

## **'TIL THE BOYS COME HOME**

**SETTING:** Fall 1917, onboard a New York City subway car

**CHARACTERS:**

ALICE SHERIDAN - a fashionable, pregnant woman in her late 20s.

MABEL KLINE - a professionally dressed woman in her late 20s.

*(The scene rises with ALICE and MABEL out of time, singing to the audience as they slowly pass through the train car to their opening positions.)*

**BOTH:**     *Over there, over there,  
Send the word, send the word over there  
That the Yanks are coming, the Yanks are coming  
The drums rum-tumming everywhere.  
So prepare, say a prayer,  
Send the word, send the word to beware.  
We'll be over, we're coming over  
And we won't come back till it's over over there!*

*(The rattling sounds of a NYC subway car are heard softly underscoring the entire play. ALICE sits near the center of the car, reading a newspaper with a purse on her lap. MABEL enters carries something wrapped in a black cloth/bag. She sits down on an empty seat across from ALICE, not acknowledging her, yet subtly glancing around before slowly revealing what was under the cloth: a suffragist "lapboard" sign which reads: "Give mother the vote! Our food, our health, our play, our homes, our school, our work are all regulated by men's votes. Think it over and Give Mother the Vote!" - see page 8 for original historical image.)*

**ALICE:** *(Notices the sign. Takes a moment to look around to see if anyone else is going to say something. Finally, flustered:)* How can you do that right now? Our country is at war! There are good men dying over there and all you suffragists care about are yourselves!

**MABEL:** Ward & Gow refuses to display our advertisements on these trains. If they won't run our ads, we simply have to run them ourselves! And this does affect you too, ma'am. Every woman here, in fact. Those boys are fighting for democracy around the world, *(announcing to the car)* well what's more democratic than everyone having an equal right to vote? *(she encourages people to cheer along with her.)*

**ALICE:** *(disgusted, trying to subdue her)* It's just so inappropriate! You silly women parading around with your banners and sashes. What's next, trousers?! How unladylike. Show some respect, some support for our troops.

**MABEL:** *(putting down sign)* Well, if you must know, I'm actually on my way right now to apply to fill in as a conductorette on this very subway...

**ALICE:** *(gasps, horrified, shaking her head)* Well I never...!

**MABEL:** Well who else do you suppose will do it? Half the force is overseas and they need people to fill the jobs! I happen to be from a subway family: my father was a motorman, I grew up on these trains... *(proudly)* in a way, I feel like this *is* my duty to my country. *(a beat, referring to the sharp-edged, broken rattan seats)* I just hope my stockings survive the trip...

**ALICE:** *(rolls eyes, begrudgingly conceding)* Ugh. Well. I suppose these cars could use a *lady's* touch... *(after a moment. Shaking her head)* I apologize. I'm Alice. Alice Sheridan.

**MABEL:** *(She inspects her. Then, cautiously shaking her hand)* Mabel Kline...

**ALICE:** I'm sorry to be so brash, it's just, the world, there's just so much happening. You see my husband is overseas fighting in Paris and—

**MABEL:** It's quite alright, really, you don't have to explain. We're all just trying to get along these days. *(ALICE sheepishly, apologetically looks away. They sit quietly for a moment. MABEL feels bad for her. After a beat.)* Say, would you like to hear something funny? I was at a rally in Washington a few weeks ago, and I met a woman who had traveled all the way in from Iowa, and—oh... I'm sorry, I'm such a chatterbox, your husband, you were saying...?

**ALICE:** *(laughing)* No, please! Do go on!

**MABEL:** Well, her family lives on a farm out there. Cornfields and cows... her son was actually just stationed in Paris too, like your husband. That's what reminded me... only he's never seen a croissant let alone anything else that goes on in a big city like Paris or New York. All the lights, all the people... She told me of a conversation she had with her husband...

**SONG: HOW YA GONNA KEEP 'EM DOWN ON THE FARM**

**MABEL:** *"Reuben, Reuben, I've been thinking," said his wifey dear.*

*"Soon when all is peaceful and calm,  
the boys will head right back to the farm."*

*Mister Reuben started winking and slowly rubbed his chin.*

*He pulled his chair up close to Mother and he asked her with a grin:*

*How ya gonna keep 'em down on the farm, after they've seen Par-ee?*

*How ya gonna keep 'em away from Broadway?*

*Jazzin' around, and painting the town?*

**ALICE:** *How ya gonna keep 'em away from harm?*

*That's a mystery.*

**BOTH:** *They'll never want to see a rake or a plow,*

*And who the deuce can parley-vous a cow?*

*How ya gonna keep 'em down on the farm*

*After they've seen, After they've seen,*

*After they've seen Par-ee?*

*(they both collapse in laughter at the absurdity of the idea)*

**ALICE:** *(ramping down, sighing)* Well fortunately I don't have that problem... my husband is quite eager to come back home... *(she moves her purse from her lap)*... we're expecting.

**MABEL:** *(excited)* Oh! *(Then realizing what her sign says and everything she's been saying)*

Oh... I'm sorry... I, I didn't realize...

**ALICE:** It's alright. *(pause)* I just don't know how I'm supposed to feel. I know I *should* be supportive of the war, but things certainly aren't any easier without him here. The looks I get alone in public... And then I think, well... what if he... *(she catches herself, quietly, shaking her head and referring to her belly)* I don't know how could I raise him on my own... *(she thinks, growing more upset)* How can other mothers support this? How can anyone just send their son away to fight?

**SONG: I DIDN'T RAISE MY BOY TO BE A SOLDIER**

**ALICE:** *Ten million soldiers to the war have gone who may never return again.  
Ten million mothers' hearts must break for the ones who died in vain.*

**MABEL:** *(No!) [Side by side for justice, fighting through the tears.]  
[As women we'll show bravery not fear.]*

**ALICE:** *I [will not] raise my boy to be a soldier,  
[I'll bring] him up to be my pride and joy.  
Who dares to place a musket on his shoulder,  
To shoot some other mother's darling boy?*

**BOTH:** *Let nations arbitrate their future troubles,  
It's time to lay the sword and gun away.  
There'd be no war today, if mothers all would say,  
"I [will not] raise my boy to be a soldier."*

**ALICE:** *(softer) There'd be no war today, if mothers all would say,  
"I [will not] raise my boy to be a soldier."*

**MABEL:** ...sounds like you've got a cause worth fighting for, too. A call to arms... for mothers?

**ALICE:** *(she chuckles, yeah right, but then pauses to think. It clicks.)* You know, maybe you're right. Maybe I *should* get... *(her face drops, suddenly realizing, completely unprepared)* WHAT IF IT'S A GIRL!?

*(They look at each other for a moment and laugh, the tension between them immediately gone.)*

**MABEL:** *(laughing)* Well all the more reason! Think of it as an investment in her future. Votes for future women too!

**ALICE:** But what change can you or I really make on any of this? This war... It's all so much bigger than us. I feel so helpless at times...

**MABEL:** I struggle with it too. It's hard to feel patriotic when our President *says* he's for democracy, yet still stands so firmly in its way at home. But it won't last forever. It can't be. We have to stay strong for ourselves... and for them.

### **SONG: KEEP THE HOMEFIRES BURNING**

**ALICE:**     *They were summoned from the hillside, they were called in from the glen,  
And the country found them ready at the stirring call for men.*

**BOTH:**     *Let no tears add to their hardships as the soldiers pass along,  
And although your heart is breaking make it sing this cheery song:*

*Keep the Home Fires Burning, while your hearts are yearning,*

*Though your lads are far away they dream of home.*

*There's a silver lining, through the dark clouds shining,*

*Turn the dark cloud inside out 'til the boys come home.*

*Turn the dark cloud inside out 'til the boys come home.*

**ALICE:** You're right. We have to keep our heads up. We have to keep moving...

**MABEL:** (*emboldened*) We have to take up the reigns! My father always said, "Mabel, if you want to succeed, you've gotta be a tough cookie. You gotta be strong, brave, and not afraid of some hard work." ... and our work has just begun! You see, that's why I decided to apply for—OH! Heavens, I almost forgot, my interview! (*she looks out the window*) Oh, thank goodness, Worth Street, I don't want to be late! (*she starts to dash out of the car*)

**ALICE:** (*calling after her*) And sweet!

**MABEL:** (*she stops and turns*) What?

**ALICE:** Well if you're a cookie, you've got to be sweet too. With all that hard work ahead of you, don't forget to smile. After all, who could resist a sweet... (*very deliberate*) lady... subway conductor. (*She smiles. She has come around to the idea*) Good luck!

(*MABEL smiles and nods at her then runs off the train. ALICE smiles and looks down, then realizes MABEL has left her sign behind. She grabs it and calls after her:*)

**ALICE:** Oh! Your sign! You left... your sign... *(a pause, she's gone)*

*(ALICE sighs then starts to inspect the sign. After a moment, in her head [prerecorded] we hear MABEL singing at first, then ALICE [also prerecorded] joins in with building intensity as she decides to prop the sign up on her own lap, proudly.)*

**MABEL:** So prepare... say a prayer...

*Send the word, send the word to beware...*

**BOTH:** We'll be over, we're coming over,

*And we won't come back till it's over, over there!*

*(The rattling sounds of the subway grow louder and the lights fade out.)*

**END OF PLAY**



*"Give Mother the Vote!" National Woman Suffrage Publishing Co. Inc, 1915*