

# Old Soldier

a One Act Play

by Rob Davis

this play is dedicated to the memory of my friend Jon Pittam,  
15/9/1942 – 4/11/2002



No Royalties are required beyond a couple of free tickets for a performance!

First Performed by Nova Theatre Club of Newport, Shropshire, on Sunday November 10<sup>th</sup>  
2002 at Church Aston Village Hall, Shropshire, UK, with the following cast:-

Tom Masters	Fred Skelton
Nurse Owen	Jill Stretton
Bill Fletcher	Jonathan Vince
Jimmy Peters	Neil Crewe
Serjeant-Major Harding	Godfrey Spurr
Susan Adams	Fay Richards
Anne Masters	Sandy Davis
Dr Thomas	Paula Wharton

Directed by	Rob Davis
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## AWARDS

Wellington Festival the Belfrey Theatre, Wellington, Shropshire November 21 <sup>st</sup> - 24 <sup>th</sup> 2002 Adjudicator : Christine Hughes GODA One Act Play Section NOVA THEATRE CLUB	
Winner	One Act Play Section
Best Male Actor	Fred Skelton
Certificate of Merit (Acting)	Neil Crewe
Certificate of Merit (Acting)	Jon Vince
Certificate of Merit (Acting)	Fay Richards
Certificate of Merit (Author)	Rob Davis

*I will keep this page updated if awards are notified to me*

## *Author's Note*

This play was written especially with One Act Play Festivals in mind, in terms of running time, necessary stage props and furniture, etc. I have also tried to make the play suitable for the smaller Drama Group where numbers may not be great, or where some doubling-up of parts is necessary. For example, the very small part of Dr Thomas can be either male or female.

If male, he could be played by one of the actors taking the part of Peters, Fletcher, or Harding, with a suitable costume change.

Groups unable to obtain the two vintage rifles<sup>1</sup>, or make dummies, can simply not carry them, and if the pistol is not available, I am happy for groups to omit the references to them in the text. If the rifles are available, the actors playing Fletcher, Peters and Harding will need to learn some simple drill moves. Any Group wanting a photo or scan of the pistol, to make a dummy, may contact me.

However I have tried to include parts of varying scope, size, length of speech and so on, to suit players of differing abilities and experience, as well as giving each character an "highlight" section. There is also scope for "sound" and "effects" production and management.

## Scene

The living-room of a simple one-bedroom flat in an anonymous part of a large city. Although small, it is spotlessly clean and tidy with everything in straight lines and squares. There is a dining-table DL (preferably with drawers), dining-chairs tucked underneath; on top are two family-type photos, and a set of three Regimental photos. A TV set is DR. The main exit is CR and the kitchen exit is UL. A comfortable reclining type chair is set RC, with an adjacent small table.

## Time

The early 1980s. Mid afternoon.

## Characters : The Present

**Tom Masters** is an elderly old soldier, born in 1900, who falsified his age and fought in the First World War, being wounded several times; he worked in an engineering factory between the wars, rising to Works Foreman. During World War 2 he was in the Home Guard, becoming Corporal in his small unit. Post-war he returned to engineering and stayed with the same firm until he retired in the mid 1960s. He is now at the end of his life and during the course of the play he will face some of the people who had a significant impact on him. He

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<sup>1</sup> Try the local Army, Air Cadet or Sea Cadet unit, or theatrical costumiers. A real old soldier will probably be only too happy to demonstrate rifle (Short Magazine Lee Enfield, or SMLE) drill; try an appeal in the local newspaper. I have a computer AVI file of the rifle drill, please contact me if you would like a copy.

can be played by a much younger man, made-up to appear older, because he will interact with the people from his past.

**District Nurse Owen** is a friendly but no-nonsense lady who in her official capacity visits Tom regularly to ensure he is taking his medication and generally looking after himself. She can be of any age or background but should show maturity and experience in her job.

**Dr Thomas** is Tom's local GP. He or she can be any age.

## Characters : The Past

**Private Jimmy Peters** is one of Tom's platoon mates from when he first joined up in 1916. He was the same age as Tom, also having lied about his age. He is a typical working-class lad, used to life's rough and tumble. In the play he should appear to be in his late teens or early 20s.

**Private Bill Fletcher** is also a platoon mate from 1916, but older, anything up to his late 30s, the steady reliable type, better educated and more articulate than Peters.

**Serjeant-Major Harding** is the recruiting sergeant who turned a blind eye to young men like Tom and Jimmy lying about their ages. He is a veteran of the Egyptian and Boer War campaigns, stiff and straight, mindful of his Duty, but with a spark of humour. Note that in the First World War era, Serjeant is spelled with a **J**, not with a **G** as in the modern rank.

**Susan Adams** is a nurse from the military hospital at Brighton, 1917. She has an intense yet pleasant manner, capable, dependable. She should appear to be about 20.

**Anne Masters** is Tom's late wife, who was killed in a car crash about 10 years ago. She should be elderly, very motherish. She should be in her late 60s or 70s.

The recommended introduction music is a ballad titled "Will You Go To Flanders" and is played for the first verse only, about 45 seconds. This song was found on the internet as an MP3 file. Any DG wanting a copy can email me.

As the house lights dim, a brisk television racing commentary is heard over the sound system. The commentary should ideally contain the words "Haydock Park" as this is mentioned in the dialogue.

As the curtain rises, **Tom** is seen sitting in his recliner, restlessly fingering the basic-looking remote control for his television. His chairside table is within easy reach. **Nurse Owen** is moving about him and checking his stock of medication whilst Tom tries to point the remote control round her as she fusses round, ensuring his three pill bottles are ready on the table top, and organising them into order.

<b>Nurse Owen</b>	<i>(Looks at the remote control with interest)</i> I see your new toy is working well. What does it do?
<b>Tom</b>	It lets me change the volume and channel without having to get out of my chair, I'll show you, look. <i>(He increases the volume, swaps channels, and having returned to the racing, decreases the volume to what it was)</i>

<b>Nurse Owen</b>	<i>(Glances quickly at the television picture)</i> Marvellous what they can do these days, isn't it? And I'd say you've a bet on today.
<b>Tom</b>	<i>(Nods)</i> Haydock Park, the three thirty. I put five quid on Kitchener's Army, at three to one. Alfie down at the Legion said it was a dead cert.
<b>Nurse Owen</b>	<i>(Severely)</i> Five pounds! Alfie's never let you down in the past, has he?
<b>Tom</b>	Now then, woman, I don't need you fussing over my private life. You're welcome to look after my health, and thank you kindly for that, but as for the rest of me, I like a little flutter once in a while.
<b>Nurse Owen</b>	A <i>little</i> flutter ... I'm just worried about you on those stairs, next time the lift's out of order.
<b>Tom</b>	I can manage. Not like it's a major expedition. Have you about done with me for today?
<b>Nurse Owen</b>	Yes, I've just about done with you for today, provided that you don't forget the new set of tablets that Dr Thomas prescribed yesterday. Remember, it's one of the large blue ones after lunch, a small blue one at tea time, and then the yellow one after your meal.
<b>Tom</b>	<i>(Resignedly)</i> I won't forget. Big blue one, little blue one, yellow one.
<b>Nurse Owen</b>	Yellow one after the meal.
<b>Tom</b>	After the meal, I won't forget. Now, will you stop fussing? I'll be all right. I'm not helpless.
<b>Nurse Owen</b>	<i>(Brightly)</i> I just want to make sure that you're all right, that's all.
<b>Tom</b>	<i>(Aimes the remote control around her; mock crossly)</i> If you don't get out of my line of fire, I'll never see who won the three thirty.
<b>Nurse Owen</b>	You and your racing! <i>(Also mock seriously)</i> I bet you fall asleep in the middle of it, and forget to take that medication.
<b>Tom</b>	I'm fine, I tell you. Don't make such a fuss.
<b>Nurse Owen</b>	I'm supposed to be responsible for you. I shall catch it if anything happens to you, won't I?
<b>Tom</b>	I suppose so.
<b>Nurse Owen</b>	Shall I make you a cup of tea before I get off? The kettle's just boiled.
<b>Tom</b>	Only if there's a shot of rum in it.
<b>Nurse Owen</b>	Very funny. You know Dr Thomas won't let you have spirits.
<b>Tom</b>	Spirits? I've been drinking spirits since I was a lad -
<b>Nurse Owen</b>	- yes I know, since you fought Kaiser Bill in 1916.
<b>Tom</b>	I'm not ashamed of it. Anyway, it was 1917. I served my country, you know. Why is it unfashionable to be patriotic?
<b>Nurse Owen</b>	<i>(Not having an answer to that)</i> I'll go and make you your tea. Now remember, I'm not playing a game here, it's my job to look after your welfare.
<b>Tom</b>	<i>(Resignedly)</i> I suppose you're right.
<b>Nurse Owen</b>	Have you got it now? <i>(Points positively to each pill bottle in turn)</i> Blue, blue, meal, yellow. Big blue one first. <i>(Exits to the kitchen)</i>
<b>Tom</b>	<i>(Looks round to make sure she's gone)</i> I should coco. <i>(Lifts the pill bottles in turn and examines them carefully, putting them down awry)</i> Big blue one <i>(rattles first bottle)</i> little blue one <i>(rattles next bottle)</i> meal, yeller 'un <i>(rattles last bottle and sets them up in a straight line, as if on parade. Then does a double-take at the yellow one and peers closely at it)</i> Blimey, nitro-glycerine, that's explosive, isn't it? <i>(He puts it down again, with great care)</i>
<b>Nurse Owen</b>	<i>(Returns with a mug of tea for him; she places it on the chairside table, and plonks the yellow bottle back into its place in the line of bottles)</i> You won't

	go bang! It's for your heart. Ok then, I'm off. I'll be in again on Wednesday. You've got my number, ring me if you need anything special bringing in.
<b>Tom</b>	All right. Thank you, Nurse. <i>(Far away, as if suddenly remembering)</i> I knew a nurse once, right cracker she was, I don't mind telling you.
<b>Nurse Owen</b>	<i>(Having heard it all before)</i> Yes, yes, Sweetheart Susan, you told me. Now then, don't you nod off, or your tea'll go cold.
<b>Tom</b>	And then I'll never know who won the three thirty.
<b>Nurse Owen</b>	That's right, you won't.
<b>Tom</b>	I should coco. <i>(Drinks tea and uses the remote control, aims around her)</i> I've still got my marbles, you know. <i>(Sleepily, as racing commentary climaxes)</i> Ah, good! Kitchener's Army won the three thirty. That's fifteen quid I've made. I'll get down there tomorrow and get the cash. <i>(Archly)</i> Something for me to do in between taking the pills.
<b>Nurse Owen</b>	It's serious, you know! It's not a game! I'll just check I turned off the gas cooker. <i>(Exits to kitchen)</i>
<b>Tom</b>	<i>(Uses the remote control to turn off the television; sleepily)</i> You mean you'll just check I turned off the gas cooker. <i>(Pause)</i> It was just a game, a game. Kitchener made it sound like a game. <i>(He sleeps)</i>
<b>Pause before sound effects of marching feet and snatches of marching songs, shouted orders, etc can be heard off. Lights dim slightly.</b>	
<b>Enter Privates Peters and Fletcher, in World War One soldiers' uniform, laden with kit and both carrying rifles slung over their right shoulders. Throughout, Fletcher and Peters converse in a gentle double act of knockabout dialogue, as if they have been doing little else in the many years since 1917. As they enter, Fletcher is sloping along very casually and seeing this, Peters jabs him gently in the shoulder.</b>	
<b>Peters</b>	<i>(Laughing as he enters)</i> Left, right, left right, swing those arms, left right!
<b>Fletcher</b>	Leave it out, will you. Don't you ever get tired of playing the fool?
<b>Peters</b>	Life's a big joke, mate. If you don't laugh at it, well, you're a sad old bastard and no mistake.
<b>Fletcher</b>	And, if you can't take a joke -
<b>Peters</b>	- you shouldn't have joined!
<b><i>(They see Tom asleep)</i></b>	
<b>Peters</b>	<i>(Stands R of Tom)</i> Well, would you credit it! Is that who I think it is, Bill?
<b>Fletcher</b>	<i>(Stands L of Tom and peering at him)</i> I think you could be right, mate. Just a moment, he's got some pictures on that table over there. <i>(He walks L across the room and inspects the set of photos on the chairside table)</i> Yes, it is. Look at that, now.
<b>Peters</b>	<i>(Comes over to stand by the pictures)</i> Stap me, Bill. That's the whole bloody Platoon. <i>(He unslings his rifle and stands with it by his side)</i>  <i>(Examines the photo closely)</i> Look at that. All of us together outside that ramshackle old barn.
<b>Fletcher</b>	Yes, that's us all right, there we are, Church or Chapel, serving our Country.
<b>Peters</b>	<i>(Nods)</i> But we never questioned it, did we, Bill? The likes of you and me came straight from the factory or school and saw Kitchener's finger pointing at us. If you even paused to draw breath, you had some flapper giving you a white feather.

<b>Fletcher</b>	<i>(He unslings his rifle, propping it against the table and places the photo on the table next to the pill bottles)</i> Those were grim days, Jimmy. You forget the bad times as you get on, but it was grim all the same.
<b>Peters</b>	<i>(Defensively)</i> Grim right enough, but we managed to have some laughs none the less, didn't we?
<b>Fletcher</b>	<i>(Indicates Tom)</i> He's had his time, I reckon. <i>(Looks closely at Tom as he sleeps)</i> Ready for the off, what do you think?
<b><i>(Nurse Owen enters. She is not aware of the presence of Fletcher and Peters, and marches straight through the just-big-enough gap between them. As she fusses round Tom, she notices the picture on the table next to the bottles, picks it up curiously, clearly wondering how it came to be there; she shrugs and replaces it on the dining table.)</i></b>	
<b>Nurse Owen</b>	Now you just sit there and have a good sleep, and never mind about who won the three thirty at Sandown Park or wherever it was. <i>(She leans over him to check he is ok)</i>
<b>Fletcher</b>	<i>(Ogles and admires the view; clearly interested in the nurse)</i> Look at that now, the lucky blighter! Now that's what I call real home comfort!
<b>Peters</b>	Give over, will you! <i>(Pause)</i> You know it's no good.
<b>Fletcher</b>	I can look, can't I? No law against that? <i>(Heavily)</i> Ah, you're right. But when I was a lad ...
<b>Peters</b>	You've always been a lad, Bill. Then and now.
<b>Nurse Owen</b>	All right, Tom? I've leave you now, anything you need, like I said, you can ring me. <i>(She waits briefly for a reply, receives none, and smiles at Tom before she exits CR, jangling her car keys)</i>
<b>Peters</b>	Is it down to us do you think?
<b>Fletcher</b>	I reckon it is. <i>(He looks all round)</i> Nobody else about. Let's give it a go. <i>(He approaches Tom and nudges him several times; Tom wakes up)</i>
<b>Peters</b>	Look, mate! It's Bill and Jimmy, your old pals!
<b>Tom</b>	<i>(Not fully awake)</i> What?
<b>Peters</b>	Number Three Platoon, King's London Regiment, 1917! <i>(Picks up his rifle; drill sergeant voice)</i> Platoon, 'shun! <i>(Stamps to attention)</i> Slope <b>arms!</b> Pree-sent <b>arms!</b> <i>(He presents arms as if on parade)</i>
<b>Fletcher</b>	<i>(To Tom: resignedly)</i> Just ignore the silly old sod, Tom. He's always been a bit like that, you know, a bit too Regimental if you ask me.  <i>(Seeing that Peters is still stiffly standing at the 'present arms' position, he gives a sad shake of his head. To Peters, who obeys)</i> Slope – <b>arms!</b> Order – <b>arms!</b> Stand at - <b>ease!</b> Stand easy. <i>(Nods as Peters flawlessly obeys)</i>  <i>(Seeing that Tom is still puzzled)</i> Well don't you remember us, you daft ha'p'orth? Now there's a fine welcome, and no mistake. What's that photo there on the sideboard? <i>(He points, and then fetches the photo again and puts it into Tom's hand. Tom stares at the photo, then at Peters and Fletcher. Fletcher points to the figures on the photo and then at himself and Peters. Tom follows the indication incredulously and recognition dawns)</i>
<b>Tom</b>	Jimmy Fletcher? <i>(He sits upright in his chair)</i> Bill – Bill <i>(he struggles with the surname)</i>
<b>Peters</b>	Peters.
<b>Tom</b>	Jimmy Fletcher and Bill Peters?

<b>Fletcher</b>	<i>(To Peters)</i> There you are, I told you he'd get it. <i>(To Tom)</i> Yes, that's it old son, got it in one.
<b>Peters</b>	<i>(Dryly)</i> Except that it's Bill <b>Fletcher</b> and Jimmy <b>Peters</b> .
<b>Tom</b>	But you – you're – <i>(he transfers his gaze several times between the photo and the men standing in front of him)</i>
<b>Fletcher</b>	Dead? Oh yes, we're dead. Aren't we, Jimmy?
<b>Peters</b>	Yes, yes, dead right enough.
<b>Fletcher</b>	Dead as he proverbial -
<b>Peters</b>	Dodo.
<b>Fletcher</b>	Dodo, indeed. You could say, even more deaderer than that. Dead as Marley.
<b>Peters</b>	Marley?
<b>Fletcher</b>	Yes, Marley was dead, didn't you know that?
<b>Peters</b>	<i>(Puzzled)</i> Corporal Marley?
<b>Fletcher</b>	<i>(Mildly exasperated)</i> No, you great lummoX, Marley, Christmas Carol Marley. He was dead, and all.
<b>Peters</b>	<i>(Unconvincingly)</i> Oh, yes, that Marley. <i>(Changing the subject)</i> Shame, though, weren't it, Bill?
<b>Fletcher</b>	Yes, shame it was. Us in the prime of it. Life. Us in the prime of life.
<b>Tom</b>	<i>(Somewhat overwhelmed by the repertoire)</i> Am I dreaming?
<b>Fletcher</b>	<i>(Prodding him, theatrically)</i> I don't think so, mate.
<b>Peters</b>	<i>(Severely, as if telling off a small child)</i> You ain't forgotten your old Platoon chums, now have you, Tom?
<b>Tom</b>	My pals? The Platoon ... no, I haven't forgotten. <i>(He stares intently at the picture)</i> That's us, wasn't it taken just before – before we went up to the Front Line?
<b>Fletcher</b>	There you are! I said he'd remember once you started him off.
<b>Tom</b>	<i>(Wonderingly)</i> But – you were killed – Jimmy and Bill were killed. <i>(He looks dazed)</i>
<b>Peters</b>	Yes, they got us, didn't they, Bill? <i>(He laughs)</i> But that's all history, ain't it, Tom? Who remembers all that sort of stuff nowadays?
<b>Tom</b>	<i>(He stands up and walks round to put the picture on the chairside table)</i> My youngest grandson asked me about it the other day. He looked at these pictures, and he said "Were you in the War, Grandpa?" I said I was in the <b>First</b> World War, not the one <b>his</b> Dad was in, that was the <b>Second</b> World War. He said "That's right, the Kaiser's War, that's the one we're doing at school." I was so surprised, I didn't think they'd be teaching that at school.  <i>(To Peters, intently)</i>  I tried to explain it to him, 'cos he was doing it for a school project. But I just couldn't seem to find the right words. I wanted to tell him what it was really like, you know, with the mud and the rain and the cold -
<b>Fletcher</b>	<i>(cutting in)</i> The mud, the bodies -
<b>Peters</b>	<i>(Mimes drinking)</i> The van blong <sup>2</sup> -
<b>Fletcher</b>	<i>(Mimes a rat scurrying along)</i> The rats in the trenches -
<b>Peters</b>	<i>(Mimes bad stomach ache)</i> The bloody awful food -

<sup>2</sup> Corrupted pronunciation of "vin blanc" = white wine

<b>Fletcher</b>	<i>(Hands over ears)</i> The whizzbangs -
<b>Peters</b>	<i>(Peers “over the top”)</i> The dawn stand to readiness -
<b>Fletcher</b>	<i>(‘Heavens above’ expression)</i> The <b>bleeding</b> silly officers -
<b>Peters</b>	<i>(Rolls his eyes and makes a gesture of the shape of a woman’s hourglass figure)</i> The mademoiselles – I remember when - <i>(Fletcher gives him a hard look and he stops)</i>
<b>Tom</b>	<i>(To Fletcher)</i> – but somehow I couldn’t find the words. So I sort of lied. I told him it was all pals together, it was rough but somehow we managed to find something to joke about. Afterwards, I knew I hadn’t explained it very well. So I tried to explain that so many of the mates were killed. I was sort of struggling with the words, trying to make it sound real, so he’d understand what I meant.
<b>Peters</b>	That’s a difficult one to get across, Tom. Difficult, right enough, to explain that to a young lad.
<b>Fletcher</b>	We weren’t much more than that ourselves, were we?
<b>Tom</b>	A few weeks later he went on a school trip to Ypres. <i>(He walks to stand by the window, and looks outside)</i> Ypres, what a place. How could I ever forget that? <i>(Blows his nose)</i>
<b>Fletcher</b>	<i>(Shakes his head at the memory)</i> Phwor, old Wipers <sup>3</sup> , blimey. <i>(Shudders)</i>
<b>Tom</b>	<i>(Turns to Peters and Fletcher: earnestly)</i> Every night they went to see the Last Post at the Menin Gate <i>(mimes the buglers)</i> . He thought it was going to be some silly ceremony, but once he’d watched it, he found that it struck a chord somewhere inside him.  <i>(Picks up the picture and looks closely at the faces)</i>  Then they’d all visited Tyne Cot War Cemetery and seen the thousands of headstones and even more thousands of names carved onto the huge curved wall at the back. He showed me the snapshots he took. He said to me that he didn’t understand why I hadn’t really told him about that.
<b>Peters</b>	<i>(Amused)</i> Thousands of graves, eh? Did he see mine?
<b>Fletcher</b>	<i>(Hisses)</i> Shaddup will you. This is serious. Can’t you be serious for a minute?
<b>Peters</b>	All right, all right.
<b>Fletcher</b>	<i>(To Tom)</i> Go on.
<b>Tom</b>	<i>(Sips his tea)</i> I think he’d gone on the trip just for a weekend away, but he told me afterwards when he’d thought about it some more, he understood it. That it took a visit to the battlefields and the cemeteries to make him understand. He told me that he got choked up about it all, and he didn’t know why, and that some of the girls cried.  <i>(To Fletcher)</i>  One of boys even had his grandfather buried there and they were able to find his grave. He said that somehow, it was much more interesting than he ever thought it was going to be, and that he was very glad that he’d gone on the trip.  <i>(To Peters)</i>

<sup>3</sup> Corrupted pronunciation of Ypres

	Then he said that “interesting” wasn’t the right word, but he didn’t know how to properly describe it, that “interesting” didn’t say what he wanted to say. He was just too young to be able to get the right words, the expressions he wanted. <i>(Looks from Peters and Fletcher, seeking their understanding)</i>
<b>Fletcher</b>	Yes, difficult for a young lad to find the right words for something like that.
<b>Tom</b>	<i>(Sits down again)</i> On the second day they’d been looking round one of the trench museums, and there was a section of real trench and they’d all walked down it <i>(gets up and acts out squelchy footsteps)</i> in Wellington boots. That evening he was in the bathroom having a hot shower <i>(action)</i> , and he stopped suddenly <i>(action)</i> and realised that most of the men who had actually been in that trench would have given their right arms for the hot shower he was having right then.
<b>Peters</b>	<i>(Feelingly)</i> Blimey, ain’t that the truth!
<b>Fletcher</b>	Bloody right.
<b>Tom</b>	<i>(More to the audience)</i> He said it made him feel uncomfortable about enjoying his hot shower, “I felt kind of guilty about it,” he told me, “but I didn’t know why.”  I could see then that he understood what I’d failed to explain to him. So there we were looking at each other, each not able to say what he wanted to, but both of us understanding exactly how the other one felt.  He was older, mentally that is, when he left. I saw him grow up.  <i>(Pause. Peters and Fletcher nod gravely)</i>  But what happened to you two? They never told us. <i>(Sits back in his recliner again)</i>
<b>Fletcher</b>	<i>(Cheerfully)</i> I don’t rightly know, mate. When the guns stopped and the whistle blew, I went over the top with everyone else, and was just sprinting along after you and Jimmy, trying to see my way through the smoke. I could see Sweet Fanny Adams, I can tell you, all that smoke and noise and everything, and then that’s it <i>(snaps fingers)</i> I’m gone.
<b>Peters</b>	What he means is that he was just blown up. A shell or something like that. <i>(Looks sideways at Fletcher)</i> Sorry to be so blunt, mate. No offence.
<b>Fletcher</b>	None taken. <i>(They smile at each other)</i> Whizz, bang, goodnight Vienna.
<b>Peters</b>	Clapham weren’t it?
<b>Fletcher</b>	<i>(Laughing)</i> Fulham!
<b>Tom</b>	<i>(Wonderingly)</i> Just – gone.
<b>Fletcher</b>	<i>(Matter-of-factly)</i> Well, it was quick enough, wasn’t it? I mean, I wasn’t wounded nor nothing like that, nor never had nothing important <i>(he indicates his groin area, Peters laughs)</i> shot off, like. I was just a bit sad that they never found me, you know, never put me in a marked grave like Jimmy here. So I’m still out there, <i>(gestures “out there”)</i> somewhere. <i>(He sighs)</i> Go on, Jimmy, explain what happened to you.
<b>Peters</b>	<i>(Stands up, and throughout, mimes his actions across the width of the stage)</i> Right enough, like Bill said, we was all ready and waiting in the trench. I heard the whistle blow and I followed him out. Then we was all just running towards the other side.

	<p>It sounded so simple when Lieutenant<sup>4</sup> What's-his-name explained what we were supposed to do, but when we was actually out there, didn't seem to have nothing to do with the plan we'd been told about.</p> <p>I never saw Bill get it, but when we actually reached the German trench, I saw you (<i>indicates Tom</i>) jump in just ahead of me, and then some German bloke came out of a foxhole and lunged at me. Then there was a shot from real close up, and someone knocked him down.</p>
<b>Tom</b>	<i>(Eagerly, stands up and touches Peters on the arm)</i> That was me.
<b>Peters</b>	You? <i>(Claps him on the shoulder)</i> I thought it might've been, but I couldn't see for sure. Then, there's me thinking, phew! Well, if I ain't got killed yet, I must be leading a charmed life like! So round the next corner I go after you, and blam! <i>(Mimes a chest shot)</i> That's me done for.
<b>Tom</b>	I got him as well, but it was too late. Got his officer and all.
<b>Peters</b>	<i>(Philosophically)</i> Well, never mind too much about it, mate. Like Bill, it were quick, and at least in the end, they put me in a proper grave. <i>(He laughs, and makes a nah-nah-na-nah-nah expression at Fletcher)</i>
<b>Fletcher</b>	<i>(Affectionately)</i> All right, you daft sod. <i>(To Tom)</i> He's never let me forget that.
<b>Peters</b>	<i>(Stamps to attention, salutes)</i> He's on the wall at the Menin Gate, with another 47,000 other poor blighters.
<b>Tom</b>	<i>(Sits down again)</i> I often used to wonder who those Germans were. A private with a rifle, and an officer with one of those big Mauser <sup>5</sup> pistols they used to carry. I went back and picked it up afterwards, when things had calmed down, and I had it at home for a souvenir for years. But later on I gave it up in one of those amnesties.
<b>Peters</b>	I s'pose they were pretty much like us, mate. Soldiers serving King, sorry, Kaiser and country. <i>(He salutes again, more mockingly)</i>
<b>Fletcher</b>	<i>(Rummages in his pack equipment and withdraws an old Mauser pistol)</i> You mean one of these? Picked one up as a souvenir myself.
<b>Tom</b>	<i>(Takes the pistol)</i> Yes, that's the one. Mauser, 1896 model. Feels strange to have one of these in my hands after all this time. <i>(He examines it with interest, and then puts it down on the chairside table.)</i> I often wanted to ask – but you don't, at the time, do you? Why did you join up? You must have been just as under age as me. If you'd waited a bit longer, the war might've been over.
<b>Peters</b>	<p>Oh, in my case, it were that or summat worse. Me dad was a docker and although he was me dad, he was right bastard when he'd been on the booze. When I were fourteen, he got me a job down the docks, but I didn't much care for it, I were glad of the chance to join up when the war started a couple of years later. I were a big strong lad and looked older than I was.</p> <p>When I gets down the barracks, the recruiting sergeant looks me over, and he asks me age. I says, dead confident like, "18, Sergeant". He gave me a sort of <b>hard</b> look, as if he wanted to give me a couple of seconds to change me mind, but then he just winked at me and I signed the papers.</p>

<sup>4</sup> "Leftenant" not "Lootenant", please!

<sup>5</sup> "Mou-ser" (as in "mouse") not "More-ser"

	<p>That were it really, next thing you know I'm with you two lads, doing foot drill and rifle drill and afterwards trying to put the rifle back together.</p> <p><i>(To Fletcher)</i></p> <p>Go on, Bill.</p>
<b>Fletcher</b>	<p>I was the chief clerk at Roberts' Timber Yard, walking out with Lucy Wilkins from across the road. Lucy, she worked in a draper's, all in a smart turnout, and she sort of hinted that she preferred a bloke with clean hands, rather than some fellow that worked a lathe.</p>
<b>Peters</b>	<p><i>(Gesturing lewdly)</i> Especially when the hands were -</p>
<b>Fletcher</b>	<p><i>(Offended, to Peters)</i> It wasn't like that.</p> <p><i>(To Tom)</i> I used to wear proper clothes, a collar and tie, earning a pretty penny more than the lads working on the shop floor. <b>And</b> them calling me "Mr Fletcher" instead of "Bill." I was set up on the right track.</p> <p>Then comes the War, and everywhere you went, there was <i>(comes suddenly fully downstage and jabs his finger right at someone in the front row of the audience)</i> Kitchener's finger pointing at you. <i>(Retreats)</i> Now I hadn't joined up so far because I reckoned I was more use to the country where I was, making sure that the timber yard was working properly, and delivering the orders on time, which wasn't easy as more and more of the men joined up.</p> <p>Lucy understood about that, because we'd talked about it. But comes the day when you just can't ignore it any more, and I joined up.</p>
<b>Peters</b>	<p>And so there you are with us, square bashing and trying to put a rifle back together.</p>
<b>Fletcher</b>	<p>Lucy, she was both heart broken and proud, all at the same time, if you know what I mean.</p>
<b>Peters</b>	<p><i>(Walks over and nudges Fletcher; curiously)</i> Did you – you know – with her, before you went away?</p>
<b>Fletcher</b>	<p><i>(Offended)</i> Give over. I told you before, it wasn't like that. <i>(Defensively, seeing Peters' 'oh yeah?' expression)</i> Well, I mean, not that we didn't want to, but you didn't, did you, we weren't married, we didn't want to spoil it.</p>
<b>Peters</b>	<p><i>(Visual response says 'More fool you then.' Shrugs and turns to Tom)</i> What about you then? Like you said, at the time, you just don't seem to be able to ask.</p>
<b>Tom</b>	<p>When I was fourteen, I wanted to stay on in school, but like you <i>(indicates Peters, who nods)</i> I had to go out to work and contribute to the family. So I worked as a milkman's boy <i>(gets up, fetches another picture from the dining-table and shows it to Peters, who passes it to Fletcher, who puts it on the chairside table)</i> getting up at three in the morning, walking two and a half miles to the yard, preparing the horse and dray and so on. It was a good enough job, steady, but I was glad to sign up just as soon as I thought I looked old enough. They never questioned me much.</p> <p>Once we were out there, in between the fighting, I was still alive, so it was <i>(lays one finger in his sleeve)</i> Lance-Corporal, then <i>(two fingers)</i> Corporal, then <i>(three fingers)</i> acting Serjeant.</p>

<b>Peters</b>	Dead mens' boots.
<b>Tom</b>	Dead mens' stripes, anyway.
<b>Fletcher</b>	But you survived, Tom! Look at what you've achieved. What were you when you went back into civvy street?
<b>Tom</b>	<i>(Proudly)</i> Serjeant, did alright for myself I suppose, bearing in mind that afterwards no buggers else wanted to stay in. So making Corporal and then Serjeant wasn't so hard if you worked at it. Dead men's shoes, you see, like I said before.  I ended up training lads like we'd been, but all of a sudden it seemed to get boring and all-the-same sort of thing. I'd learned some fitting and mechanics in the Army, and when I decided to come out in 1920, I found a job all right.
<b>Fletcher</b>	There you are, then, it wasn't all a waste. What were you doing?
<b>Tom</b>	Worked at Millshaw's, light engineers, they made parts for motor cars.
<b>Fletcher</b>	Plenty of work there, then.
<b>Tom</b>	I always sort of believed that I'd only got there on the efforts of all the lads who didn't come back. I felt kind of responsible for not letting them down, so it wouldn't all be a waste of effort and lives.
<b>Peters</b>	I told you so, Bill. Old platoon chums, still.
	<i>(There is a pause as Tom gets up and walks to the cabinet. He looks furtively around to see if Nurse Owen is watching, sees that she is nowhere in sight, and delves into the cabinet drawers, fetching out a bottle of whisky and three glasses. He returns with them, pours a measure into each glass, and passes one to Peters and Fletcher before taking one himself. They clink glasses without comment, raise their glasses to each other and drink a toast)</i>
<b>Peters</b>	<i>(As they drink, he starts to sing, softly at first, then full and confidently, to the tune of "Here's To The Next Man To Die"<sup>6</sup>)</i>  As the old Serjeant-Major lay dying And there on his death-bed he lay, His comrades all gathered around him To hear of the last words he'd say.
<b>Tom and Peters, with Fletcher whistling along</b>	<i>(They join in)</i>  Take the trigger-guard out of my kidneys, take the magazine out of my brain; take the barrel from out of my backbone <i>and assemble my rifle again.</i>
	<i>(another pause)</i>
<b>Fletcher</b>	Grim days.
<b>Peters</b>	Grim days.
	<i>(Tom pours again and they clink glasses, drink another toast)</i>
<b>Tom</b>	<i>(Very eagerly)</i> Say, do you two remember when -
<b>Serjeant-Major Harding (off L)</b>	<i>(Drill sergeant voice)</i> Order in the ranks there! Quiet, d'you hear?
<b>Fletcher</b>	<i>(To Peters and downing his drink quickly)</i> Blimey. We'd better be off. <i>(To Tom)</i> See you soon, mate. Better not let them catch us drinking this

<sup>6</sup> aka The Eton Boating Song

	stuff. <i>(Peters drains his own glass and they both put down their glasses before collecting their kit and picking up their rifles)</i>
<b>Tom</b>	<i>(Standing)</i> Soon?
<b>Peters</b>	Soon.
<b>Harding (off L)</b>	<i>(Drill sergeant voice; Fletcher and Peters both follow his barked orders)</i> Quiet in the ranks! Platoon, 'shun! Slope arms! About, turn! By the left, quick, march! Left right left right ... <i>(They march off DR<sup>7</sup>, precisely, to the call of "left right" from Harding's voice)</i>
<b>Tom</b>	<i>(Thoughtfully as he watches them depart)</i> Soon...
<b>Harding</b>	<i>(Enters from UL and glowers at Peters and Fletcher as they march off)</i> We'll make soldiers of you yet!
<b>Tom</b>	<i>(Without looking at Harding)</i> Chance would be a fine thing.
<b>Harding</b>	<i>(Comes over to stand near Tom, and gives him a rapid but close inspection. Decisively)</i> It worked for you well enough, lad.
<b>Tom</b>	<i>(Turns to look directly at Harding: after a short pause)</i> Yes, I suppose it did.
<b>Harding</b>	<i>(Taps Tom's arm, where sergeant's stripes would go)</i> Serjeant, wasn't it, when you left and went back in civvy street?
<b>Tom</b>	<i>(Proudly)</i> Right enough. But then in the second lot, just corporal in the Home Guard.
<b>Harding</b>	You'd have tried to join up again. I know your sort, you know your duty to King and Country.
<b>Tom</b>	<i>(Sits down)</i> Millshaw's put me on the reserved occupation list.
<b>Harding</b>	Millshaw's?
<b>Tom</b>	Where I worked – Millshaw's – light engineers – started on the shop floor. Kept my head down and did my trade exams. <i>(He stands and fetches another photo from the sideboard drawer, which he shows to Harding, who after inspecting it, puts it down on the chairside table)</i> Foreman after five years, then Works Supervisor by the time I tried to join up, that's why they wouldn't have me.  <i>(Sits down)</i> I could have twisted a few arms and got myself off the reserved occupation list, but by then I was 40, too old to be a soldier, they said. But I had to be content with the Home Guard and I joined them like a flash, <b>they</b> were glad of me at any rate, 'cos I could drill and shoot and do all the right stuff.
<b>Harding</b>	Useful stuff for an old sweat.
<b>Tom</b>	It was all right being Corporal, in between the long shifts at Millshaw's. Don't mind telling you that holding down a regular job as well as Home Guarding wasn't easy, but we all mucked in and did our bit, no matter how old we were.
<b>Harding</b>	So you see, it was all to the good. Old soldier's a good 'un.
<b>Tom</b>	You saved my life, you know.
<b>Harding</b>	<i>(Astonished)</i> I did?
<b>Tom</b>	I never realised what I had learned until I was in the trenches in France and Belgium, right there in the fighting, then I understood it all.
<b>Harding</b>	<i>(Sternly, very Serjeant-Major-ish)</i> Discipline.
<b>Tom</b>	Yes, discipline, comradeship.
<b>Harding</b>	People make fun of it these days.

<sup>7</sup> they could march off through the auditorium

<b>Tom</b>	<i>(Sadly)</i> That's right enough.
<b>Harding</b>	I saw thousands of lads just like you. Came in not knowing their arse from their elbow. Didn't know whether they was Arthur or Martha. Didn't know one end of a rifle from another.
<b>Tom</b>	And so we went out into battle.
<b>Harding</b>	Aye. I knew a lot of you'd lied about your ages.
<b>Tom</b>	You knew all along, you could tell that easily?
<b>Harding</b>	<i>(Breezily)</i> Oh, yes, there was lots of lads like you. We was told to turn a blind eye unless it was some kid really wet behind the ears. I mean, some of 'em were fourteen, fifteen! You couldn't go along with that. But a year, eighteen months even, too young – what did it matter s'long as the lad <b>looked</b> the right age?  <i>(Reflectively)</i> Was it worth it, do you think?
<b>Tom</b>	"The war to end all wars" wasn't it?
<b>Harding</b>	That's what they said. Didn't you see it like that, a struggle for the survival of good over evil?
<b>Tom</b>	<i>(Feelingly)</i> I pretty much saw it as a struggle for the survival of yours truly. <i>(Pause)</i> What happened to you, then?
<b>Harding</b>	Twenty-six years in the Army; I joined up as a boy soldier. The Sudan -
<b>Tom</b>	<i>(Laughing, Dad's Army voice)</i> "They don't like it up them, they do not like it."
<b>Harding</b>	<i>(Mimes a bayonet thrust)</i> Bloody right they didn't. Can't beat the old cold steel for putting the wind up the enemy. <i>(Thinks)</i> Then South Africa. Then out and about, in barracks, out of barracks. Corporal. Serjeant. Drill Serjeant to you blokes at training camps all over the country. Boring after the war, though. All the purpose had just gone. Discharged on a pension – just in time for the Depression. A lot of blokes out of work. I joined the Legion in the end, got nothing else to do, I liked the Army life and an old pal roped me in.
<b>Tom</b>	<i>(Puzzled)</i> The British Legion?
<b>Harding</b>	<i>(Scornfully)</i> The Foreign Legion. You never heard of Les Quinzaines?
<b>Tom</b>	Les what?
<b>Harding</b>	<i>(Scornfully)</i> That's what they called you when you'd done your fifteen years. Fifteen, quinze in French, see. Les Quinzaines, the Fifteen-Year men. Did my fifteen years and then you have to retire, compulsory-like. So I retired with another piddling pension and a French passport in the name I'd given them, they didn't ask no questions when you joined up.  When I'd finished, I thought about being a mercenary – a lot of the men did that, but it didn't seem like the right sort of soldiering to me, so I came home. <i>(Pause)</i> Died.
<b>Tom</b>	Wife? Family?
<b>Harding</b>	Never seemed to have the time. Nearly got hitched up once, but – as they say – nearly isn't quite.
<b>Tom</b>	Sad, that. I was married, fifty-one years.
<b>Harding</b>	And?
<b>Tom</b>	Car crash. Some lunatic drunk in a sports car. Killed himself and his girlfriend, too. <i>(He stands, fetches another photo and shows it to Harding, who after examining it, puts it with the others on the chairside table)</i>

<b>Harding</b>	Folks don't learn. Now, the discipline would've sorted them out.
<b>Tom</b>	National Service -
<b>Harding</b>	Two years in the Army, right enough, sort out the men from the boys.
<b>Tom</b>	You did that for us.
<b>Harding</b>	Aye. And much good it did you, eh?
<b>Tom</b>	But we beat them, didn't we?
<b>Harding</b>	Twice, as I recall. <i>(Suddenly gives a wicked looking smile of satisfaction)</i>
<b>Tom</b>	<i>(Returning the look)</i> All friendly again now. Until we play 'em at football!
<b>Harding</b>	<i>(Laughs)</i> And then they bloody beat us!
<b>Tom</b>	<p>But the enemy ... those men we called our enemies ... I had a sort of regard for them, and I'll tell you why. <i>(He stands, and throughout, mimes out his actions)</i> After the attack when it was dusk, I went back out with a stretcher party, just a few volunteers, to try and reach the wounded. After twenty minutes or so we bumped into a German patrol doing the same as us. The bloke in charge was a corporal, like me, I'd been promoted that same morning.</p> <p><i>(Harding, standing, winces and moves himself to one of the dining-room chairs, where he sits)</i></p> <p>I was helping a badly wounded soldier, and as it happened, he was German, 'cos we was all mixed up in that scrap, and I couldn't just leave him. So there I am doing what I can for the poor blighter, when one of my blokes nudges me and I see this German patrol. My man reaches for his rifle, but I pushed it down 'cos I could see that Fritz was doing the same as us. Their corporal is giving one of our wounded lads a drink of water. My man says, all surprised, "Blimey they're just the same as us!"</p> <p><i>(Moves further DR, addresses more to the audience)</i> Anyway so I helps up their bloke and the German corporal helps up our bloke, and we just stand there looking at each other for a few seconds. We both took a step forward at the same time and without a word we just swapped our wounded so he has his and I have ours. Then he stands up straight, and salutes me. I saluted him back and that was it, that was all there was to it. We both backed off with our people and came back to our own lines.</p>
<b>Harding</b>	<i>(Moved by the story)</i> There were good and bad on both sides.
<b>Tom</b>	<p>Then we just carried on with the fighting.</p> <p><i>(Moves fully DR and speaks directly to the audience, with a crack in his voice)</i> That German bloke ... I never even knew his name, but when the war was over, I'd have been pleased to have had a pint with him.</p> <p><i>(Noisily blows his nose, wipes his eyes, then comes back and sits down)</i></p> <p>So I did have this sort of sneaking respect after that. It made me realise that the fellows in the other trench were mostly ordinary men like me, Jimmy and Bill. Ordinary men doing what they were told.</p>
<b>Harding</b>	<i>(Stands)</i> I'd better be off. I've had my piece. I did what I could to try and give you lads what you needed. I did my Duty.
<b>Tom</b>	<i>(Emotionally)</i> Thank you.
<b>Harding</b>	See you soon, then. <i>(Stamps to attention, salutes)</i>

<b>Tom</b>	Soon?
<b>Harding</b>	Soon. <i>(Drill sergeant voice)</i> Platoon, ‘shun! About, turn! <i>(Follows his own commands)</i> By the left, quick, march! Left right, left right. <i>(Marches off L as if on parade ground, calling “left right” until off)</i>
<b>Tom</b>	I’ll let you know. <i>(He watches Harding exit)</i>
	<i>Tom sleeps again, more heavily. Nurse Adams, dressed in uniform, enters from RC and stands there briefly before she turns to look towards Tom.</i>
<b>Susan</b>	<p><i>(To Tom)</i> You were a handsome man even then.</p> <p><i>(She walks over to Tom, and stands to his right looking at him for a moment. Then she walks around the back of him and to the dining-room table. She brings one of the dining-room chair to Tom’s left, placing it ‘at his bedside’ and then sits. From her coat or uniform pocket she pulls out a battered diary in which during her speeches, she alternatively reads directly from the diary, and talks to Tom. It is intended to give a sharp contrast between the reading and the talks to Tom, and so the actress should actually <b>read</b> from the diary.)</i></p> <p><i>(Reads)</i> <b>September 21<sup>st</sup>, 1917.</b> Queen Mary Hospital, Brighton. Today I met the man I want to marry. His name is Tom Masters and he’s a corporal in the King’s London Regiment. He has been badly wounded in the legs, and I am his nurse. He has been having dreadful nightmares.</p>
<b>Tom</b>	<i>(Tosses in his chair, reliving the nightmare: murmurs unintelligibly, then:)</i> Fix bayonets! Ready! Give ‘em the steel! Charge!
<b>Susan</b>	<i>(Dabs his brow, soothes him)</i> You’re safe now, you’re safe. It’s a dream. You’re all right.
<b>Tom</b>	<i>(Nightmare; shouts)</i> Jimmy! Bill! Look out! Take THAT, you bastard! Aaarghh! My legs, my legs!
	<p><i>Takes his hand and soothes him again)</i> Shush, shush, you’re just dreaming, it’s only a bad dream. You’re safe now, you’re in hospital. <i>(Tom gradually quietens down)</i></p> <p><i>(To Tom)</i> I know that you must have signed up before you were eighteen. I was so proud of you. I sometimes think it was a lucky thing for me that you stopped those bullets – oh Tom, isn’t that a dreadful thing to say? But if you hadn’t been wounded, I would never have met you, my life would never have been the same.</p> <p><i>(Reads)</i> He’s been very poorly but I am looking after him and today he seems to be getting better, Dr Patterson had me take off the big dressing and the wounds were clean. I said he was looking better and he spoke to me and asked my name.</p> <p><i>(To Tom)</i> My room-mate, Maisie, said to watch out, because the patient nearly always falls in love with the nurse, but they soon get over it. She never told me that the nurse wasn’t supposed to fall in love with the patient, though.</p> <p>That was the exact moment when I fell in love with you. Just that one sentence, “What’s your name?” I’d read all about Love At First Sight, but you never believe anything like that is ever going to happen to you. I</p>

	<p>remember being a complete daze all the rest of the day, Matron telling me off because I was clumsy and knocked things over.</p> <p><i>(Reads)</i> <b>September 25<sup>th</sup></b>. Tom is much improved and has been able to walk for the first time. I helped him go onto the veranda and he sat in the sun for an hour with a couple of other soldiers.</p> <p><i>(To Tom)</i> But they weren't like you, Tom. No matter how badly wounded they were, most of them just wanted to get up my skirt and see what I had. But you didn't.</p> <p><i>(Reads)</i> <b>September 30<sup>th</sup></b>. I was able to go home for the weekend and I told my Dad about Tom. My Dad said "Good for you my girl" and we laughed. My Mum gave me a look, and told me that I wasn't to do anything until I was married and I couldn't get married until I was twenty-one<sup>8</sup>.</p> <p><i>(To Tom)</i> Twenty-one! That would have meant waiting years! I wanted a husband and a baby, Tom, I wanted to be a mum like my Mum and my Gran.</p>
<b>Tom</b>	<p><i>(Is seized by a bad coughing fit. Not really awake, he gasps and half sits up. Susan holds him and pours him a short measure of whisky from the bottle on the chairside table into one of the tumblers, and helps him drink it. He is not aware of her, and once his cough has stopped, he slips off to sleep again, Susan takes the glass from his hands as they fall)</i></p>
<b>Susan</b>	<p><i>(Reads)</i> <b>October 7<sup>th</sup></b>. I helped Tom walk round the garden today, his leg is so much better and although it rained we had a good time until Matron made us come back inside. I had to hold the umbrella though.</p> <p><i>(To Tom)</i> You said how grand it was to be able to get around, you didn't mind if it rained. I had to stay close to you to hold the umbrella, and I could feel you so close to me.</p> <p><i>(Reads)</i> <b>October 15<sup>th</sup></b>. Tom is much better now and can get about on his own. I have told him that I will miss him because I know he will be discharged soon. He said he would miss me and we held hands until Matron almost saw us.</p> <p><i>(To Tom)</i> I was just taking your pulse, counting the heartbeats and looking out of the window, and you took my hand in yours. I turned my head and looked into your eyes, and I knew straight away that you felt the same way that I did. You said "They'll be sending me back to France soon, I don't want to go now I've met you." I couldn't think what to say, all I could come out with was, "I'll miss you so much when they send you back." And so I stood there with my hand in yours for what seemed like an hour, with your fingers just rubbing mine, and me trying not to cry. Then Nurse Gordon gave a big cough to warn us that Matron was coming, and you let my hand go.</p> <p><i>(Reads)</i> <b>October 16<sup>th</sup></b>. Tom and I kissed for the first time today. It was in</p>

<sup>8</sup> This age and the next paragraph may be adjusted slightly, if necessary, to suit the age of the actress.  
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	<p>the garden, and nobody saw us. I am sure he really likes me because he said he wanted to see me again before he goes back to France.</p> <p><i>(To Tom)</i> It was at the back of the lawn, by the gardener's shed. I'd never been kissed properly before. You put your arms round me, it was like sinking into a feather bed, and I shut my eyes. I didn't need your hands on me <i>(she lifts his hand and holds it on her breast)</i> to know that I was yours. I was yours almost from the first day I saw you. It didn't matter that I was a year or so older<sup>9</sup>. It was just that kiss which made it all come right. You said "I have to go back to my unit, but when I come back, I'll come and find you, I promise." I just said "Come back safe." I wanted to be your wife, proper like, there and then <i>(coy, embarrassed face)</i>, but we couldn't, not there, and there was nowhere private to go, they were really strict with us. They threw out one girl that they caught doing it with a soldier.</p> <p><i>(Reads)</i> <b>October 20<sup>th</sup></b>. Tom has gone back to France. I don't know when he will return, but I know he loves me, and I know that I truly love him.</p> <p><i>(To Tom)</i> I love you.</p> <p><i>(There is a long pause as she wipes her eyes with her handkerchief)</i></p> <p><i>(Reads)</i> <b>November 15<sup>th</sup></b>. There has been a big push at a place called Passchendaele<sup>10</sup>. I have only had one letter from Tom since he went back.</p> <p><i>(To Tom)</i> The military post didn't work very fast. I don't think the people running the post knew anything about other people being in love and wanting to hear from each other. I was so worried about you.</p> <p><i>(Reads)</i> <b>December 31<sup>st</sup></b>. There is still no word from Tom, only the newspaper reports from Belgium, and the casualty lists.</p> <p><i>(To Tom)</i> Why didn't you write to me? My letters just came back.</p> <p><i>(Reads)</i> <b>January 18<sup>th</sup>, 1918</b>. I heard today that Tom is dead. He was killed at Passchendaele, in November last year. One of the men in his platoon told me.</p> <p><i>(To Tom)</i> I didn't know that it was a mistake! A big mistake! That you'd just been knocked senseless, shell-shocked, not knowing who you were. I waited and waited, held on as long as they would let me, but then the war ended, and I'd heard nothing, the Hospital closed. So I went home to my parents, because there didn't seem to be anything left, anywhere.</p>
	<p><i>(Anne enters R. She is matronly and elderly, dressed very sensibly.</i></p> <p>Throughout their discourse, Susan remains warm and friendly, glad of the opportunity to explain herself. Anne is hostile at first, unsure how to deal</p>

<sup>9</sup> Again, this sentence may be tweaked to suit the age of the actress.

<sup>10</sup> Actually pronounced "passion-dale", but she should stumble over the pronunciation.

	with this girl from Tom's past, but she becomes progressively more impressed by Susan's warm character, obvious truthfulness and love for Tom, until she accepts that they each have their own safe and distinct places in his past.)
<b>Anne</b>	<i>(Accusingly)</i> You were his first love, he told me about you before he asked me to marry him. That he'd gone back to the Hospital after he'd recovered his mind, but by then it was 1919, everything was all over, and he didn't know where you came from or very much about you. He was always afraid that you'd think he had abandoned you, when it wasn't true.
<b>Susan</b>	<i>(To Anne)</i> I always thought he'd just walk in one day, just be there when I looked up. And then he'd pick me up and take me in his arms and sweep me off to where we could be man and wife, together, properly.
<b>Anne</b>	The military hospitals were closing and everything was trying to get back to normal. But about that time everyone was getting ill with the 'flu, like the War had finished, but turned round and bit you on its way out.
<b>Susan</b>	My dad got it, my mother got it, I went to nurse them at home, so in the end I got it as well. I could never even let him know about it or tell him what had happened, why I never came to look for him.
<b>Anne</b>	I see. That was why, then. He told me all about you, that he hardly knew you, but that you were in love. He waited months, you know, and in the end, well, it was just like a dream he'd had. In the end you just have to wake up and face the fact that it's not going to come true.
<b>Susan</b>	It was so short, just a few weeks, and we were never really together. We never even walked out, not unless you count the Hospital gardens.
<b>Anne</b>	<i>(Sharply)</i> You were the lucky one! I never had that sudden flash of being in love, like you did. I often wondered what it would have been like. I was at Millshaw's too, and I saw Tom every day. One Christmas do, he asked me to dance and we sort of went on from there. All very unexciting I suppose, like it was simply supposed to happen, with both our lives running on rails.
<b>Susan</b>	With me, it was just that one look whilst he asked my name, it wasn't gradual like you. I knew straight away.
<b>Anne</b>	It took me a while to realise that there was some great sadness in his life, but I put it down to the War. <i>(Still a little hostile)</i> I didn't know anything about you until Tom and I were getting serious. He told me that he had met a girl when he was in hospital, but that after he'd recovered from his wounds, he hadn't been able to find her again.
<b>Susan</b>	I always just assumed that he would sort of turn up one day, that's somehow he'd find me, from official records or something.
<b>Anne</b>	He did try.
<b>Susan</b>	<i>(Eagerly)</i> But it was <b>you</b> who was the lucky one! Did you have any children?
<b>Anne</b>	Yes, we had a family almost straight away, a boy in 1923, twin boys in 1925, and a girl in 1927. <i>(She fetches a family photo from the sideboard, gives it to Susan, who looks at it before placing it on the chairside table, by the Regimental photo, the pistol, and Susan's diary)</i> He did try to find you, you know, really he did.
<b>Susan</b>	I know. I heard that he was killed, one of his friends was in the same hospital and it was him who told me that Tom was dead – killed in the final advance in November 1917. But as far as the authorities were concerned, I never existed at all.

<b>Anne</b>	<i>(Mollified)</i> It wasn't what you might call a proper courtship, was it?
<b>Susan</b>	No, no, but the two of us both understood what it meant, even though it only lasted a few weeks.
<b>Anne</b>	<i>(Less hostile)</i> I used to feel a bit jealous of you, you know, because you were the first girl he really loved, and of course you never forget that, you never forget how that makes you feel. First love.
<b>Susan</b>	First love, that's just what it was. For me, first and only. But it was real love, I remember how it made me feel, gave me awful highs and lows, I thought I was ill, thought I was coming down with something. But my room-mate Maisie, she just said one day, seeing that I was all in a dither, "Susan my girl, you might as well just sit back and give in to it. You're in love." And she was exactly right.
<b>Anne</b>	<i>(Musingly)</i> You're lucky, so lucky.
<b>Susan</b>	But not as fortunate as you, look what you had, a family, Tom as your husband, in the proper sense.
<b>Anne</b>	You didn't – then -
<b>Susan</b>	No!
<b>Anne</b>	I just assumed that you had.
<b>Susan</b>	<i>(Laughs)</i> I think we both sort of wanted to, but I didn't even know what to do! Anyway, a stolen kiss was all that anyone could manage, and that was difficult enough.
<b>Anne</b>	I realised he'd genuinely moved on, once he'd failed to find you, but sometimes I had the idea that he occasionally thought of you.
<b>Susan</b>	The way you do with your first love.
<b>Anne</b>	Yes.
<b>Susan</b>	He was a good man.
<b>Anne</b>	Everything he did, he seemed to do properly and correctly. He once told me that he was always aware of standing in the shadow of the men he'd served with, those that had been killed, and that he just didn't feel that he ought to let them down, or it would all have been a waste.
<b>Susan</b>	<i>(Observing Tom, asleep)</i> It won't be long now.
<b>Anne</b>	<i>(Taking Tom's hand; to Susan)</i> No. <i>(To Tom)</i> I love you.
<b>Susan</b>	What happened, then – with you two?
<b>Anne</b>	Tom stayed on at Millshaw's all the rest of his working life. He was happy enough there, but I knew that he missed the Army life, because he could drill and shoot, and he knew what it was that bound men together.
<b>Susan</b>	Eventually he must have come out of uniform.
<b>Anne</b>	Yes, once the Home Guard was disbanded, we settled back into a normal life. I often wondered if he would find life humdrum once he was out of uniform. But he never mentioned it much, it was as if it was another chapter of his life that he'd decided had run its course.
<b>Susan</b>	I was never a threat to you. He quietly moved on, like you said. It was you who made him happy.
<b>Anne</b>	He was an easy man to please in many ways. Never panicked or did things in a rushed way; steady, dependable.
<b>Susan</b>	I miss him, even now.
	<i>(There is a short pause before Anne reaches a decision and holds out her hands to Susan who also rises and takes her hands. They move away CL</i>

	<i>from Tom's chair and embrace briefly, then both stand looking at him. Sad music<sup>11</sup> is played very softly in the background)</i>
<b>Anne</b>	Not long now. <i>(There is a knock on the door.)</i>
<b>Anne</b>	It's time then. Here they are. <i>(Both Anne and Susan move CL to the dining-table, and sit on the chairs.)</i>
	<i>(Another knock, and then the key turns and Nurse Owen and Dr Thomas enter CR, the doctor carrying a doctor's bag. They are not aware of Susan or Anne.)</i>
<b>Nurse Owen</b>	<i>(As they come in)</i> He always left the key under the plant pot, Doctor, in case he was taken ill, so that I could get in if needs be. But I'm not too happy with his general condition, although he was fine when I left him earlier this afternoon.  <i>(Seeing that Tom is recumbent)</i> He often dozes off in front of the afternoon racing.
<b>Dr Thomas</b>	Mr Masters? Tom? <i>(He approaches Tom and takes his pulse, first at the wrist and then the throat. He shakes his head at Nurse Owen and folds Tom's arms over his chest before examining the bottles.)</i> He's gone, I'm afraid. Not too long ago, either, by the feel of him. No great surprise though, his heart was really weak when I saw him the other day. What would he be now – early-mid 80s? A good innings. Hope I can last as long as that.
<b>Nurse Owen</b>	He did do his best to get around, he went round to the Legion, and he liked a flutter on the horses. He told me that he won fifteen pounds today. I don't suppose he ever collected it, though. He was an old soldier, you know, a First War veteran.
<b>Dr Thomas</b>	<i>(Picks up the pistol from the chairside table)</i> That would explain this, then.
<b>Nurse Owen</b>	<i>(Horrified)</i> He's not – he's not <b>used</b> that, has he?
<b>Dr Thomas</b>	No, no. <i>(Inspects it closely)</i> It's rusted up, it's not been fired for years. A souvenir, I suppose, from the trenches. Did you know he had this?
<b>Nurse Owen</b>	<i>(Shakes her head)</i> No, no idea at all. Is it safe?
<b>Dr Thomas</b>	I don't know anything about these things, but I'd better take it with me when I go, to be on the safe side. I know these old guns and shells and such can be dangerous after all these years.
<b>Nurse Owen</b>	He didn't say much about his time in the army, but he was a decent, straight sort of man, one you could trust. I'll miss him.
<b>Dr Thomas</b>	Is there a phone here?
<b>Nurse Owen</b>	In the hall by the front door. <i>(Dr Thomas nods and exits CR)</i>
<b>Nurse Owen</b>	<i>(Idly looks at the items on the table)</i> Whisky! Oh well. Some people just won't do what the doctor tells them. A diary! But it's ancient. <i>(She riffles through it)</i> Hospital life in 1918, he must have kept it. <i>(Puts it down without reading any details)</i> And those photos – he fetched them again. <i>(She look and talks directly at Tom)</i> Did you know? Did you want your things by you? <i>(She hesitates for a moment, then puts the diary in his hands.)</i> I really will miss you. <i>(Realises that there are three whisky glasses on the table)</i> There are <b>three</b> glasses here –

	<i>(Anne and Susan stand up and turn to look at her. She turns as if hearing them, and looks in their general direction, as if peering through a fog. Can she see them or not? We don't know.)</i>
	Three glasses - how – <i>(tails off, baffled)</i>
<b>Susan</b>	Old soldiers never die.
<b>Anne</b>	They just fade away.
	<b>FADE TO BLACKOUT</b>
<p>For a curtain call, it is recommended that behind the closed curtain, the actors on stage retain their places whilst Peters and Fletcher come in CR and stand to attention with rifles at the 'slope' position. Dr Thomas and Serjeant-Major Harding come in R and L respectively. Then, as the curtains open, Harding calls "Present arms!" and the two soldiers obey, this being the cue for the others to bow, except for Harding, who should be wearing a hat so he can salute.</p>	

PROPERTY LIST	
Set	2 Regimental and 3 Family photos on sideboard
Set	Bottle of whisky and 3 tumblers in a drawer of the sideboard
Set	TV on table DR
Tom	Simple TV remote control, newspaper
<b>Tom / Nurse Owen</b>	3 different pill bottles on the chairside table
<b>Nurse Owen</b>	Steaming hot mug of tea (ready, in kitchen, off UL); medical bag, car keys
<b>Peters / Fletcher</b>	Rifles and packs
<b>Fletcher</b>	Mauser pistol
<b>Susan</b>	Old diary
<b>Dr Thomas</b>	Doctor's bag

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