

When I come home – Drama by Ray Gedling

Synopsis

Betty Turner and David Patterson are sweethearts; they were born and brought up in a small, close-knit, Norfolk village community. He is a shy and sensitive chap and a conscientious, agricultural worker. With the outbreak of the First World War, he firmly believes that his duty is to continue his vital work on the land; he has no thoughts of becoming a soldier. However, along with his life-long pal, Roger, he succumbs to the country's appeal for more men to join up, and initially he sees the prospect of joining the fray, and doing his bit, as a great adventure.

Betty has a wonderful, simplistic naivety and with this and her warm, bubbly and positive nature and personality, she is protected from the harsher realities of the world. She sees David's decision to go to war as wonderfully romantic, and she is blissfully ignorant of the barbarity of what he is subjecting himself to. Their story is told out in the letters they exchange during their time apart.....

Characters:

David Patterson: *soldier, aged say between 25 and 35 years. Dressed in full WW1 private's uniform with accoutrements including rifle. Backpack with pencil and pad.*

Betty Turner: *country girl of the time aged say between 25 and 35 years. Dressed according to era and status.*

Narrators: *one or two, in today's formal dress.*

Backstage voices: *say one male, one female.*

Stage setting throughout: two simple wooden chairs, one down stage left, one down stage right - both lit independently, with dimming spot lights. The downstage left spot (soldier) stark and white, the other (girl) warmer white.

A narrator's lectern style, reading desk, centre down stage, also independently lit with warm, dimming spot. The one or two narrators (depending on choice) to have chairs behind lectern to sit after standing for each narration.

House lights black out - Recorded music begin - Slides on – When I Come Home, by Ray Gedling

I'm not the man I used to be before I went to war
It changes men, this living hell, to see the things I saw
I saw friends fall around me and I saw them breathe their last,
I watched them die before my eyes, God knows, I could be next

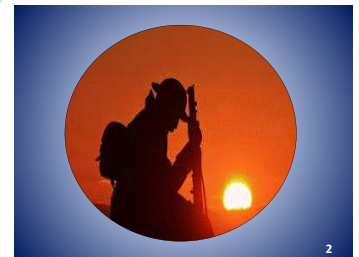


There's a green cloud drifting overhead it's on its evil way
It's melting lungs and blinding eyes and taking lives away
And then we put men in the ground, their final resting place
Could man do this to fellow man? What a hell of a human race!

My body may be broken but my mind stays ever strong
I dream when this war's over, I'll be back where I belong
But If the Good Lord calls me and I die here for this cause
My heart will be in England underneath those English stars.

Kingfisher fly, down by the shoals
There by my little church where the oak trees grow
My true love she'll be waiting with everyone I know
We'll all be together when I come home; we'll all be together when I come home

I'll join the glorious fallen here down in their muddy tombs
There'll be no stone to mark my grave no place to lay your blooms
But Beatrice when you need me, I'll be where the wild geese fly
Looking down upon you from the sapphire Irstead skies



There's part of me will always be beside those golden fields
Where seas of corn and barley wave in Norfolk's summer breeze
I'll be by every hedgerow and on every Irstead lane
Each poppy in the sun is me, my love, we'll meet again

Kingfisher fly, down by the shoals
There by my little church where the oak trees grow
My true love she'll be waiting with everyone I know
We'll all be together when I come home; we'll all be together when I come home

I dreamt of golden mornings, with a sunrise on the hill
When a bugle sounded ceasefire
And the world stood calm and still
Friends and foe agreed as one to lay their weapons down
Bayonets, rifles, uniforms lay scattered on the ground

For now please pray my Beatrice, dear, that I'll be home once more
By glorious peaceful Alderfen, far from this canon roar
One day when it's all over, all this madness here in France
We'll sit by gentle waters where the swallowtails will dance



Kingfisher fly, down by the shoals
There by my little church where the oak trees grow
My true love she'll be waiting with everyone I know
We'll all be together when I come home; we'll all be together when I come home.

Narrator 1:



Narrator light up

That song was written by his family in memory of John Horace Pestell, a local man, and one of the 140 men of our three villages who went off to fight in the first world war. Horace, known locally as Jack, was one of those who returned alive - but he came home having lost an arm in the conflict. 32 of our villagers never came home at all.

At the outbreak of war, Jack Pestell lived in Irstead Street with his wife, Beatrice, and their four children; he was an agricultural worker, as was his father before him and he too had lived in Irstead Street. Like many of his contemporaries, Jack answered the call to war and suffered the consequences. He came back home to Irstead and, despite his disability, he worked hard earning a living; he did various jobs - one was working as a drover, when he'd walk cattle to both Norwich and Stalham markets. Sadly, his wife, Beatrice, died very young and Jack struggled to bring up his family alone through very hard times. In later life he lived in King Street and he was a familiar sight, right up to the sixties, pedalling his tricycle around the villages.

Narrator 2:



This evening we pay tribute to that generation to the families and individuals of our villages, who lived through that time of hardship and struggle.





We pay particular tribute to the men of our villages who fought, but also to their families left behind here, largely unaware of the brutality being faced overseas by their fathers, husbands, sons and brothers.


Any theatre of war is harrowing, but we can only imagine what it must have been like for our local men, whose lives had been spent living and working in the tranquillity and peace of these idyllic, beautiful surroundings.

They were ordinary countrymen doing countrymen's work; they included marsh men, agricultural workers, harvesters, ploughmen, cow men - their working environment was the field and the soil - their work was governed by nature, by the weather and the seasons.



Country life had hardly prepared them for the killing fields of France.

From the gentility and the peace of the Norfolk meadows and pastures, our men suddenly found themselves thrust amongst the savagery and carnage of Passchendaele and the Somme - the most barbarous conflict ever known to mankind!

<p>Narrator 1:</p> 	<p>Our story this evening is told through our fictional character, David Patterson, a young man born and bred in one of our villages - an agricultural community nestled discretely on the shores of Barton Broad. David had known Betty Turner since they had been in the same class in the little village school. They became sweethearts after David, then seventeen, and in response to a dare from his best friend, Roger, had asked her to dance at an evening social gathering in the church hall. Betty lived in the village with her mother, father, younger brother and two younger sisters - her father was typical of so many of the area at that time and worked as a marsh man, cutting reed and sedge on and around the Broad; he also kept a small-holding which had been handed down through generations of the family.</p>
<p>Narrator 2:</p> 	<p>David and Betty had been 'walking out together' for five years and had been engaged for two; the entire village had been anticipating their marriage for a good while, and he was often teased by family and friends who advised him to, "Make an honest woman of her before she changed her mind".</p> <p>They were a popular couple; he was a tall and strong lad with a quiet manner and shy ways, while she was a bubbly girl who chattered constantly, and she was full of fun and life and charm.</p> <p>Betty was a generous and caring girl who gave freely of her time to help anyone in need. She worked in domestic service two days each week at the village 'big house', and for the rest of the week, she assisted her mother who took in washing for the locals.</p>
<p>Narrator 1:</p>  	<p>David's best friend from the village was Roger - they had been inseparable pals since childhood, remaining close friends throughout their lives. They worked hard together, side by side on the farm. David had become a skilled and respected ploughman and with his horse team, he was a familiar sight on the fields around the village.</p> <p>Roger, in turn, was a natural cowman and he looked after his dairy herd with great care, pride and affection. Both men were highly regarded by their employer, Major Kitson, the wealthy local land owner.</p> <p>At the outbreak of war, the two friends had convinced themselves that their agricultural work was vital to the war effort, although they had occasionally talked of joining up. After a year, recruitment across the country was slowing down and particularly so in Norfolk, so when a poster appeared in the post office, urging men to enlist, the two pals answered the call and left for war.</p>

Narrator 2:	<p>David lived with his mother, she had been a widow for ten years since David's father had died; David was their only child. His mother was in poor health, so the two families agreed that in David's absence, while he was away at the war, Betty would keep an eye on Mrs Patterson and assist her in the home. She would be a companion and carer for her future mother-in-law and, true to her caring nature, she took on the task willingly. David's mother was more world-wise than Betty and so she was much more aware of the dangers faced by her son in France.</p>
Narrator 1: 	<p>On 30 July 1917, the 8th Norfolks, worn out, tired and under fire, would be waiting in front line trenches in the Comines Canal area of Flanders. The two Norfolk lads, David Patterson and his lifelong friend, Roger, were awaiting their orders to go over the top at the start of the butchery of the third Ypres offensive, a bloody, mud-caked nightmare, later known as the Battle of Passchendaele.</p> <p><i>Narrator light fade - soldier light up</i></p>
David:	<p><i>Enters from back stage in full WW1 kit and rifle over shoulder; hangs rifle and back pack over chair back; takes out pencil and pad from pack and sits down to write letter. According to director's guidance, some lines to be spoken while he appears to be writing, while some lines spoken as he looks over audience as if rehearsing them mentally - demeanour throughout upbeat and positive, smiling.</i></p> <p>My dearest darling Betty, I'm so terribly sorry my dearest that I haven't been able to write to you for quite some time. You see, we've had many weeks of training and we weren't ever given much time to ourselves. They have worked us really hard and we've been working non-stop, and every day we've been hard at it. There's been nothing but marching, sleeping and eating, but it's been a good time, Betty. Roger and me can't wait to get to do some real fighting. We've done lots of shooting at targets and yesterday we trained at throwing hand grenades. You wouldn't like the noise they make, Betty, because you don't like loud noises do you? You wouldn't like being here at all because there's noise and guns going off and grenades exploding all the time. Everyone shouts and the sergeant shouts like a bull - you wouldn't like him but he's a good chap. We had to pretend to kill dummies with bayonets and as we charged at them we had to shout and scream - you would hate the noise, Betty, but you get used to it. I really enjoy being a soldier, Betty, and I know you will be proud of me. The sergeant says that at the end of the training we'll be able to go into town and get a photo taken so I'll get one for you and my dear mother and you can put my picture on the mantelpiece.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">/continued</p>

	<p>Roger and me have met some good mates, here, Betty. There's four of us and we stay together all the time. We sit together for grub in the canteen tent. The grub is really good, Betty, and there's plenty of it. So don't you worry about me not getting enough to eat.</p> <p>It looks like I'll be able to get at the Germans soon; the sergeant said the first time he killed a German he was a bit scared but he got used to it. I can't wait.</p>
<p>Sergeant off stage:</p> <p>/continued</p> <p>David:</p>	<p>Yelling - stereotypical sergeant major style</p> <p>Right! Get fell in you horrible lot!</p> <p>I've got to go now Betty, so I will write again as soon as I can.</p> <p>Give my love to dearest mother, Betty, tell her I will try to put a special letter in just for her the next chance I get to write to you. Goodbye for now my dearest, darling Betty.</p> <p>All my love, Davy. I'll be with you soon when I come home.</p> <p>Puts on hat, holds rifle upright resting on floor and remains seated in darkness</p> <p>Soldier light down, Betty light up</p>
<p>Betty:</p>	<p>Enters slowly, carefree manner, happy, smiling, breezy - with pad and pencil, sits and writes. Some lines said aloud with head down while writing, some while looking out over audience as if mentally rehearsing - standing and sitting as appropriate.</p> <p>My Darling Davy,</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">John the postman came running up the path with your letter this morning. He knew it was from you before I even opened it. I think he was as excited to bring it as I was to get it. I'm glad to hear that you and Roger are enjoying being soldiers. I am proud as proud can be of you Davy, and I can't wait to get your photograph. I was a bit jealous when Molly showed me a picture of her Robert in <u>his</u> uniform - she was showing it off to people after church on Sunday, so just wait until I can show off yours. By the way Davy, the vicar said a prayer in church for you and Roger—he said we had to pray for you two and all the other soldiers in the war—I was rather embarrassed, I could feel everyone looking at me, but it was nice of him, wasn't it?</p> <p style="text-align: right;">/continued</p>

<p>Betty cont'd</p>	<p>It sounds as if you are enjoying your time in the training camp and it does sound very noisy, Davy. You know how much I hate loud noises - I jump when my dad fires that twelve bore, it always makes me jump. I read your letter to your mother, Davy, and she started to cry, so I told her not to be so silly. She's feeling much better in herself and I took her for a little walk across the low pasture down by the river and she really enjoyed it. We came back and had buttered scones for our tea and she ate more than me. She sends her love. Don't you worry about her Davy because I'm really looking after her. She talks a lot about you and she likes telling me stories all about you when you were a little boy. She often says she's worried about you but I keep telling her that it won't be long before you get back home.</p> <p>I'll say goodbye dear Davy. John the postman told me yesterday that if I can give him this letter when he passes on his round this morning, he will take it for me, so I will close now my darling before he comes.</p> <p>Your loving sweetheart. Betty. <i>(Exit)</i></p> <p>Betty light down—narrator light up</p>
<p>Narrator 1:</p> 	<p>As the war progressed, the numbers of men needing to be trained as front line troops increased massively, and finding sufficient places to house them all and to train them became a problem. The usual training camps and barracks that were normally used by the regular army across Britain, were soon overwhelmed by the huge numbers of men being recruited in 1914 and then again when conscription was introduced in 1916. It became very clear that additional training places and accommodation for the men would be required. At first, large public buildings such as church and local halls, schools and warehouses were taken over - offered up by the local authority. Thousands of men were also billeted in private homes.</p> <p>Gradually, new camps were constructed. Some of them were vast affairs, with their own canteens, hospitals, post offices, clubs and so on.</p>
<p>Narrator 2:</p> 	<p>The culture shock for men joining up, particularly those from quiet, agricultural areas, was tremendous. Men recruited from Barton Turf, Irstead and Neatishead had been at home in the quiet, peaceful routine of working the fields; some of these men would rarely have ventured further than Norwich or Great Yarmouth. They found themselves being transported across the country in packed, smoke-filled, railway carriages, going off to training camps where they would now be sharing life with hundreds of strangers.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">/continued</p>

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Strangers would find themselves thrown together into the intimacy of shared tents and billets. After a lifetime of solitary ploughing, milking and harvesting, our men were soon thrust into an intensive training programme of marching, shooting, and fitness exercises. But, they were yet to face the reality of what was to come.

Narrator light down - soldier light up

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