to clean up.

Andrew
Oh come on May it's not like that, it's just funny that's all.

May
It's funny is it? Funny? You want to try working here and cleaning up all the sick. It's every night now and I am fed up. I want to rub all your noses in it. That might stop you.

Andrew
(Pause) Are you alright May?

(May doesn't answer)

Andrew
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You, know we are you old friends come on May, what's up love?

May

I'm fine, I am. Just let me be.

Andrew

Let you be? A friend of mine is standing in front of me sobbing and I am to let it be? I won't, I can't. May come on; tell me what's to do?

May

It's my Billy.

Andrew

What about him?

May

He's only gone and joined up.

Andrew

He never? What would he go and do a thing like that for?

May

I don't know. I said to him, I said, what do you do that for Billy?

Andrew

And what did he say?

May

Just some stuff about our lads dying over there and him being at a loose end an all and he reckoned if we all sat back and did nothing we will never win.

Andrew

Blimey...when does he go?

May

End of the week.

Andrew

Billy? A soldier eh?

May

Yea, Billy a soldier.

Andrew

Blimey.....

(Andrew walks across the bar with the two pints and puts them on the table where George is sitting. George is reading a newspaper.)

George
Cheers

Andrew
Cheers..

(They both raise their glasses and drink.)

Andrew
You'll never guess.

George
No you're probably right.

Andrew
No, go on have a go..

George
A go at what ?

Andrew
Have a guess.

George
I don't know...Erm, King Edward's just won the two thirty at Kempton Park..

Andrew
No.

George
Kaiser Bill is coming over to give a concert for the Chelsea Pensioners?

Andrew
Oh come on you're not trying.

George
Well I don't know.

Andrew
Let's say it's about the Kaiser in a kind of way...

George
Kaiser Bill is really a woman and is to star in the next Charlie Chaplin film?

Andrew
No, it's May's Billy.

George
What, *he's* a woman and he's going to start in the next Charlie Chaplin film?

Andrew

No you fool. Anyway it would be better if it was. No, it's none of that; he's only gone and enlisted.

George

He's what?

Andrew

He's joined up. He's off next week.

George

What's he gone and done that for?

Andrew

You tell me.

George

The way this war's going we'll all be called up soon enough anyway.

Andrew

I know he's bloody mad.

George

How's May?

Andrew.

Pretty cut up.

George

I thought she was crying. What did he go and do that for? The simpleton, I can't believe that; Billy a soldier. Gawd 'elp us....

Andrew

Not 'alf.

George.

Shush she's coming over....

(May comes over with a cloth to wipe their table)

May

Talking about me were you lads?

(Both Deny it)

May

Well what were you talking about.

Andrew/George together

- A. Darts
- G. Football

May

Hopeless liars; the pair of you.

George

Well what came over him?

May

I don't know he said something about a white feather he had been given in the market the other day. He said a young woman, young enough to be his daughter, went up to him, shouted at him and gave him a white feather. He's a proud man is my Billy.

Andrew

Aye he is that. But he's no soldier.

George

He'll do fine May. You'll see he'll beat the sausage eaters single handed and march back leading the band you see if he doesn't.

May

I hope so I really do.

(She walks away)

George

I'll give him three weeks.

Andrew

He'll never stand it.

George.

He'll find some reason to come back.

Andrew

If the Hun doesn't get him first!

George

Well Hun or not you won't get me out there, until I have to go.

Andrew

Wonder what it's like? I mean you know, on the front line, what is it like?

George

Oh yea, you weren't here the other night when Gerald Gough was down on leave just back from France. Christ he had some tales.

Andrew
Go on.

George
Well he said they sit in long trenches up to their ears in mud. If you poke your head over the top you get shot. The mud never dries. The food is short and disgusting, the smell of rotting corpses is 'orrible and according to him, the dead don't always get buried but litter up the trenches. It's slimy and wet and the lads sit for hours doing nothing. Then comes the order, and they make them jump out and run towards the enemy whilst the enemy shoot at them. They then either push on and die or lie injured in a sea of mud. If they go back our officers will shoot them. If they desert our officers shoot them, if they disobey an order, our officers shoot them.

Andrew
Jesus Christ sounds fantastic...

George
Yes doesn't it?

Andrew
Where do I sign? (*He stands to attention as a soldier would*)

George
(*Mimicking an Army sergeant*) Here, at the bottom, thank you son, you have just given your life to the service of the British Army. Fall in over there and to save time and money on transport we will shoot you now. Cheaper in the long run.

Andrew
Will I get to win a medal?

George
(*Directly into his face*) A medal son? Medals is for h'officers, your betters, and don't you forget it. They are brave and cunning they sit and plan day after day. I mean if someone didn't sit two miles behind the lines eating pheasant and drinking port, were would the Army be. ?

Andrew
(*Andrew laughs as they sit down*) Do you reckon it really is like that?

George
It's what Gerald says.

Andrew
And people are still stupid enough to volunteer eh.

George
And you know what? The lucky ones die. Look at Sid from the legion.

Andrew
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Sid?

George
You know him. Sid Everett,

Andrew
Oh that Sid; what about him?

George
Apparently a shell exploded at the top of his trench. Left him deaf and blind.

Andrew
What forever?

George
Forever; oh and he lost an arm. Imagine that one arm and not being able to see or hear. It's awful. It would be like living in a box for ever more.

Andrew
That's worse than dying.

George
You're right.

Andrew
And people volunteer for this.

George
Bloody mad-men.

Andrew
Yes, It's not for me.

George
Nor me..... Want another?

Andrew
No I have a job to do for my Ma, I'll see you later.

(Fade)

(George is walking through the street alone on his way from the pub..he is again accosted by Jenny.....She gives him a white feather)

Jenny
In case you lost the first one.

George
You can take this and shove it where the sun don't shine.

