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Lions and Donkeys

A play

Steve Harper

Samuel French — London
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LIONS AND DONKEYS

First presented at the Hunstanton Drama Festival in June 2009 with the following cast:

Corporal David Rawlings

Sergeant Thomas Atkins

Lieutenant Harry Hargreaves

Lieutenant Willy Schmitt

Jonathon Rice

Peter Duhig

Andy Mussell

Richard Abel

Produced and directed by Steve Harper

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CHARACTERS

Corporal David Rawlings, early 20s, member of the
British Army

Sergeant Thomas Atkins, late 20s, member of the
British Army

Lieutenant Harry Hargreaves, 20, officer in the
British Army.

Lieutenant Willy Schmitt, late 20s, officer in
the German Army.

The action takes place on the Western Front, Observation Point
435.

Time—September 1918

LIONS AND DONKEYS

The setting is a British dugout on the Western Front, Observation Point 435 for the Third Essex Battallion. There is a simple table and two chairs. The table is set with a field phone, three tin mugs, some papers, an ashtray, a box of Swan Vesta matches and a packet of Woodbines. A map is pinned on a wall next to a duty list with many names crossed off, and a saucy picture of a 1918 starlet

The CURTAIN rises as music from “It’s a Long Way to Tipperary” fades

Corporal Rawlings enters with two mugs of tea

Rawlings Cup of tea, Sarnt, come and get it while it’s hot. Come on, you bugger, where are you? Oh well. (*Seeing the packet of Woodbines on the table*) Oily Rag, Corporal Rawlings? Most kind, don’t mind if I do. (*He lights a cigarette, sits down and relaxes*)

Sergeant Atkins enters and sees Rawlings

Atkins On your feet, you horrible man. Just look at you — your bleedin’ mother wouldn’t forgive you if she saw what you’ve done to that uniform. You’re a disgrace to the British Army. What are you? Consider yourself on a charge.

Rawlings (*getting up*) Yes, Sarnt. Will I be shot at dawn, Sarnt?

Atkins Take any more of my fags, and I’ll bloody shoot you myself.

Rawlings You can’t do that, Sarnt. Not without a full court-martial.

Atkins Don’t tell me,

Rawlings } (*together*) Says so in King’s Regulations.
Atkins }

Atkins (*helping himself to a Woodbine*) Can I bayonet you?

Rawlings Not if I give you this cup of cha.

Atkins Fair enough. Any messages from HQ?

Rawlings Only the usual request for enemy body counts, and a warning that the barrage starts at twenty-three thirty sharp. We're on a night attack again.

Atkins You did give them the co-ordinates, and range...

Rawlings Course I did, you think I want to go the same way as Jones, Bradley and the other poor sods?

Atkins Right, and have you let our friends know?

Rawlings Yes, no reciprocal arrangements tonight.

Atkins Right, so it's all peace and quiet until Jerry advances.

Rawlings I'm expecting the Bosch night party at about twenty-three hundred.

Atkins All set?

Rawlings Yes, the boys know what to expect — Sarge?

Atkins What?

Rawlings Do you really think it's nearly over?

Atkins Well, that's what they're all saying. But I seem to remember it was all going to be over by Christmas four years ago.

Rawlings Jesus, is it four years now? There can't be many of us left that have been here from the kick-off. Wipers, Passion Dale, Ver Dun. Christ, Tom, how many do you think have died?

Atkins Too many, Dave, too many.

Rawlings I wonder why we've been the lucky ones. Well I know we've both had our fair share of wounds, never a Blighty one though. But look at you, somebody up there is looking out for you, Mr Tommy bloody Atkins, coming back from the dead.

Atkins My father liked Kipling; thought it was funny to call me Thomas back in 1892.

Rawlings What?

Atkins Never mind.

Sounds of movement can be heard offstage. Atkins pauses, listening

What's that?

Rawlings Dunno, Sarge.

Atkins Well go and look, man!

Rawlings exits for a moment, then rushes back in

Rawlings Oh my good God, Tom, it's only a bloody officer!

Atkins Shit, they didn't send any message.

Rawlings checks the field phone

Rawlings Dead, the wire must have been hit again.

Atkins Right, keep calm, let's have him in here, and follow my lead.

Rawlings sits and puts his head in his hands

Rawlings Oh Jesus, Mary and Joseph, we've bloody had it! What are we going to do, Tom, what are we going to do?

Atkins On your feet, Corporal Rawlings, ATTENTION! We've come through too much to lose it now. We are the survivors of the Third Essex's front line observation point. We are the last of the few. We are bloody bulletproof —

Rawlings } (together) Says so in King's Regulations.

Atkins

Atkins Right, get him in here now, we've only got fifteen minutes before we reckon Jerry will be over the top.

Rawlings Sarnt.

Rawlings exits. He returns a moment later with Lieutenant Hargreaves

Atkins stands to attention

Hargreaves Stand easy, Sergeant.

Atkins Sir.

Hargreaves I expect you're wondering why I'm here tonight, Sergeant.

Atkins Been a while since we've had an officer up here with us, sir. Nobody with you, sir?

Hargreaves No. I'm afraid a whizz bang got a little too close in the main line and Private Stanley died of wounds less than an hour ago. He was my batman, and a fine fellow. (*To Cpl Rawlings*) Sufficient firewood up here, Corporal?

Rawlings Er — yes, sir, thank you, sir.

Hargreaves Well be a bloody hero and heat up some tea with some of it would you, there's a good chap. One sugar please. Oh and you'd better get the sergeant a cup too.

Rawlings Sir.

Rawlings exits

Hargreaves It is Sergeant Atkins, isn't it?

Atkins Sir.

Hargreaves Is it really "Tommy Atkins"?

Atkins It is, sir.

Hargreaves Did you know that Rudyard Kipling had written a poem about you?

Atkins About me, sir? No, sir.

Hargreaves Well not about you personally Sergeant, but then I don't suppose you did a lot of English Literature at school.

Atkins No, sir.

Hargreaves Ah well, there we have it I suppose. I rather liked Kipling — would have been part of my course at Cambridge. But then that doesn't count for too much out here, does it?

Atkins If you say so, sir.

Hargreaves But we digress, Sergeant. I was telling you why I have risked life and limb to journey to the most forward position in the whole of the front line. It is to see you, Sergeant.

Atkins Me, sir?

Hargreaves Yes, Sergeant, I have a message for you from Field Marshal Haig.

Atkins For me, sir?

Hargreaves Yes, sir, for you, sir. Well not directly from the old man himself, but certainly from the general staff. (*He produces a letter. Reading*) "Sergeant Thomas Atkins of His Majesty's Third Essex Battalion. In recognition of outstanding courage and leadership

whilst being in sole command of Forward Observation Point Number 435 on the Western Front, and while facing prolonged attack from superior enemy strength for over four weeks, you are to be awarded the Military Medal.” It goes on a bit about how the enemy losses have been considerable, and ours minimal. Blah de blah... and how you never even thought of abdicating responsibility by asking for an officer to replace Captain Jennings after he was killed ... etc., etc. Well, there we have it, signed with the grateful thanks of Lord Haig, or at least one of his adjutants. How does that feel, Sergeant Atkins MM?

Atkins Permission to sit down, sir?

Hargreaves Of course, old man, and may I be the first to offer my congratulations. (*He shakes Atkins' hand*)

Rawlings enters with two mugs of tea

Atkins sits, looking dazed

Rawlings Excuse me, sir, but here's your tea and one for the sarnt. I took the liberty of putting a little drop of rum in, sir, to ward off the cold for your journey.

Hargreaves Journey, Corporal?

Rawlings Oh yes, sir, gets a bit hairy round here soon. Expecting another big push from Fritz, sir. Begging pardon, sir, is Sarnt Atkins all right? He's gone a bit pale, sir.

Hargreaves Sergeant Atkins has just received news of a long overdue recognition. He is to be awarded the Military Medal. And if this post is under imminent attack then I rather think I should be inspecting the men. A few words of encouragement from an officer can mean a lot, Corporal, you should know that.

Atkins No, sir, the Corporal's right, this is no place for you, sir. We're old hands at this. The boys and me will be fine, sir. Best thing you can do is report back to HQ, and tell them all's well at 435 and we're proud to be fighting for King and country, sir. The wire's down again I'm afraid, but I can send Corporal Rawlings to escort you back to the main line, sir. Bit of a shock about the medal, sir, just not sure I deserve it.

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