

EVEN IF WE ARE AT WAR

By Isobel Andrews

Alec came into the room just as the announcer had finished announcing. Alec saw that there were fruit squares for afternoon tea, and said hooray, fly ceme-teries, and took one in each hand, and went and stood in the middle of the sitting-room floor. And started to talk. Alec was like that. He liked talking and he liked fruit squares, and he liked standing in the middle of the sitting-room floor so that nobody could help but see him. He hadn't heard just what record the wireless was playing but he felt quite capable of saying something about it all the same.

Even if we are at war, said Alec, with his mouth full of fruit square, I don't see why they should keep on playing Land of Hope and Glory all the time.

Mum poured out his tea and sighed, and the wireless kept on playing something that she really wasn't listening to . . . even if we are at war . . . she had heard no other words all week. She remembered the last time so well.

Sewing circles and bandages and getting up concerts, and the long brown line marching along the Quay and Tipperary and the Rose of No Man's Land. . . . Not again surely . . . not again, that suspense, that keyed up feeling, that sense of impotence and unreality. . . .

It's not as though it was going to help us any, said Alec, as he took another piece of fruit square and reached out for his tea. Something bright's what we want. We know all about the Empire and what we're in for . . . we're going through with it, but we're realists this time. We know we don't hate the German people just as we hope they don't hate us . . . so for heaven's sake let's be sensible and if we must have music have something cheerful. Alec, who had no ear at all, and who had been put out of the School Choir not so very long ago because he insisted on singing It Aint Gonna Rain No mo No mo when the rest of the class had been learning Si-i-lent Night Ho-o-ly Night was really no authority and inclined to be bitter, but that didn't stop him stating his opinions pretty freely all the same.

Something more cheerful . . . Bruce Bairns-father and the jokes about Bill Massey and his boots . . . and all the little flags you used to buy and the games the children played . . . you be a German—no you. . . .

Dad came in. He was in his stocking feet because he had been gardening and had left

off his gardening boots at the kitchen door. Good heavens he said of all the things to play at a time like this you'd think they'd have more sense . . . we don't need all that old stuff to tell us what we're up against. We'll get along without having God Defend



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New Zealand every day in the week. We'll defend her all right if we have to, but why the heck do they keep on nagging at us?

If we have to . . . those lists in the papers and Mrs. Summer's face when she knew Bill wouldn't be coming home again. Bill was only a year older than Alec but wild. . . . Not Alec . . . surely not Alec. . . . But why not? If Mrs. Summers had had to lose Bill why should she not lose Alec? There was nothing about her that made her different, apart from the rest . . . to be relieved of any loss . . . but all the same . . . not Alec . . . surely. . . .

Elizabeth came in. I've joined up with the ambulance she said. Everybody's doing it so

why shouldn't I? That's all right dear, said her mother if that's the way you feel. And Elizabeth said why on earth do they stick to the same old records? I'm sick of listening to the Last Rose of Summer. Last Rose of Summer he blowed, said Alec, its Land of Hope and Glory. Can't you hear it . . . it goes like this . . . and Alec tried to sing it . . . deedeede dee dee, and Elizabeth said Land of Hope and Glory doesn't go like that, and Elizabeth tried to sing it, and went on it's The Last Rose of Summer listen . . . dadada daa, and then Dad chipped in and said you're both off the track, its perfectly obvious they're playing God Defend New Zealand because anybody with half an ear could tell that only God Defend New Zealand went that way, you listen . . . dodododo dododo. . . .

And Bob came in and said, mum have you any spare bits of wood, I want to make a gun.

He wants to make a gun . . . a gun . . . not Bob . . . not Alec. . . .

Well, said Dad, finishing his tea, I'll get back to the land . . . better get a supply of carrots in, just in case . . . and he went out singing in a loud voice, dodododo dododo.

Alec said he was going down the road to have a chat with Tom Aitcheson, and Elizabeth said with Betty, you mean, and Alec said it's a wonder there's so many sticky beaks in this world and went out singing deedeede dee dee.

And Elizabeth went to her room. As she went she took a table napkin off the sideboard and when she got in front of her mirror she made it into a little crisp white cap and thought she would look pretty good as a nurse going up and down the wards with a sweet smile on her face and her long cool hands bringing comfort and peace to the men.

Mum sat still and finished her tea.

On the knees of the Gods . . . on the knees of the Gods. . . .

And as she was clearing the dishes away the announcer announced that she had just been listening to The Lost Chord composed by Sir Arthur Sullivan and played by Sydney Torch on the organ.