

EVANS PLAYERS

CHICKEN SOUP
WITH
BARLEY

A Play in Three Acts

By

ARNOLD WESKER

* GENERAL
EDITOR

* LIONEL HALE

Price 6s. net

BGS

CHICKEN SOUP WITH BARLEY

The first play of the ROOTS' trilogy

by
ARNOLD WESKER



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By the same author:

ROOTS
I'M TALKING ABOUT JERUSALEM

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Chicken Soup with Barley

This play was first presented at the Belgrade Theatre, Coventry, on 7th July 1958, and subsequently at the Royal Court Theatre, London, on 14th July 1958, with the following cast:—

SARAH KAHN	Charmian Eyre
HARRY KAHN	Frank Finlay
MONTY BLATT	Alfred Lynch
DAVE SIMMONDS	Richard Martin
PRINCE SILVER	Patrick Carter
HYMIE KOSSOF	Henry Manning
CISSIE	Cherry Morris
ADA KAHN	Jacqueline Wilson
RONNIE KAHN	Anthony Valentine
BESSIE BLATT	Patsy Byrne

Directed by JOHN DEXTER

During Act One the action of the play takes place in the basement of the KAHNS' house in an East End street. In Acts Two and Three the family are living in an L.C.C. flat in Hackney.

ACT ONE

SCENE 1	4th October 1936
SCENE 2	Later that evening

ACT TWO

SCENE 1	June 1946
SCENE 2	October 1947

ACT THREE

SCENE 1	November 1955
SCENE 2	December 1956

No character, in this play, is intended to portray any specific person, alive or dead.

The running time of this play, excluding intervals, is one hour and fifty minutes.

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PRODUCTION NOTE

Chicken Soup with Barley has not, perhaps, attained the popularity of the same author's *Roots*, probably for two main reasons: certain casting difficulties due to the passage of time during the action, and the fact that it has a less definite story line than the former play. It is true that the plot, in the conventional sense of the word, is tenuous, but the play is full of action and dramatic high-lights, the development of characters and situations through the twenty years is fascinatingly contrived, and the gradual ageing of some of the cast offers an exciting challenge to any competent group of players.

Equally as in *Roots*, the play has something vital to say on the contemporary scene, delivering no simple or trite message, but presenting and illuminating the most important problems of our time with clarity, vigour and a notable freedom from dogmatic one-sidedness. The tremendous last line of the play—"Ronnie, if you don't care, you'll die!"—could profitably be displayed prominently in public places throughout the country.

In setting, the play is actually simpler than *Roots*. There are two scenes, the basement of a house in the East End and the front room in a L.C.C. block of flats in Hackney. Both can be quite simply staged, the former actually gaining in effect by being presented in a smallish inset. This first scene should give an appearance of cosy, shabby, friendly warmth. Poor it may be, but at least the place is alive and kicking—reflecting the spirit of its occupants as they are then. In the same way the appearance of the L.C.C. flats reflects equally the increased respectability and decreased vitality of the class of people inhabiting them—though one may be sure that any place in which Sarah lived would soon show the impress of her personality. She would, one feels, make a home out of even a Council flat.

The lighting is simple—straightforward day or night scenes, with no cues indicated in the action—although in Act Three Scene II the full lights might effectively be reduced to a table lamp for the last moments of the play. In Act Two Scene II Ronnie can merely be putting the finishing touches to a fire already alight.

Once again the author has provided his cast with some magnificent acting opportunities. Sarah is, in her different way, as enviable a part as Beatie in *Roots*, and it is difficult to imagine any competent actress not revelling in her. The strength of her personality and vitality drives right through the play, even when, with age and worry upon her, she seems most alone. With the passage of years she may mellow and quieten, but the spark never altogether dies, and shines out nobly once

more in her fine closing speeches. She never degenerates into mere nagging—even when giving Harry a terrible time. She is at one with her surroundings—a woman of her class, with little education, in many ways unimaginative, and Harry has some reason for his remark: “Ach, you’re such a silly woman sometimes”. And yet, in spite of all this, there is about her in this play something almost monumental.

There is, on the contrary, nothing monumental about Harry—coward, weakling and liar—yet saved by his very humanity from seeming utterly contemptible. He commands our pity, if not our respect. The character is drawn without gloss yet equally without hatred, and requires the same clear-sighted understanding in the playing. Poor Harry, all he asked for really was that simplest, yet rarest, of all present-day luxuries—a quiet life.

Monty Blatt, the cockney Jew who prospers, has to age from nineteen to thirty-eight, a tricky bridge for an actor to gap. He is, however, pretty smart at nineteen and still full of youthful bounce at thirty-eight. A likeable fellow, even though you might not feel inclined to trust him too far in business, who has taken his disillusionments easily. He is, one feels, quite genuine in the distress shown in the last line he speaks: “Poor Sarah and Harry. Jesus! It’s all come to this?”—in a sense the kernel of the play.

Ada grows from thirteen to twenty-five, but is merely glimpsed in the earlier scenes. A small but important part (she will come into prominence in the final play of the Trilogy), she is the first to give expression to the disillusionment which affects them all by the end of the play. Her attitude, however, weary though she may be of the waiting and the life she has been forced to live, is by no means defeatist. It is disillusionment, not despair, which motivates her retreat (if that is the word) to the country. On the surface she may appear somewhat hard, but it is a shell of commonsense, necessary—in her view—if she and her family are to survive.

Cissie is precise, business-like, wryly humorous, efficient—an organizer to whom the organization itself perhaps means more than the individuals composing it.

Ronnie has probably the most difficult task as regards age, appearing at fifteen, sixteen and twenty-five. He is, however, fairly sophisticated as a teen-ager and, for all his disillusionment, a youthful twenty-five. When we meet him first he is lively, idealistic, with an alert imagination and an eager mind—at the end, bewildered and bitter. We are left wondering, and doubting, about what his response to his mother’s last warning will be. The part needs handling with much charm and sympathy—but with a hint of Harry, as he himself recognizes, which adds a disturbing note.

Dave makes only a brief appearance but becomes the leading character

in the last section of the Trilogy. He is very likeable, full of hope for the future, but not a blind hope, doing what he feels he ought to do, but realizing the inevitable misery and pain he must help to cause, and taking no pleasure in it.

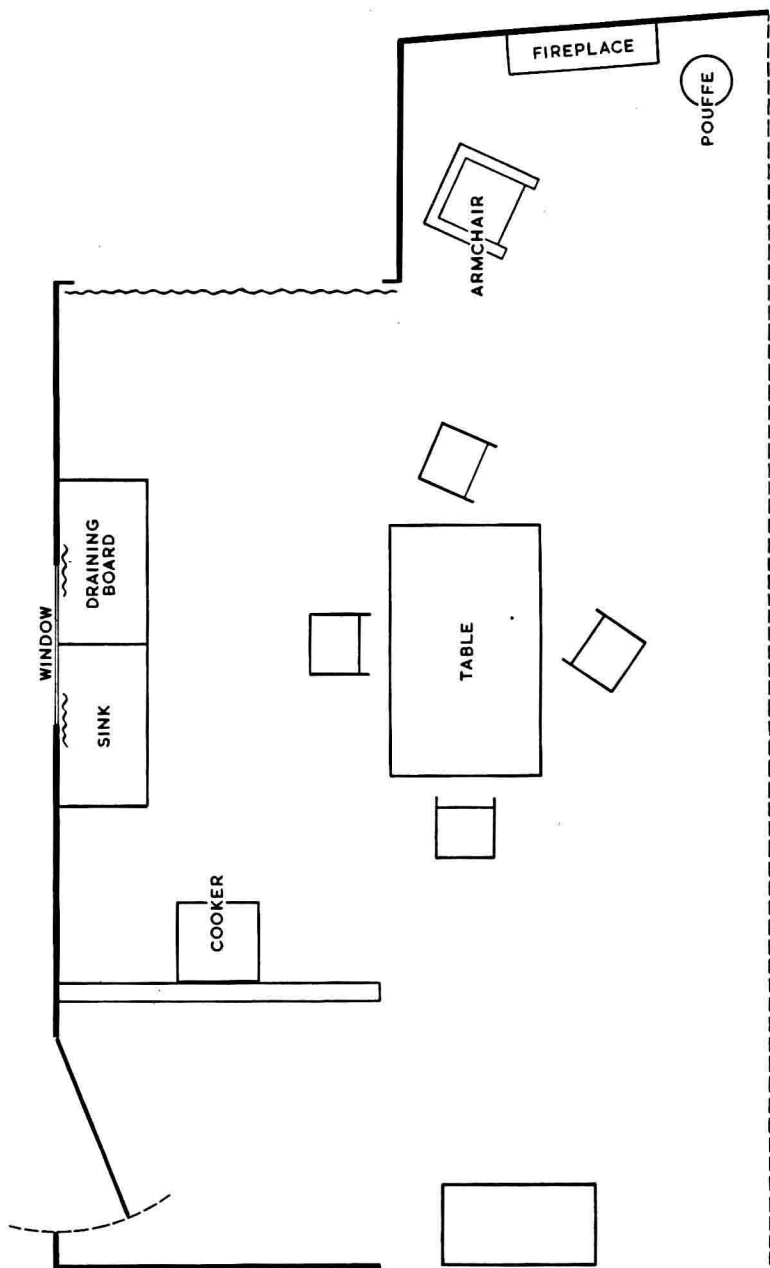
As in *Roots* the smaller parts of Prince and Hymie (brave, serious revolutionaries at the beginning, whist-players in the end) and Bessie (Monty's bouncy little wife) have their own interest and individuality, and are not mere "supporting roles".

The story might be regarded as a descent—from the high fervour and excitement of the first act (which should positively boil with activity), to the disillusionment and weariness of the last. This does not mean, however, that the production should be allowed to run down like a clock. The tragedy is that in the beginning the characters are devoting their energies and attention to the creation of a new world, and in the end to—a game of whist.

The movement and placing of actors and furniture are left very much to the producer's discretion but should present little difficulty. Particularly in the first act, tempo generally should be brisk, the pauses and moments of rest becoming all the more effective by contrast. Directed and played with sympathy and understanding, with an alert eye for variety of pace and mood, the play can make an unforgettable impact.

IVAN BUTLER

STREET CLOTH



★ CHICKEN SOUP WITH BARLEY

ACT ONE

SCENE I

The place is the basement of the KAHNS' house in an East End street. The date is 4th October 1936.

The room is warm and lived in. A fire is burning. One door, at the back and L. of the room, leads to a bedroom. A window, C., looks up to the street. To the R. of this is the kitchen area which is seen. At rear of stage is a door leading up into the street.

SARAH KAHN is washing up, humming to herself. She is a small, fiery woman, aged thirty-seven, Jewish and of European origin. Her movements indicate great energy and vitality. She is a very warm person.

HARRY KAHN, her husband, comes through the street door and into the room. He is thirty-five and also a European Jew. He is dark, slight, rather pleasant looking and the antithesis of SARAH. He is amiable but weak. From outside we hear a band playing a revolutionary song from the Spanish Civil War.

SARAH. You took the children to Lottie's?

HARRY (taking up book to read). I took them.

SARAH. They didn't mind?

HARRY. No, they didn't mind.

SARAH. Is Hymie coming?

HARRY. I don't know.

SARAH (to herself). Nothing he knows! You didn't ask him? He didn't say? He knows about the demonstration, doesn't he?

HARRY. I don't know whether he knows or he doesn't know. I didn't discuss it with him—I took the kids, that's all. Hey, Sarah—you should read Upton Sinclair's book about the meat-canning industry—it's an eye-opener.

SARAH. Books! Nothing else interests him, only books. Did you see anything outside? What's happening?

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HARRY. The streets are packed with people, I never seen so many people. They've got barricades at Gardner's Corner.

SARAH. There'll be such trouble.

HARRY. Sure there'll be trouble. You ever known a demonstration where there wasn't trouble?

SARAH. And the police?

HARRY. There'll be more police than blackshirts.

SARAH. What time they marching?

HARRY. I don't know.

SARAH. Harry, you know where your cigarettes are, don't you?

(This is her well-meaning but maddening attempt to point out to a weak man his weakness.)

HARRY. I know where they are.

SARAH. And you know what's on at the cinema?

HARRY. So?

SARAH. And also you know what time it opens? *(He grins.)* So why don't you know what time they plan to march? *(Touché.)*

HARRY. Leave me alone, Sarah, will you? Two o'clock they plan to march—nah!

SARAH. So you do know. Why didn't you tell me straight away? Shouldn't you tell me something when I ask you?

HARRY. I didn't know what time they marched, so what do you want of me?

SARAH. But you did know when I nagged you.

HARRY. So I suddenly remembered. Is there anything terrible in that?

(She shakes a disbelieving fist at him and goes out to see where the loudspeaker cries are coming from. The slogan "Madrid Today—London Tomorrow" is being repeated. As she is out HARRY looks for her handbag, and on finding it proceeds to take some money from it.)

SARAH *(she is hot)*. Air! I must have air—this basement will kill me. God knows what I'll do without air when I'm dead. Who else was at Lottie's?

HARRY *(still preoccupied)*. All of them.

SARAH. Who's all of them?

HARRY. All of them! You know. Lottie and Hymie and the boys, Solly and Martin.

(He finds a ten-shilling note, pockets it and resumes his seat by the fire, taking up a book to read. SARAH returns to room and collects some cups and saucers.)

SARAH. Here, lay these out, the boys will be coming soon.

HARRY. Good woman! I could just do with a cup of tea.

SARAH. What's the matter, you didn't have any tea by Lottie's?

HARRY. No.

SARAH. Liar!

HARRY. I didn't have any tea by Lottie's, I tell you. (*Injured tone.*) Good God, woman, why don't you believe me when I tell you things?

SARAH. You tell me why. Why don't I believe him when he tells me things! As if he's such an angel and never tells lies. What's the matter, you never told lies before I don't think?

HARRY. All right, so I had tea at Lottie's. There, you satisfied now?

SARAH (*preparing things as she talks*). Well, of course you had tea at Lotties. Don't I know you had tea at Lotties? You think I'm going to think that Lottie wouldn't make you a cup of tea?

HARRY. Oh, leave off, Sarah.

SARAH. No! This time I won't leave off. (*Her logic again.*) I want to know why you told me you didn't have tea at Lottie's when you know perfectly well you did. I want to know.

(HARRY raises his hands in despair.)

I know you had tea there and you know you had tea there—so what harm is it if you tell me? You think I care whether you had a cup of tea there or not? You can drink tea there till it comes out of your eyes and I wouldn't care only as long as you tell me.

HARRY. Sarah, will you please stop nagging me, will you? What difference if I had tea there or I didn't have tea there?

SARAH. That's just what I'm saying. All I want to know is whether you're all of a liar or half a liar!

HARRY (*together with her*). . . . all of a liar or half a liar!

(A young man, MONTY BLATT, comes down from the street to the front door. He is about nineteen, Jewish, working class, and cockney. His voice is heard before he is seen, shouting: "Mrs. Kahn! Sarah! Mrs. Kahn!") He has interrupted the row as he dashes into the room without knocking.)

MONTY. Ah, good! You're here! (*Moves to the window and, looking out, shouts up.*) It's O.K. They're here. Here! (*Offering parcel.*) Mother sent you over some of her strudel. C'mon down. (*To HARRY.*)

Hello, Harry boy, how you going? All fighting fit for the demo?

HARRY. I'm fit, like a Trojan I'm fit!

SARAH. You won't see him at any demo. In the pictures you'll find him. (*Goes to landing to make tea.*)

MONTY. The pictures? Don't be bloody mad. You won't hear a thing! You seen the streets today? Sarah, you seen the streets yet? Mobbed! Mo-obbed! The lads have been there since seven this morning.

(Two other young men in their early twenties come through the door. DAVE SIMMONDS and PRINCE SILVER. They are heatedly discussing something as they enter the living-room.)

PRINCE. But Dave, there's so much work here to do. Hello, Sarah.

DAVE. I know all about the work here, but there are plenty of party members to do it. Hello, Sarah. Spain is the battle-front. Spain is a real issue at last.

SARAH. Spain? Spain, Dave?

HARRY. Spain?

PRINCE. Dave is joining the International Brigade. He's leaving for Spain tomorrow morning. (*To DAVE.*) But Spain is only one issue brought to a head. You're too young to—

HARRY. Dave, don't go mad all of a sudden. It's not all glory, you know.

DAVE. Harry, you look as though you didn't sleep last night.

MONTY. He didn't—the old cossack. (*To the tune of "All the Nice Girls Love a Sailor"*.) For you know what cossacks are . . . Am I right, Harry?

PRINCE. I saw your sister Cissie at Aldgate, Harry. She was waving your mother's walking-stick in the air.

HARRY. She's mad.

MONTY (*loudly calling*). Where's this cup of tea, Sarah?

SARAH (*bringing in tea*). Do your fly-buttons up, Monty, you tramp you. Now then, Dave, tell me what's happening and what the plans are.

(Everyone draws up a chair by the table.)

DAVE. It's like this. The Party loudspeaker vans have been out all morning—you heard them? The Fascists are gathering at Royal Mint Street near the bridge. They plan to march up to Aldgate, down Commercial Road to Salmon Lane in Limehouse—you know Salmon Lane?—where they think they're going to hold a meeting. Then they plan to go on to Victoria Park and hold another meeting.

SARAH. Two meetings? What do they want to hold two meetings for?

HARRY. Why shouldn't they hold two meetings?

SARAH. What, you think they should hold two meetings?

HARRY. It's not what I think—she's such a funny woman—it's not what I think, but they want to hold two meetings—so what's so strange about that?

SARAH. But it costs so much money.

HARRY. Perhaps you want we should have a collection for them?

DAVE. Now. They could go along the Highway by the docks and then up Cable Street, but Mosley won't take the Highway because that's the back way, though the police will suggest he does.

SARAH. I bet the police cause trouble.

PRINCE. They've had to call in forces from outside London.

SARAH. You won't make it a real fight, boys, will you? I mean you won't get hurt.

MONTY. Sarah, you remember they threw a seven-year-old girl through a glass window? So don't fight the bastards?

PRINCE. Now Monty, there's to be discipline, remember. There's to be no attack or bottle-throwing. It's a test, you know that, don't you, it's a test for us. We're to stop them passing, that's all.

MONTY. Sure we'll stop them passing. If I see a blackshirt come by I'll tap his shoulder and I'll say: "Excuse me, but you can't come this way today, we're digging up the road." And he'll look at my hammer and sickle and he'll doff his cap and he'll say: "I beg your pardon, comrade, I'll take the underground."

DAVE. Comrades! You want to know what the plans are or you don't want to know? Again. As we don't know what's going to happen we've done this: some of the workers are rallying at Royal Mint Street—so if the Fascists want to go through the Highway they'll have to fight for it. But we guess they'll want to stick to the main route so as not to lose face—you follow? We've therefore called the main rally at Gardner's Corner. If, on the other hand, they do attempt to pass up Cable Street—

SARAH. Everything happens in Cable Street.

HARRY. What else happened in Cable Street?

SARAH. Peter the painter had a fight with Churchill there, didn't he?

MONTY. You are thinking of Sidney Street, sweetheart.

HARRY. You know, she gets everything mixed up.

SARAH. You're very wonderful I suppose, yes? You're the clever one!

HARRY. I don't get my facts mixed up, anyway.

SARAH. Pah, pah, pah, pah, pah! Listen to him! My politician!

MONTY. Sarah, do me a favour, perhaps you should leave the fists till later?

DAVE. If, on the other hand, they do try to come up Cable Street then

they'll meet some dockers and more barricades. And if any get through that lot then they still can't hold their meetings either in Salmon Lane or Victoria Park Square.

SARAH. Why not?

PRINCE. Because since seven this morning there's been some of our comrades standing there with our platforms.

MONTY. Bloody wonderful, isn't it? Makes you feel proud, eh Sarah? Every section of this working-class area that we've approached has responded. The dockers at Limehouse have come out to the man. The lot!

PRINCE. The Unions, the Co-ops, Labour Party members and the Jewish People's Council—

SARAH. The Board of Deputies?

HARRY. There she goes again. Not the Jewish Board of Deputies—they asked the Jewish population to keep away. No, the Jewish People's Council—the one that organized that mass demo against Hitler some years back.

(SARAH pulls face at him.)

MONTY. There's been nothing like it since the General Strike.

HARRY. Christ! The General Strike! That was a time, Sarah, eh?

SARAH. What you asking me for? You want I should remember that you were missing for six days when Ada was ill?

HARRY. Yes, I was missing, I'm sure.

SARAH. Well, sure you were missing.

HARRY. Where was I missing?

SARAH. How should I know where you were missing. If I'd have known where you were missing you wouldn't have been missing.

(There is heard from outside a sound of running feet and voices shouting. Everyone except HARRY moves to the window.)

FIRST VOICE. They're assembling! They're assembling! Out to the barricades—the Fascists are assembling!

SECOND VOICE. Hey, Stan! Where's the best place?

FIRST VOICE. Take your boys to Cable Street. The Fascists are assembling! Come out of your houses! Come out of your houses!

MONTY. What about us, Dave!

SARAH. You haven't suggested to Harry and me where to go yet.

DAVE. There's plenty of time. They won't try to march till two, and it's only twelve-thirty.

SARAH. You eaten? You boys had lunch?

PRINCE. We all had lunch at my place, Sarah; sit down, stop moving a few seconds.

DAVE. Take your pick, Sarah. If you fancy yourself as a nurse then go to Aldgate, we've got a first-aid post there, near Whitechapel Library.

SARAH. Such organization! And you lot?

DAVE. Monty is taking some of the lads to the left flank of Cable Street, Prince is organizing a team of cyclist messengers between the main points and headquarters, I'm going round the streets at the last minute to call everyone out and—and that's the lot.

MONTY (*rubbing his hands*). All we have to do is wait.

DAVE. Where is Ada?

SARAH. Ada and Ronnie are at Hymie's place. I thought it best they get right out of the way.

DAVE (*guiltily*). You think she'll stay away? Your precocious daughter is a born fighter, Sarah.

MONTY. 'Corse she is! She'll be round the streets organizing the pioneers—you see.

SARAH. Never! I told her to stay there and she'll stay there.

HARRY. I'm sure!

SARAH. God forbid she should be like you and run wild.

HARRY. All right, so she should be like you then!

SARAH. I'm jolly sure she should be like me! Ronnie isn't enough for him yet. A boy of five running about at nights and swearing at his aunts. (*Smiles at the thought.*) Bless him! (*To the others.*) He didn't half upset them: they wouldn't let him mess around with the radio so he started effing and blinding and threw their books on the floor. (*Turning again to HARRY.*) Like you he throws things.

HARRY. Have you ever come across a woman like her before?

MONTY. I'd love another cup of tea.

HARRY (*jumps up and goes to kitchen*). I'll make it, I'll make it.

SARAH. He's so sweet when anybody else is around. I'll make some sandwiches.

PRINCE. But we've eaten, Sarah.

SARAH. Eat. Always eat. You don't know what time you'll be back.

(*SARAH goes to the cupboard on landing and cuts up bread ready for cheese sandwiches. A very distant sound of people chanting is heard: "They shall not pass, they shall not pass, they shall not pass."*)

MONTY. The boys! Listen. Hear them? You know, Sarah, that's the same cry the people of Madrid were shouting.

PRINCE. And they didn't get past either. Imagine it! All those women

and children coming out into the streets and making barricades with their beds and their chairs.

DAVE (*sadly*). It was a slaughter.

PRINCE. And then came the first International Brigade.

DAVE. The Edgar André from Germany, Commune de Paris from France, and the Dombrovsky from Poland.

MONTY. Wait till our Dave gets over there. You'll give 'em brass balls for breakfast, Dave, eh?

SARAH. You really going, Dave? Does Ada know?

DAVE. Don't tell her, Sarah. You know how dramatic calf-love is.

PRINCE. Calf-love? If you get back alive from Spain she'll marry you at the landing stage—mark me.

SARAH. How are you going?

DAVE. They tell me it's a week-end trip to Paris and then a midnight ramble over the Pyrenees. The back way!

SARAH. It's terrible out there, they say. They say we've lost a lot of good comrades already.

PRINCE. We've lost too many good comrades out there—you hear me, Dave?

MONTY. Sammy Avner and Lorimer Birch at Boadilla, Felicia Brown and Ernst Julius at Aragon.

SARAH. Julius? The tailor who used to work with us at Cantor's? But he was only a young boy.

PRINCE. And Felicia an artist and Lorimer an Oxford undergraduate.

MONTY. And Cornford was killed at Cordova.

PRINCE. And Ronnie Symes at Madrid.

MONTY. And Stevie Yates at Casa del Campo.

SARAH. Casa del Campo! Madrid! Such beautiful names and all that killing.

(*Long pause.*)

MONTY. Hey! You know who organized the first British group? Nat Cohen! I used to go to school with him. Him and Sam Masters were on a cycling holiday in France. As soon as they heard of the revolt they cycled over to Barcelona and started the Tom Mann Centuria.

HARRY (*coming to the table*). He's a real madman, Nat Cohen. He chalks slogans right outside the police station. I used to work with him.

SARAH. God knows if they'll come back alive.

DAVE. When three Fascist deserters were asked how they reached our lines they said they came through the hills of the widows, orphans and sweethearts; they'd lost so many men attacking those hills.

MONTY. And may they lose many more!

[ACT TWO set 