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DESERT HIGHWAY

A Play in Two Acts
and One Interlude

by

J. B. PRIESTLEY

SAMUEL FRENCH LIMITED
LONDON

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ISBN 978-0-573-11654-4

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DESERT HIGHWAY

Produced at the Playhouse, London, in March, 1944, with the following cast of characters :—

(In the order of their appearance.)

TROOPER LITYDD HUGHES	<i>W. Emlyn James.</i>
TROOPER GEORGE WICK	<i>Peter Tuddenham.</i>
TROOPER ("KNOCKER") ELVIN	<i>Stanley Rose.</i>
CORPORAL PHILLIP DONNINGTON	<i>John Wyse.</i>
TROOPER HERBERT SHAW	<i>George Cooper.</i>
SERGEANT BEN JOSEPH	<i>Stephen Murray.</i>

The Members of the Cast are serving Soldiers.

Directed by MICHAEL MACOWAN.

Technical advice on R.A.C. procedure by Major Harry Barker, R.T.R.

Décor by George Ramon.

SYNOPSIS OF SCENES

ACT I.—During the present war. Evening.
Interval of ten minutes.

INTERLUDE.—The same place, about the year 703 B.C.
Interval of ten minutes.

ACT II.—During the present war. Next morning.

The Scene is a hollow near an old Highway in the Syrian Desert, where—it is assumed for the purpose of this play—a campaign is being fought.

NOTE BY THE AUTHOR

This play was specially written for the Army and has been presented to it as a small tribute from a soldier of the last war to the soldiers of this one.

Although it has some humour in it—or at least, I hope you will find it has—it is essentially a serious play, because, after all, war is a very serious business. The central theme of the play is also to my mind, the central theme of our whole war effort.

The two Acts that take place during the present war need no explanation, but I must say something about the middle Act, which I have called an Interlude. Here you see the same place in the Syrian Desert over two thousand six hundred years ago. I chose this particular time because it was a time of confusion and war and suffering, like ours, when the powerful Assyrian Empire, which was really a vast military organisation not unlike Hitler's Germany, was invading and looting and burning its way throughout the Middle East, and also because this was the time of the great Hebrew prophets, such as Isaiah, whose words are still alive to-day. Many of you may find this part of the play strange and remote and therefore perhaps not very interesting, but I want you to try to see what I am getting at in this Interlude, if only because it sets the two modern scenes in relief, against the long perspective of world history, and, if it does nothing else, it reminds us that men have been fighting, wondering, suffering, hoping, for thousands of years, just as we are doing to-day. History shows us mankind as a long, long procession of brothers for ever losing and finding and losing again their essential brotherhood. It is our turn now to make a supreme effort to find that brotherhood, and this play is a small contribution to that great task. I hope you will enjoy it.

J. B. PRIESTLEY.

NOTES ON THE CHARACTERS

SERGEANT JOSEPH is a well-built, thoughtful Jew of the best type, aged about thirty. His ascendancy over the other men is due to his personality rather than to his rank; he has no Jewish accent, but speaks as an ordinary London secondary schoolboy would speak. He is a sensitive fellow, but very virile.

CORPORAL PHILLIP DONNINGTON is a public school and university man, also about thirty. He ought to have a commission but cannot be bothered and does not want any responsibility. Is the kind of educated man who wanders from job to job, and rather likes low company and probably drinks too much in civil life. Indifferent and cynical. Preferably of rather slight physique.

“KNOCKER” ELVIN is a Cockney of the Cockneys. Old enough to have fought in the last war. Old soldier. Does anything in civil life. Ought to be a sergeant at least but prefers to be a private. Physically and mentally, very tough. But temperamental.

HERBERT SHAW is a hefty, solemn West Riding working-class type, in his late twenties. Slow and stubborn. Speaks with marked Yorkshire accent.

ILTYDD HUGHES is a dark, quick Welshman, in his early thirties, very temperamental. Very Welsh in accent and manner and general outlook.

GEORGE WICK is a fresh-faced country lad, easily the baby of the party, with something very young and innocent and pleasantly foolish about him. About twenty. Preferably should speak with something like a Gloucestershire accent, but any not too marked rural accent will do, so long as it is not North-country or Welsh.

DESERT HIGHWAY

ACT I

The SCENE is a hollow near an old highway in the Syrian Desert.

The setting can be more or less elaborate, according to the circumstances of production. These notes assume a full stage and ordinary theatrical equipment.

In the distance, nothing but sky can be seen.

In the foreground, running from R. to L., is a long low ridge of rocks and sand (see Ground Plan at the end of the book) of varying levels. These rocks can be sat upon, and also mounted at various points (as indicated in the script) to the ridge proper, the basis of which is a central rostrum with a ramp at either end leading down to stage level.

Prominent in the ridge, at L.C., is a piece of worn, carved stone, less than a foot high, suggesting a buried stone monument or idol of some kind. Near it, a hump of rock which is frequently used as a seat by some of the characters.

The total impression is that of a harsh desert.

At the opening of this Act there is a hard, bright evening light.

On the R., partially hidden, is a Grant tank. It is not necessary that the actors should be seen getting in or coming out of it, but it must be possible for them to enter and exit both above and below it.

On the L., down stage, is a small desert tent, the opening of which faces slightly up R., so that anybody going into the tent can leave the stage unseen by the audience.

Various equipment—blankets, ground sheets, etc., has already been brought out of the tank, suggesting that the men intend to spend the night there.

Other properties, and their positions, are described in the Property Plot.

All the men wear desert clothes, and though deeply sun-burned, look dusty, tired and short of sleep.

When the CURTAIN rises, HUGHES and WICK are kneeling to R. of the tent. HUGHES, R. of WICK, is holding open a sandbag while the latter fills it with a shovel from a pile of sand nearby.

HUGHES. So I said to myself—I said—"Itydd Hughes," I said, "you are going to have bad luck this time," I said.

WICK. I don't believe you can tell if you're going to have bad luck.

HUGHES. Certainly you can tell—if you have the gift. My grandmother had the gift—she was terrible. So was my Uncle Thomas. (*He rises, and goes R. to the tank, selects a sandbag from the pile, and returns to WICK.*)

WICK (*placing the filled bag in front of the tent*). I've got an Uncle Thomas. (*He returns to HUGHES, L.C.*) Runs a baker's and confectioner's in Moreton-on-the-Marsh.

HUGHES (*holding open the fresh bag*). It's not a business I would care to be in—baking. Gets you up too early in the morning.

WICK (*busy filling the bag*). You have to get up early on a farm too. I was used to it.

HUGHES (*rather proudly*). I have worked on a farm. It belonged to my cousin—in Mid-Wales. I went there for my health when I was seventeen. "An outdoor life for you, my boy," they said. "Yes, an outdoor life." So I had an outdoor life. And now I'm having another outdoor life. (*He rises, and takes the sandbag to the tent, kneeling to set it in place.*)

(*WICK rises, moves up the rocks to the rostrum, and looks round as if trying to see into the distance. He pauses, and then turns to HUGHES.*)

WICK. I say—Taffy—— (*He hesitates.*)

HUGHES (*rising to his feet*). Whatever you are going to say, Georgie—don't call me Taff. I don't like it. Hughes—or Mister Hughes as it often was in Civvy Street—or Iltydd—I don't mind. I don't care if you call me nothing at all. But not Taff. It sounds like Elvin—and I don't like the man. (*He turns up to the rock up c.*)

WICK. Okay, sorry.

HUGHES (*moving to WICK and sits on the edge below and to L. of WICK*). But you were going to ask me something, I think, Georgie—eh?

WICK (*dropping his voice—crouching*). That's right. But I was only going to ask—d'you think we're all right here?

HUGHES (*flustered*). All right here? Certainly we're all right here—I suppose. (*From dubiousness now to alarm.*) Why shouldn't we be all right? Nothing wrong with us, is there? The tank's broken down—temporarily, I suppose, quite temporarily—but we've plenty of rations and water—and we can have a nice little rest. All right? Certainly—we're all right.

WICK (*who catches the final tone of doubt*). Sergeant Joseph knows all about it, doesn't he?

HUGHES. Of course he does. He's one of the *very* best.

(*Enter ELVIN R. from below the tank. He carries a Bren gun box, and moves towards L. WICK climbs down to the stage to help him.*)

ELVIN (*boisterously, as they carry the box to L.C.*). Got the ol' tent up, eh? Good job your mother doesn't know about this little packet, Georgie. Fed up, mucked up, an' far from 'ome—that's us.

(*They put the gun box down L.C., just below the ledge of rock.*)

HUGHES (*indignantly*). Why do you talk to him like that?

(*He comes down from the ledge to C. of the stage R. of WICK.*)

ELVIN. What's the matter with you, Lloyd George?

HUGHES (*furiously*). I'm telling you, Knocker Elvin—

ELVIN (*angry now*). Don't call me Knocker. Only my chinas—like young Georgie 'ere—call me Knocker—see?—any little Welsh mucker can't call me Knocker. As soon as the Sarge tells me oo's in this bleedin' party, I says, "For Gord's sake leave Taffy out," I says—" 'cos 'e'll bring a packet, 'e will. First thing yer knows, Sarge," I says, "something'll break down or get mucked up, just mark my bleedin' words," I says. An' 'ere we are.

VOICE OF SERGEANT JOSEPH (*from inside the tank*). Knocker!

ELVIN (*calling*). Yes, Sergeant? (*He moves to R.C.*)

VOICE OF JOSEPH (*sharply*). We're hungry. Get cracking.

ELVIN (*calling*). Ready when you are, Sergeant. (*To WICK.*) 'Ere, give me a 'and, Georgie.

(*WICK crosses R.*)

(*They go out R behind the tank. HUGHES watches them go with marked distaste, and messes about, tidying up the equipment for a moment, placing water-cans in the tent. DONNINGTON enters, as from the tank.*)

DONNINGTON. That's the quietest radio set I ever listened to. (*Sitting on the low rock R.C.*) You can't even catch a crooner.

(*He produces a packet of cigarettes. HUGHES comes nearer and stares at them. DONNINGTON looks up and sees him.*)

All right, you'll be giving yourself eyestrain in a minute. Here you are.

(*He tosses him a cigarette. They light up.*)

HUGHES. I am very much obliged to you, Corporal Donnington. Very much obliged to you.

DONNINGTON (*ironical, but not unfriendly*). Don't mention it, Trooper Hughes, don't mention it.

HUGHES. I have sometimes thought it would be much better not to smoke at all—(*He sits on the lower ledge C. stage to L. of DONNINGTON*) like young Georgie—because then if I didn't smoke at all, I wouldn't miss it if I had nothing to smoke—if you see what I mean, Corporal.

DONNINGTON. No difficulty at all in following that thought. I feel the same about whisky. If you'd never had it, you'd never miss it. And anyhow, I could never really afford it.

Born too late. My father had all the luck—except when he produced me. Ever have any trouble with your father, Hughes ?

HUGHES (*rather startled*). Oh—no—no trouble at all. He was very nice, my father. But he's dead now.

DONNINGTON. So is mine, only he doesn't know it.

HUGHES (*startled again*). But—if he was dead—

DONNINGTON. No, don't thrash it out. Leave it.

HUGHES (*solemnly*). No, I see now what you mean, Corporal. You know, I have often thought you are a bitter man.

DONNINGTON. Yes, yes—a cynical type.

HUGHES. I think you have had some trouble with a woman.

DONNINGTON. I think so too. Matter of fact, I saw her last week.

HUGHES (*astounded*). You saw her ? But how could you see her ?

DONNINGTON. Captain Fawcett—I knew him slightly before the war—let me look at an old copy of the "Tatler" he had. She was in. Doing something nice and fancy for the Red Cross—for our gallant boys overseas. You're one of our gallant boys overseas, you know. How d'you feel ?

HUGHES. I should like very much to be at home hearing about it on the wireless.

DONNINGTON. Let me get back and I won't listen to it on the wireless. I've had enough listening on *this* wireless—and hearing nothing. Which means that nobody knows where we are, and we don't know where anybody else is.

HUGHES. The recce planes can spot us.

DONNINGTON. Yes, but whose recce planes ? The wrong lot may spot us first. However, it's no use worrying about that.

HUGHES. No, I was saying to young Georgie that we have a good man, one of the very best, in Sergeant Joseph.

DONNINGTON. Yes, that's our only bit of luck. It might have been that fool Stanners, or that belly-ache—Nash. Ben Joseph's a bit too solemn for my taste, but he does know his stuff.

HUGHES. Certainly, one of the very best. And yet I heard Elvin calling him a teapot.

DONNINGTON. That's all right. Knocker's a real Cockney and uses the old rhyming slang. "Teapot" is short for "teapot lid," and that's rhyming slang for "Yid." In other words, Knocker's only saying in his elaborate way that our sergeant is a Jew. That's why he takes this war so seriously, because he's a Jew. I might do the same myself if I were a Jew.

HUGHES. There are some Jews in my town, but they weren't like the sergeant—very different they are.

DONNINGTON. Well, there are all kinds of Jews, y'know—fat and thin, rich and poor, noisy ones and quiet ones, some in the

front line, some in the Black Market—like the rest of us. Only, perhaps, a bit tougher.

HUGHES (*seriously*). It is a great pleasure to me to listen to an educated man like yourself, Corporal. Cambridge no doubt?

DONNINGTON. Oxford, if we must mention it.

HUGHES (*moving nearer to DONNINGTON*). My cousin Aneurin is studying at the University of Wales—at Bangor.

DONNINGTON. He's probably in "Itma" by this time. Were you with us when Ben Joseph—he was only a corporal then—won the middleweight championship of the two armoured divisions for us?

HUGHES. No, but I heard of it. Both Elvin and Shaw have told me all about it.

DONNINGTON. They wanted to give him a job in Cairo, just to keep him boxing, but he turned it down. In fact, he said he'd never do any more fighting—except the military kind. He got a bit solemn after that. But he's all right.

(*Enter SHAW, as from the tank. He is very dirty.*)

SHAW (*indicating the tank*). Bloody 'opeless. (*He sits down heavily on a box in front of the tank.*)

DONNINGTON (*mockingly*). Our 'Erbert from Ossett—our sweet little ray of sunshine!

SHAW. Well, if it's bloody 'opeless, what's good o' saying it isn't? It'll take lads in t'workshops all ther time to get her goin' again.

HUGHES (*rises and moves down L.C.*). What's happened to her?

SHAW. Everything's 'appened. To start wi', steering-box is a proper muck-up. There was something wrong wi' yon tank when we took 'er over. I said so from t'start, didn't I, Corporal?

DONNINGTON. Certainly, Herbert. Ever since I've known you, you've been passing on bad news—and enjoying it. Are they all like you in Ossett?

SHAW (*grimly*). Ah don't know—but Ah wish Ah wor back to find out. An' Ah could ha' been reserved if Ah'd gone t'engine-room at Ackroyd's—same as me father said—but o' course Ah took no notice.

DONNINGTON. Is your father like you, Herbert?

SHAW (*seriously*). Oh no, me father's a more serious sort o' chap. An' me grandfather's more serious still.

DONNINGTON. He must be carved out of granite.

SHAW. He's a big man at t'chapel, me grandfather is.

HUGHES. So was mine.

SHAW. Ay, but it's diff'rent up ahr way.

DONNINGTON. If ever I get out of this, I must have a look at Ossett.

SHAW. Ay, but we're not aht of it yet. Sergeant's trying t'wireless again.

(HUGHES sits on the lowest ledge of rock below the "monument.")

DONNINGTON. I couldn't get a thing out of it.

SHAW. Eee—Ah'm 'ungry.

DONNINGTON (*rising*). We'll be eating in a minute, but don't think too much about it. We'll have to go easy on the rations.

SHAW (*aghast*). What for?

DONNINGTON. Because we're stuck here and can't get away, and it may be a few days before anybody finds us. So work that out, Herbert. (*Climbing to the top of the ramp.*)

(ELVIN and WICK now appear with food and tea, from behind the tank, and place the food on the Bren gun box, L.C. The others get ready to feed. SHAW moves to R.C. DONNINGTON walks down the ramp towards L. ELVIN begins dishing out the food, throughout the following dialogue. After WICK has put the food down, he sits below the Bren gun box.)

ELVIN. Well, 'ere it is, chummies, what there is of it. An' don't blame me if yer 'ear it rattle inside, 'cos the Sarge tells me to cut it down—see? An' yer can use yer common about that, Yorky, an' stop lookin' as if it's my muckin' fault we're abaht two hundred flamin' long miles from the Quarter-bloke an' another two hundred from the nearest Naffy.

(As SHAW replies, DONNINGTON moves from the ramp to L.C. He tastes the tea and then sits down by the tent.)

SHAW (*gloomily*). Proper muck-up. (*He hands his mug to ELVIN.*)

ELVIN. Go orn, Yorky. (*Filling the mug and handing it to SHAW.*) You blokes ought to 'ave 'ad some o' the seran we 'ad in the last war, when there wasn't this Lord Whoozit makin' up a nice tin 'o this an' a nice tin o' that for the boys (*WICK hands down the tin with the food*) when they gives yer biscuit an' bully, bully an' biscuit till yer teeth was wurn dahn an' yer bleedin' at the gums—iron rations 'alf the muckin' time, an' iron rations was iron all right them days. You blokes is livin' in Lyons Corner 'Ouse now only yer don't know it.

(SHAW takes his mug and food to R., below the tank.)

WICK. I went to one of them once. There was a band playing. (*He sits below the Bren gun box, facing DONNINGTON.*)

ELVIN. I'll bet there was, Georgie boy. (*As HUGHES gets his mug and spoon from the tent and kneels in front of the tea bucket to get his tea.*) An' some nice little bints to dish out the chow, eh? Well, take yer mind right off it, Georgie. (*Calling.*) It's

WAIT, THERE'S MORE!

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