

Kipps Yes! *Advice!*

Actor It sounds more like reproval.

Kipps I promise you that as the day goes on it's likely to sound more so.

Actor May I just say — it is not a *performance* that I wish to give. No. I think we are at a misunderstanding in that respect. I wish to — speak it. No more. For my family, only. For those who need to know. I am not a performer — I have no pretensions to be — nor inclination — but — those terrible things that happened to me — they must — I *have to* — let them be told. For my health and reason.

Kipps You say you're not a performer.

Actor Oh truly.

Kipps In your hand is a manuscript which, on estimate, will take five hours to read. If you, as an acknowledged non-performer, should stand before an audience, however friendly, and drone at them for longer than it takes to play *King Lear*, I trust you will be unsurprised if by the end of it they're either fast asleep or at your throat.

Actor Five hours?

Kipps At least.

Actor Good heavens. (*Pause*) I'd no idea — I — five hours? (*Pause. He slumps into a chair*) I cannot possibly. (*Pause. At length he looks up. Addressing Kipps*) It must be told. I cannot carry the burden any longer. *It must be told.*

Black-out. When the Lights return, the House Lights stay off. Kipps is now on the stage, with the manuscript. Kipps reads it rather well. A bit actorish, certainly, but with enthusiasm and skill. The Actor walks to the back of the theatre to listen

Begin

Kipps (*reading*) It was nine-thirty on Christmas Eve. As I opened my front door and stepped outside I smelled at once, and with a lightening heart, that there had been a change in the weather. All the previous week we had had thin chilling rain and a mist that lay low about the house and over the countryside. My spirits have for many years been excessively affected by the weather. But now the dampness and fogs had stolen away like thieves into the night, the sky was pricked over with stars and the full moon rimmed with a halo of frost. Upstairs, three children slept with stockings tied to their bedposts. There was something in the air that night. That my peace of mind was about to be disturbed, and memories awakened that I had thought forever dead, I had, naturally, no idea. That

I should ever again renew my acquaintance with mortal dread and terror of spirit, would have seemed at that moment impossible. I took a last look at the frosty darkness, sighed contentedly, and went in, to the happy company of my family. At the far end of the room stood the tree, candlelit and bedecked, and beneath it were the presents. There were vases of white chrysanthemums, and in the centre of the room a pyramid of gilded fruit and a bowl of oranges stuck all about with cloves, their spicy scent filling the air and mingling with the wood-smoke to be the very aroma of Christmas. I became aware that I had interrupted the others in a lively conversation. "We are telling ghost stories — just the thing for Christmas Eve!" And so they were — vying with each other to tell the horriest, most spine-chilling tale. They told of dripping stone walls in uninhabited castles and of ivy-clad monastery ruins by moonlight, of locked inner rooms and secret dungeons, dank charnel houses and overgrown graveyards, of howlings and shriekings, groanings and scuttlings. This was a sport, a high-spirited and harmless game among young people, there was nothing to torment and trouble me, nothing of which I could possibly disapprove. I did not want to seem a killjoy, old, stodgy and unimaginative. I turned my head away so that none of them should see my discomfiture. "And now it's your turn." "Oh no," I said, "nothing from me." "You must know at least one ghost story, everyone knows *one*." Ah, yes, yes, indeed. All the time I had been listening to their ghoulish, lurid inventions, the one thought that had been in my mind, and the only thing I could have said was "No, no, you have none of you any idea. This is all nonsense, fantasy, it is not like this. Nothing so blood-curdling and becreeped and crude — not so ... so laughable. The truth is quite other, and altogether more terrible. "I am sorry to disappoint you," I said. "But I have no story to tell!" And went quickly from the room and from the house. I walked in a frenzy of agitation, my heart pounding, my breathing short. I had always known in my heart that the experience would never leave me, that it was woven into my very fibres. Yes, I had a story, a true story, a story of haunting and evil, fear and confusion, horror and tragedy. But it was not a story to be told around the fireside on Christmas Eve.

Pause. Kipps looks out to the Actor at the back of the theatre

And then I thought you might recite the piece from *Hamlet*.
Actor *Hamlet?*