

# DEAD WOOD

BY

ALEX JONES

*Produced by The Watermill Theatre, Newbury. September 1997.*

Summer 1918 - a battle scarred soldier returns from the horrors of the trenches to his family, and a hero's welcome. But who is the stranger he has in tow and what is the terrible secret that the two of them share? This superb new play belies the myth of war as a gallant adventure and reveals a raw emotion that seeks both reconciliation and revenge.

**SYNOPSIS & SAMPLE SCENES  
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## CHARACTERS

ELIZABETH COOPER (BESS) - *EARLY TWENTIES*

IRENE BRADLEY - *LATE TWENTIES*

EARNEST BRADLEY (ERNIE) - *THIRTEEN AND A HALF*

STANLEY COOPER (STAN) - *MID TWENTIES*

NATHANIAL JONES (NAT) - *LATE TWENTIES*

BEATRICE COOPER (BEATTIE) - *LATE FIFTIES*

LOUIE BRADLEY - *MID FIFTIES*

UNCLE WILLY (WILLIAM BRADLEY) - *LATE FIFTIES*

## THE SET

*All action takes place in the same room. It is a turn of the century miner's cottage in a semi-rural mining town in Yorkshire. They were usually two-up, two-down. This room has a range for cooking, and a large table with chairs around. The table is used for dining and for preparing food. The room also doubles as a parlour, and there should be a sofa or something similar by the range. There is a stone sink with a single tap, various cupboards and shelves about the place containing plates, pots and assorted bric-a-brac. There is a window at the back of the set, looking onto the street, and there are two doors: one stage left, one opposite, stage right. The stage left door should lead to the stairs and perhaps a hallway, or perhaps an even smaller room; it would also be the way to the yard, where the outside privvie would have been. The stage right door leads onto the street, or if an end terrace, a small yard with flowers, etc. The overall impression of the room should be one of homeliness and simple comforts.*

**This play is dedicated in memory of my Mom -  
*Jean Margaret Jones***

**ACT 1****SCENE 1**

*It is early morning on a hot summer's day. Bright sunlight is blazing through the lace curtains. The outside door is wide open; birdsong can be faintly heard. BESS is preparing food - a meal for STAN's return. After a brief interval, IRENE enters through the open door with an armful of dog roses.*

IRENE There's flowers for the bedroom, lass; brighten it up a bit for yer.

BESS (Taking flowers) Roses!

IRENE There's not many of them left now. I got them from that wild bush at back o' church.

BESS They're lovely.

IRENE (*Looking around*) Everything's spick an' span.

BESS I'll get the vase -

BESS exits for a vase, leaving the door open.

IRENE (*Calls through*) You've got things nice, Bess; shining like a new pin: black lead, red cardinal, spit an' polish an' you've got a palace!

BESS *re-enters and begins to fill the vase with water and arrange the flowers.*

BESS Does it look all right then?

IRENE Lovely, it looks lovely, lass.

BESS I got the good china out.

IRENE Aye, I can see.

BESS D' yer think I should have?

IRENE Aye, why not?

BESS You dun't think... well..?

IRENE It's fine.

BESS It's not *too* much, is it? I mean everything should seem normal, shouldn't it, not different?

IRENE It's not too much. It's fine, Bess; pretty an' clean, that's all.

BESS I dun't want him t' feel...

IRENE What?

BESS Well, that anything's changed.

IRENE No, nowt's changed; it's his home, you can see that. Dun't tek on so - he'll not be mindin' a bit of fussin' after all he's bin through.

BESS I've got bacon.

IRENE           *Bacon!*

BESS            Aye an' eggs an' cheese, apples, oranges an' a pound of Mrs Pardoe's biscuits.

IRENE           He'll be needin' a good feedin' up.

BESS            Aye. I shall send out for a jug of beer when our Ernie comes round.

IRENE           He'll appreciate that.

BESS            French beer's watery.

IRENE           *(Laughing)* Is it?

BESS            He used t' say in his letters: "Flat as a pancake an' as strong as tea."

IRENE           That'll cheer him up then.

BESS            En't had a letter for a long time... Last 'n was all black smudges where it'd bin censored; couldn't mek it out.

IRENE           Aye... You goin' t' the station t' meet him?

BESS            No, I want t' see him alone. I think it'll be easier.

IRENE           Aye, you're right.

BESS            I've asked everyone to stay away tonight; give us a chance t' settle back into things. They're sendin' the pit band, d'yer think they should?

IRENE           He deserves it.

BESS            He does, dun't he?

IRENE           A hero's welcome for a local hero! We're all as proud as punch; we want t' let him know.

BESS            He *does* deserve it. The Mayor's sendin' his car t' pick him up.

IRENE           The Mayor's car!

BESS            *(Proudly)* Aye.

IRENE           The Mayor's car, a brass band, bacon in the larder an' beer in the jug; he'll never want t' go away again.

BESS            I hope not. I want him t' meself now. He'll be needin' me. I'll mek him feel... I'll mek him feel good... *normal*.

*Pause.*

IRENE           They say it'll be over soon.

BESS            They've bin sayin' that for years.

IRENE           He'll be out of it, anyroad.

BESS            I hope he feels that way.

IRENE           There's some 'as are a lot worse off, lass.

BESS I wonder how he'll be?

IRENE The same.

BESS How can he be?

IRENE He will be.

BESS How can he be the same? He'll never be the same again - never.

IRENE He'll get used to it.

BESS What about me?

IRENE What?

BESS It'll be different for me too, yer know.

IRENE Aye, it will that I suppose.

BESS No suppose about it, Irene. He wun't be able t' do for himself no more.

IRENE Oh he will. They get by; they manage after a while.

BESS He wun't be goin' down no pit again.

IRENE Mebbe not, but he'll find employment of a sort. There's that chap at 'mill near Halifax, you've heard of him; works a loom an' changes shuttles an' everythin'.

BESS But it *is* different, ennet? I mean... what will he look like? What will he feel like? I keep thinkin' about it.

IRENE Dun't Bess...

BESS I can't help it; I keep thinkin', imaginin' what it's like.

IRENE There's no point...

BESS I know it's wrong, but I can't help it, Irene.

IRENE It wor a sacrifice, Bess; you have to see it that way.

BESS Oh Irene, I know all that; but it's something so unnatural, so different... *oh God, am I rotten?*

IRENE Of course you're not rotten. But you can't let Stan see yer like this; he'll be dependin' on yer.

BESS You wun't tell anybody, Irene; promise yer wun't tell anybody. You're the on'y one I've spoken to about it.

IRENE I wun't tell.

Pause.

BESS I've got 'pot on. D'yer want a cup?

IRENE I'll get it. You sit down.

BESS sits at the table while IRENE prepares the tea.

- BESS If me Mam knew...
- IRENE Nobody's gun'ter know anythin': you're sharin' yer problems wi' yer sister, nowt wrong wi' that. An' I'll bet yer, once he's bin back here a while you'll wonder what all yer fuss has bin about - you see if I'm right.
- BESS Oh, I am rotten, I know I am!
- IRENE Stop punishin' yerself. You've got a heart of gold, you needn't fret on that count; why you'd give yer last crust to a hungry dog ye're so soft. (*Hands BESS tea*) Drink yer tea, yer ninny. Tell yer what though, I wish I had a man comin' home t' me, any condition; long as he had all his tackle of course.
- BESS (*Laughs*) Hark at you; you're terrible! (*Sips tea*) You'll find a man soon; you'll be snapped up, I know it.
- IRENE No, it's past me now, it dun't matter.
- BESS I know it does.
- IRENE I'm too old now; an empty pot nobody'll trouble t' pour.
- BESS No you're not!
- IRENE *Old Maid Irene* - that's what they'll be callin' me soon - probably already do behind me back, if truth be told.
- BESS No, I'm sure that's not true!
- IRENE It dun't matter, honest... after last time, well...mebbe it's not meant t' be.
- BESS He wor just a bad 'n. Throw him back in t' cut; there's plenty more fishes splashin' about!
- IRENE Not any more.
- Pause.*
- BESS Oh come an' hug me! (*They embrace*) I'm glad I've got *you*, anyroad.
- IRENE I'm glad for you too, lass. We're two peas from same pod, you an' me. Oh but you have got somebody, Bess: a brave husband comin' back from the war, an' I know that everything's gun'ter be fine an' well. And I'll wager this house'll be bouncin' wi' bairns before a couple more springs pass.
- BESS Aye... Thanks for helpin' me see straight. Things'll work out; I know they will - for me an' for you.
- IRENE Of course they will; they always do... Oh but look how this house sparkles! I'd call this a home you've got here, our Bess; a home fit for a hero... (*Sings*) *When Johnny comes marching home again, hurrah, hurrah..!*
- BESS joins in. They hold hands and dance around the room as they sing, eventually they stop and embrace each other: two sisters whose life will never be the same again. A brass band plays a melancholic air as the lights fade to black.

**SCENE 2**

Lights up. The room is empty. It is late afternoon. A brass band is playing some distance away 'When Johnny Comes Marching Home'. ERNIE runs in through the open door.

ERNIE           Bess! Bess, our Bess!

BESS rushes in from the opposite door, nervous.

BESS           What is it, Ernie?

ERNIE          The train's comin'! Can't you hear 'band?

BESS           Aye.

ERNIE          Well, are yer not comin' down t' station?

BESS           No - I'll wait 'ere.

ERNIE          But the band's there: the whole bloomin' town's turned out, almost!

BESS           I'm... waitin' 'ere for him. An' dun't you go disturbin' him later, neither!

ERNIE          What about the beer?

BESS           Bring the beer, but dun't be hangin' around.

ERNIE          Aw, our Bess! I want t' see him too; he is family now.

BESS           He wun't want you botherin' him straight after 'journey. He'll be tired an' hungry, so you just let him be.

ERNIE          I just want to ask him about his wound.

BESS           Ernie!

ERNIE          Well he is me brother-in-law, I've got a right t' know.

BESS           T' know what, exactly?

ERNIE          Everythin' - all the details.

BESS           I'm gun'ter brain you!

ERNIE          Jus' so's I can tell people. Jeremy Tadcote's cousin lost an eye!

BESS           I dun't think yer should go yappin' about it!

ERNIE          Frank Boulder, 'butcher's son had a bullet go straight through his shoulder. But nobody's got nothin' like Stanley.

BESS           It's nowt t' be proud of.

ERNIE          'Course it is - it's a war wound!

BESS           Just get out of 'ere, will yer!

ERNIE          It's a good 'n, an' all.

BESS           Get out!

ERNIE I'm goin'. I'll not miss welcome, even if you will.

ERNIE *turns to leave and bumps into IRENE, who is entering.*

IRENE What you doin' 'ere, Ernie?

ERNIE Just seein' if our Bess wor comin' t' station.

IRENE You were told to stay away.

ERNIE Ye're me sister, not me Mam!

IRENE I'll swing for you, I swear it!

ERNIE You shouldn't swear, Irene - on'y beggars an' bandits cuss!

ERNIE *runs out through the open door.*

IRENE *(Shouting after him)* Oh, you're so smart! *(Turns to face BESS)* I told him t' stay away.

BESS You can't tell our Ernie anythin', you should know that by now.

IRENE Stubborn little beggar... How are yer now, all right?

BESS I think so... sort o' dazed, I s'pose.

In the distance the band strike up another tune, 'See How the conquering Hero comes'. A crowd gives a cheer. IRENE crosses to the window and pulls back the lace.

It sounds like the hero's home!

BESS He's here?

IRENE I can't see 'owt, but by the sound of it all I'd hazard that cheer's for Stan.

BESS Stanley... *back.*

IRENE Oh Bess, you'll be fine now: Stanley back an' life t' live; no more partings, eh?

BESS No, no more. My Stanley's back an' I'll welcome him warm. He wun't ever want t' go away again.

IRENE *(Smiles)* Tha's the ticket... I'd best be goin' now, lass; leave yer to it. Thought I'd just look in, like.

BESS Ooh... I can't breathe properly; it's hot en't it?

IRENE You gun'ter be all right?

BESS Aye... it's the heat.

IRENE It *is* close.

BESS Muggy... *Irene!*

BESS *cries and embraces IRENE.*

IRENE Hey, hush up, hush up; it's nowt but butterflies!

IRENE *hugs and pats her, almost like a baby.*

Big sister's here, an' when I'm gone I'll on'y be a hop, stride an' a jump away - you'll not be alone wi' yer problems. (*Hands BESS a handkerchief*) Now blow yer nose an' dry yer eyes... *ninny!*

BESS Sorry, Irene.

IRENE If you keep excusin' yerself you'll be halfway up 'chimney.

BESS *smiles*, IRENE *smiles back*.

Look I *will* have t' go now, Bess; he'll be 'ere any second... Dun't forget *me*, will yer? I mean... yer know, we're still sisters an' all.

BESS 'Course not - you're me sister, me big sister.

IRENE Why does it tek a war t' me a hero, eh? I wish there was an easier way.

IRENE *exits and BESS is alone. She stands for a while looking at the open door, breathing heavy with trepidation. She then breaks away and leans over the range with her back to the door. STAN enters. He enters slowly, unsure, like an animal entering a strange place. One sleeve is pinned at his armless side, but he has a kit bag slung over his other shoulder. He stands stock-still for a while, watching BESS, who is unaware of his presence. STAN has a tic; a small mannerism that manifests itself sometimes, and sometimes when he speaks, his voice is faltering - a result of shell shock. He puts down his kit bag, almost silently. But BESS is now aware that someone is there. She turns to face STAN. There is a long pause.*

BESS Stanley...

STAN *takes a few steps towards BESS. But then a voice calls from outside as NAT enters and stops STAN in his tracks.*

NAT Nice place you've got 'ere, Stan!

*Pause.*

Hello.

BESS Hello.

NAT You must be Elizabeth?

BESS Aye.

NAT *drops his kit, crosses to BESS and extends his hand. BESS shakes it.*

NAT Pleased to meet you!

STAN This is Nat Jones, Bess, a mate o' mine.

NAT *Nat!* Like the little buggers that sting yer! (*Laughs*).

BESS *nods, bewildered.*

Nice place you've got 'ere, Mrs Cooper.

- BESS Thank you... erm; would yer like a drink? A cup o' tea, or... there'll be beer later; our Ernie, my brother I mean, my little brother, he's bringin' a jug round.
- NAT Beer, eh?
- STAN A cup o' tea'd be very nice, Bess - thanks.
- NAT Nice cup of tea - sounds lovely!
- BESS Well... sit down. I've got 'kettle on 'fire, wun't tek long.
- STAN *Kettle on 'fire* - looks like I've never bin away, Bess; everythin' exactly the same.
- BESS turns around from the range and smiles.*
- BESS I've got bacon for yer, too. And some other things - hot pot for t'night; I reckon it'll stretch t' yer friend, Mr Jones, I mean.
- NAT *Nat.*
- STAN Nat's stayin' for a few days, Bess. Yer dun't mind, do yer?
- BESS No! No, 'course not, on'y too happy. Mek yerself at home, Mr Jones; I reckon this house could stand some company.
- STAN It's bin a long time.
- BESS Oh God, too long, Stan.
- Pause.*
- NAT What about this cuppa, then?
- BESS Oh aye, sorry... I'll... (*Begins to make tea*). I thought Mayor's car was pickin' you up?
- STAN Aye, I preferred t' walk, though. Nipped off through back lane; *all that palaver wi' band an' buntin'..!* I shook a few hands an' rushed off.
- BESS Oh Stan! The Mayor sent his car for yer.
- STAN I din't ask him.
- BESS But it's for you; bein' a hero an' all that -Town wanted t' welcome yer wi' band an' everythin'.
- STAN Aye... I know that, but the car wor a bit much; you know me, Bess; wouldn't've felt comfortable.
- BESS But we're all so proud, Stan; all on us, for what you've done.
- STAN For what I've done?
- BESS For King an' Country, like.
- STAN Oh - that.
- BESS And... and for losin' yer arm.

*Pause.*

STAN *(Ironic laugh)* Din't mean t' lose it... Bit of a scarecrow, en't I?

BESS No, no - what yer did was brave - it wor a sacrifice.

STAN Is that what people say?

BESS Does it hurt?

STAN No, not anymore... Nat's a wounded soldier an' all, yer know.

NAT *grins.*

It's his toe.

NAT *laughs.*

He had his toe shot off.

NAT *laughs louder.*

NAT My big toe, Mrs Cooper; my big toe sacrificed for me Country!

BESS Oh...

STAN No, it's true enough; poor old Nat'll be invalided out, like me.

BESS I see... D'yer tek sugar, Mr Jones?

NAT Yeah, though some people'd say I'm sweet enough!

BESS Where are yer from, Mr Jones - London?

NAT How'd you guess? Bethnal Green, Mrs Cooper, East End lad I am; exe - barra' boy, fruit an' veg market.

BESS You worked markets?

NAT *Covent Garden*, best of 'em all; big green cathedral of the vegetable world! You ever been there?

BESS Me? No, I en't bin but south o' Sheffield, an' that were when pit strike were on an' I worked a while at 'mill.

NAT Well then you must see it, Mrs Cooper. The Tower an' Parliament are sights enough, but the market is the place to be first thing in the mornin'. It's a rare sight, I tell ya: bustle an' bloom everywhere, *an' the smell!* There's everythin' from artichokes to aspidistras cloggin' up your nostrils an' crammin' up your brain! Gimme the market to the relics any day - the visitors don't know what they're missin'.

BESS Will you be goin' back there t' work, then?

NAT No, no I don't think that'll be possible.

BESS Oh... you got summat else lined up?

NAT No, it's me toe you see. I sort a' walk wobbly now; need a stick most of the time. Can't see me cartin' round crates an' baskets no more. Somethin'll turn up, I expect.

BESS I'm sure. There's a chap at 'mill near Halifax, works looms an' everythin' an' he's... well, Irene told me about him; he's really good, s'posed t' be.

STAN The bloke wi' one arm?

BESS Aye.

STAN What will I do, eh?

BESS I just thought...

STAN Can't work seam no more; dun't know owt else.

BESS Perhaps yer could... I mean; there's plenty really.

STAN D' yer reckon?

*Pause.*

NAT (*Grinning*) You make a lovely cup of tea, Mrs Cooper.

BESS Thank you... They say it'll all be over soon.

STAN *nods.*

They're lookin' for coal on 'east side o' valley now... You should see our Ernie lately; he's bigger than me, almost - soldier mad.

*Pause.*

Mrs Daventry's got a gramophone.

STAN Has she?

BESS 'Bout a month ago. We all went round to hear it.

*Pause.*

*Ooh... it's hot!* You've brought the sunshine wi' yer.

STAN Aye.

*There is another uncomfortable pause. NAT is toying about with his teaspoon, jangling it idly as he stirs his already stirred tea.*

BESS D'yer get tea in France? I mean...

*There is a knock at the door.*

Oh... it must be...

ERNIE *enters carrying a jug of beer.*

ERNIE I knocked first.

STAN *Ernie!* Bloody hell, you've pushed up.

ERNIE I've brought jug, our Bess.

BESS Aye, well come in then -

ERNIE But you said...

BESS Just come in, Ernie. Say hello to Stanley.

ERNIE Hello Stanley. *(To NAT)* Who are you? *(To BESS)* *Who's he?*

BESS Sorry, Mr Jones, Ernie's not famous for bein' polite.

ERNIE What have I done now?

BESS Just put the jug down, Ernie. This is Mr Jones, a friend of Stanley's who's come t' stay for a while.

NAT Call me Nat.

NAT *extends his hand.* ERNIE *shakes it.*

ERNIE Ye're not from round 'ere, are yer?

BESS Mr Jones is from Covent Garden, an' dun't be so forward.

NAT Bethnal Green, actually.

ERNIE *(Turning to STAN)* Did it hurt when yer lost yer arm? How did it happen?

BESS Ernie!

ERNIE I'm on'y askin'!

STAN It's all right, Bess; s' a lads way, tha's all. How old are yer now, Ernie?

ERNIE Thirteen an' a half. Wish I was eighteen.

STAN Why wish yer life away?

ERNIE So I can be a soldier.

NAT That really is wishin' your life away!

ERNIE Does it feel funny, Stanley?

STAN Aye, it does. I can still feel it there sometime. I wake up in 'middle o' night, lean over for summat... *(ironic laugh)* catches me out... But it dun't hurt no more... Here, what's this? We've got a jug o' beer on 'table an' we're not suppin'!

BESS I'll get 'mugs -

STAN Get one for young Ernie, an' all.

BESS Oh, I dun't think...

STAN Just this once; celebration, en't it?

BESS Well just a spot. Me Mam'd kill me if she knew.

STAN (*Sardonic*) Dun't worry about her.

ERNIE Thanks Stanley!

NAT Come on - sit yourself down with the men.

ERNIE *enthusiastically joins them at the table.*

STAN How's me Mam bin?

NAT How'd yer think? Missin' yer - bag o' nerves, she is.

STAN I shoulda' wrote to her... shoulda' wrote t' you an' all.

BESS I said you'd see her t'morra'. She didn't want t' greet yer wi' all the crowd around.

STAN Like you?

BESS Aye...

ERNIE *is knocking back his mug of beer.*

Hey, steady on wi' that ale, our Ernie! You're not old enough.

ERNIE I'm nearly old enough for 'pit!

STAN Aye, you are that an' all.

BESS I dun't know what yer want t' go down no pit for; crawlin' about like rabbits in the dark.

ERNIE Stanley were a miner.

BESS Aye, well...

ERNIE An' our Da'.

BESS An' look what happened to him - killed cold as stone in cave-in.

STAN Aah, there's worse ways o' dyin'.

ERNIE Did you kill many Germans, Stanley? How many did yer kill?

STAN I weren't countin'.

ERNIE *notices STAN's nervous tic.*

STAN Stan, why are you..?

BESS Ernie -

ERNIE (*Drops it*) What about you... erm, Nat? Did you kill lots?

NAT Oh yes, we killed 'em all right, lots an' lots of 'em; like pickin' off sparra's, it was.

ERNIE (*To STAN*) You were at Pashendale, weren't yer? What wor it like?

STAN and NAT look at each other.

STAN Well, it weren't no picnic.

ERNIE Is that where yer lost yer arm?

BESS All right, Ernie...

STAN Aye, it wor there.

ERNIE How?

BESS Ernie, shut up!

STAN I... lost me arm, it wor blown off.

ERNIE Blimey, it must've hurt!

STAN Aye... aye, it come sharp.  
*Pause. Eventually STAN laughs. NAT joins in.*

NAT It was a bit sore.

STAN But that wor nothin'; some lost both arms.

NAT Both legs.

STAN Both arms and legs (*laughs*).

NAT And had to have their teeth pulled (*laughs*).

*They are both laughing. ERNIE looks puzzled. The laughter slowly subsides.*

STAN But it wor no picnic. How's the beer suit yer, Ernie?

ERNIE Reckon I'll get a taste for it in time. Bit sour though, en' it?

STAN *Knock it back!* Sour or not, it'll tek away taste o' dust when ye're minin'.

*ERNIE grins and swigs generously.*

NAT I'll drink to that one. Here's to the honest coal miner - good luck, Ernie!

*NAT toasts with his mug and they all swig.*

ERNIE I'd prefer the honest soldier.

STAN No, this meks more sense. Tek it from me, Ernie - you be a rabbit an' burrow deep, 'cause a hole's safer the deeper yer go. An' we've lived in 'em, so we know a bit about it.

ERNIE I'd still prefer the army t' this dump!

STAN No, no yer wouldn't. You dun't want t' go for no soldier, lad; it's a mug's game.

BESS There's three more from chums' battalion gone. Harry Squires wor killed last month.

STAN Harry..? I went t' school wi' 'im; big red face an' sort a' stupid lookin'. But he used t' run... he wor a good runner.

NAT                    Couldn't have been that good.

*Pause.*

ERNIE                Have yer got a gun?

STAN                 A gun?

ERNIE                Aye - a gun. Have yer got one 'ere wi' yer?

NAT                    What do you want a gun for? Somebody you don't like? Your headmaster, eh?

ERNIE                No, I just want t' see it.

NAT                    He hasn't got a gun.

ERNIE                Why not?

NAT                    They took 'em off us. We're finished you see; don't need 'em anymore.

ERNIE                Oh... What were the Germans like?

STAN                 How'd yer mean?

ERNIE                Well - they eat babies, dun't they?

*STAN and NAT laugh. BESS is preparing the food.*

*It said so in't' paper. An' they roast prisoners on 'fire - alive!*

STAN                 They're the same as us, just speak another language, tha's all.

ERNIE                But they're the enemy!

STAN                 An' we're *their* enemy; just a bunch o' lads like us.

ERNIE                But en't they barbarians, like?

NAT                    I preferred old Fritz to the Frogs any day. I sometimes felt we were fightin' the wrong bleedin' side!

ERNIE                But the French are our allies!

NAT                    You wouldn't've thought so sometimes. They were about as helpful as a carpenter in an igloo - right ignorant swines!

STAN                 Old Fritz weren't so bad.

ERNIE                *What?!*

STAN                 One of our lot dropped in't' shell-crater wi' one durin' the Somme offensive. He were shot up right bad, thought his end'd come. So there he were, cowerin' in't' corner like a whipped dog; eventually opens his eyes an' there's this German chap wi' gun an' bayonet sittin' all nice an' comfortable like, opposite.

ERNIE                What happened?

STAN                 Hun broke open his emergency dressin', patched him up a bit, gave him some hard tack t' chew on while battle wor ragin', an' then dragged him to a cable trench near the home line.

ERNIE            Why?

STAN            'Cause they were both a couple o' lads.

NAT             It's the Brass that are the enemy; an' they're sittin' right back three miles yonder, watchin' it all through their binoculars. They stick their little pins in their maps an' over the top we go!

ERNIE           I dun't understand... I thought...

NAT             Yeah, you keep thinkin'. You an' your school pals'll work it out one day, an' you'd better get it right 'cause some things have got to be sorted out very soon.

ERNIE           What d'yer mean?

NAT             What I mean is the world's never gonna be the same anymore.

ERNIE           What's he talkin' about, Stanley? En't we winnin'?

STAN            What he's sayin' Ernie is nobody's winnin' but them 'as are runnin' the show.

ERNIE           Din't yer like it then?

STAN            (*Hopeless laugh*) Not really, Ernie.

ERNIE           Oh.

BESS            Sup up now, our Ernie. I'll be dishin' out dinner just now, an' we wun't want you gawpin' at us.

STAN            Dun't worry.

ERNIE           I think I feel drunk!

                  STAN *and* NAT *laugh*.

STAN            You've on'y supped but a nipple-full!

NAT             It's the lad's first swig. It's gone to his head.

ERNIE           I think I *am* drunk.

BESS            You're not drunk, Ernie. Come on - get out.

ERNIE           I think I'll have t' stay a while an' sober up.

BESS            Ye're tryin' it on, Ernie, I weren't born yesterday. I've let yer stay for a while, now come on -

ERNIE           (*Getting up*) If me Mam notices, it'll be your fault.

BESS            Dun't be cheeky - it dun't suit yer.

NAT             Watch out how you go, Captain. Keep to the footpaths, eh?

ERNIE           I'll try. Tarah Stanley. Will yer tell me what it wor really like sometime?

STAN            If yer really want t' know.

- ERNIE            *I do!* I mean, hand-to-hand combat an' things like that. Will yer walk past our school t'morra'?
- STAN            What?
- ERNIE            So's me muckers can see yer arm.
- BESS            *Out!*
- ERNIE            I'm going! (*Exiting*) Ten o' clock, Stanley, by 'playground - tarah!
- ERNIE *exits.*
- BESS            Sorry Stan; it's hero worship, I suppose.
- STAN            Aye.
- BESS            He dun't mean no harm by it.
- STAN            I know that. The war can look different in a newspaper.
- BESS            Were it really that bad?
- STAN            Aye... it was.
- BESS            What *was* it like?
- Pause.*
- STAN            It wor... well, yer know...
- NAT            That stew smells nice, Mrs Cooper.
- BESS            Aye, it should be warmed through now. I'll dish it out.
- There is silence as she sets the table and dishes out the stew. When she is seated, they begin to eat.*
- NAT            *What can I say, Mrs Cooper, what can I say?* This is beautiful! I ain't tasted food like this in a long time, I can tell ya!
- BESS            It's nice?
- NAT            *Beautiful!* Beats the bully beef slop we've been used to.
- STAN is struggling with a piece of meat. BESS notices. Eventually STAN throws down his knife in frustration. BESS stands and goes to him. She picks up his knife and fork and begins to cut the meat into pieces. STAN doesn't look at her. When BESS has finished, she sits back in her place. After a pause, STAN picks up his fork and begins to eat.*
- NAT            Same old slop every mealtime, never changed; always the same old blinkin' slop! Sometimes warm, sometimes cold - never hot. Don't think they ever managed to heat the stuff up, not once (*laughs*)! I think the rats ate better than us; and the officers, of course.
- BESS            I'm glad ye're enjoyin' it, Mr Jones.

NAT           It's lovely! Can't beat a good meal, almost a *carnal pleasure* after two years fightin', I can tell ya!

STAN           *(Irritated)* Lay off, Nat!

NAT           Pecker up, mate. No offence meant.

*Pause.*

STAN           Is... is Irene married now?

BESS           No, 'fraid not.

STAN           Oh, I thought it wor on the cards, like. What about that fellah she wor seein'?

BESS           He went away, Stan. I told yer in me letters.

STAN           Oh... aye... What, wor he a gipsy, or summat?

BESS           No, he worked at all sorts: bricklayin', helped out the Smithy at 'pit for a while, too.

STAN           Why did he go then?

BESS           Weren't really the settlin' type - had an eye for the lasses, yer know?

STAN           What, yer mean he took another?

BESS           Well no, but he weren't shy o' lookin'.

STAN           There's no harm wi' lookin'.

BESS           It weren't *just* that.

STAN           What else then?

BESS           He wor a coward.

STAN           A coward?

BESS           Aye.

STAN           He left her 'cause he wor a coward?

BESS           No, not rightly. He were driven away, really.

STAN           Now d'yer mean?

BESS           He wouldn't join up.

NAT           *(Shakes his head)* Tut, tut, tut!

BESS           Old Bainbridge wanted him for Chums Battalion.

NAT           *(Looks up)* Bainbridge, is that..?

STAN           The Mayor, aye.

BESS           D'yer know him?

NAT           Stan's told me about him.

BESS So anyroad, Bainbridge up an' called him a coward, an' most everyone in town upped an' threw feathers at him an' all.

STAN So he left?

BESS Aye.

STAN How'd Irene tek it?

BESS She were broken up at first; but he wor a bad 'n. Me Mam never took to him.

STAN Your Mam never took to anyone.

*BESS looks hurt. Pause.*

NAT Anymore of this stew left, Mrs Cooper? Pardon me for askin'; but it really is delicious!

BESS *(Rising and taking NAT's plate)* Of course, no trouble; there should be enough for another helping all around. What about you, Stan?

*STAN shakes his head. BESS dishes out the stew and hands it to NAT.*

I wasn't expectin' a guest, Mr Jones. There's a mattress in t' spare room, but it's not bin aired.

NAT Aired or not aired, a mattress'll be a luxury compared to our previous arrangements: bare boards an' sandbags have been our beds for a while. Don't worry on my account, Mrs Cooper; I'll sleep like a dead dog tonight.

BESS I'll look out some blankets.

NAT Much obliged.

*BESS sits down. The meal resumes.*

To sleep on a mattress..!

*There is a knock at the door.*

BESS Come in -

*BEATRICE enters. She stands, framed in the doorway.*

STAN *Mam!*

BEATRICE Sorry Stanley, Bess... I couldn't wait till tomorra'; I had t' come round.

BESS That's all right, Beattie.

STAN *(Rising)* Hey Mam... your hair, bloody hell, you've gone grey *(laughs)*!

BEATRICE *(Laughs)* What a thing t' say t' yer Mam!

STAN Aye...

BEATRICE Look at you... what have yer done?

BEATRICE *breaks down and begins to cry.*

What have they done t' yer?

STAN *goes to her. She puts her arms around him.*

STAN I'm home now, Mam - no need t' cry.

BEATRICE Your arm... your poor arm...

STAN Hey come on now; it's done; nowt we can do about it.

BEATRICE Oh Stan - *look at yer!*

BESS But he's home now, Beattie.

BEATRICE Aye, thank God ye're home, son! Ye're back wi' us an' we can tek care on yer.

NAT Soldiers are a tough lot - he'll be all right.

BESS This is Mr Jones, Beattie - a friend o' Stan's.

NAT Been keepin' me eye on him.

BEATRICE (*Confused*) Have yer?

STAN I'm all right, Mam.

BEATRICE *hugs him tight.*

BEATRICE Aye, aye, so am I now... *Yer arm, though! Oh, yer poor arm!*

Brass band music as lights fade to blackout.

**SCENE 3**

*It is early morning the following day. STAN and NAT are together. NAT is standing, drinking a cup of tea, shirtsleeves and dangling braces. STAN is at the range, poking the embers of the previous night's fire.*

NAT We can't afford to waste time, Stan.

*Pause.*

Crank the engine an' set it rolling.

*Pause.*

You're not goin' soft, are ya?

*Pause.*

*(Shakes his head)* Don't let me down, Stan.

STAN I'm not lettin' yer down.

NAT Well just don't, or...

STAN *(Looks up)* Or what?

NAT Look, you're me mate, ain't ya?

STAN "Or what?"

NAT Or nothing... You know it's right, Stan.

STAN I know my duty here, but it's not for you I'll do it.

NAT No mate, not for one - *for all*.

STAN For *me*.

NAT It means the same thing.

STAN T' you, mebbe.

*Pause.*

NAT You're a strange fish, sulkin' like a woman's bleedin' monthly! It's this place sappin' at ya - *home!* It pulls at your heartstrings an' yanks your guts 'till you feel like spewin'.

*Pause.*

You don't belong 'ere anymore, Stan. You know that, don't ya?

*Pause.*

I could never take leave after the first year; couldn't stomach it:: all them people millin' about doin' nothin' in particular; an' there at the back of your head the guns are still hammerin' away, an' the old brain box is stuffed to burstin' with the yellin' stink of sulphur an' bad meat. How can you ever come back to it all after *the front*? Nothin' means anythin' anymore. There's no purpose 'ere, mate, no value.

STAN           What *are* you sayin'?

NAT            You know what I'm sayin', don't fool yourself. We've been to hell an' back; so now we can give them a taste of apocalypse.

STAN           You talk like a Methodist.

NAT            I talk like a soldier who was once a man - an ordinary man!

*Pause.*

STAN           Aye... an' so was I. But now we're a couple of cripples. What can we do? What can we really do? *An eye for an' eye*, and that's as much as we can expect, yer cockney nit.

NAT            No, that's where you're wrong, mate - things can never be the same again, not after what we've been through. It's our turn now an' the nobs'd better look out 'cause there's gonna be no more "*Yes sir, no sir three bags full, sir*"; no more fightin' a fool's errand for the bleedin' aristocracy - the King an' his poncey lackeys shootin' grouse while we're away doin' their dirty work. There's a change in the air, Stan; a great change on the way.

STAN           Listen t' Moses!

NAT            Listen to common sense.

STAN           Ye're a dreamer. But it wun't solve anythin' in the long term: we're like ghosts, we're already dead; just got a bit of hauntin' t' do before we dissolve in'ter smoke.

NAT            What kind of talk's that?! I'm no puff of smoke! I'm Corporal Nathaniel Jones, 0561778, blood, bones, guts an' steel: trained to kill, maim, inflict pain an' generally mess up the enemy's bollocks! An' I've got a dream, or better still - a nightmare - a big black spider of a nightmare to bring the piss to their pants. That's what I am; an' if you had any sense, you'd grind your teeth an' jump on the wagon too; 'cause without a purpose it don't meant nothin'! How about it then?

STAN           Eh?

NAT            Well, should we go out, like? Observe the ground plan, movements, time-schedules, all that sort of thing.

STAN           You're anxious.

NAT            Too right I'm bloody anxious. I dread every bleedin' knock at the door. Time is not on our side right now, Stan. Let's not wait too long.

STAN           I'll do it when I'm ready.

NAT            When *you're* ready?

STAN           That's what I said.

NAT            Right... when you're ready.

STAN           Dun't worry, I want it as much as you - it'll be a kind o' release. Leave it at that, eh?

NAT            I just want you to see what it could become.

STAN           I dun't owe you anythin', Nat - so lay off!

NAT            *You what?!* Don't you come that one, Stan! Don't you say that. We're in this together - blood for blood, no two ways about it, mate. Look at me... *look at me!*

STAN *looks.*

Blood for blood - we decided together. *Together.*

*Pause.*

All right?

*Another small pause and BESS enters from the stairs. NAT's demeanour instantly changes.*

Good mornin', Mrs Cooper! As bright as the day itself!

BESS           Aye, the sun's as hot today... I thought I heard..?

NAT            Just discussin', Mrs Cooper. Friendly argument, that's all.

STAN           Did we wake yer, Bess?

BESS           No I wor just gettin' up, anyroad.

STAN           There's a pot on. D'yer want a brew?

BESS           No... I thought we'd got straight out.

STAN           Oh?

BESS           I'd like t' go t' church; say a short prayer.

STAN           Aye?

BESS           Ye're back home, Stan; mebbe not in one piece, but ye're where yer belong an' that's one prayer answered at least. So I just thought we..? Well, yer know... if yer wanted, like?

STAN           Aye, aye, all right Bess.

BESS           How about you, Mr Jones? Would yer like t' join us?

NAT            Not much of a church man, Mrs Cooper. Though thank you for the kind thought.

BESS           The vicar wun't there, Stan; just quiet an' peaceful - we can be alone.

STAN Right.

BESS He's bin askin' about yer, though, lookin' forward t' welcomin' yer back t' fold.

NAT With all the other sheep, eh?

STAN Why dun't yer go an' tek a walk, Nat - clear yer head?

NAT No, no, I'll wait for you, Stan. You can show me around the town; point out places of interest.

STAN Dun't worry, I'll show yer around. We've got plenty o' time.

*STAN is struggling to fasten the buttons on his tunic. BESS goes to him. A pause and then she fastens them for him.*

Thanks lass.

*BESS smiles and picks up a bible from the mantelpiece.*

BESS *(Putting on hat)* Bye, Mr Jones.

NAT *Nat*, please.

STAN See yer later, *Nat*.

*STAN and BESS begin to exit.*

NAT Say one for me, eh Stan?

*STAN and BESS exit. NAT gazes at the open door for a while, and then sits down with his back to it. He glares at the opposite wall and then suddenly slams his fist on the table. He leans over his cup in frustrated anger. Pause and then IRENE enters. NAT does not turn around.*

IRENE Stan..?

*NAT turns to face IRENE and smiles.*

Oh... oh sorry. I thought it wor Stan, back from the... You must be Nat. Ernie told me about yer.

*NAT stands and proffers his hand.*

NAT Right first time! *(Shakes her hand)* Nathaniel Jones, but *Nat* to friends and... charming acquaintances.

IRENE Pleased ter meet yer.

NAT No, the pleasure's mine, Mrs..?

IRENE *Miss* - Bradley, Irene Bradley.

NAT *Irene* - Mrs Cooper's sister.

IRENE That's right.

NAT                   Of course. I can see the resemblance - two peaches from the same tree.  
IRENE laughs, flattered and embarrassed.  
I'm sorry, Irene. Didn't mean to embarrass you. *Me an' my mouth!* It just sorta' runs away with itself sometimes.

IRENE                Oh...

NAT                   An' you are a very attractive woman, if you don't mind me sayin' so.

IRENE                Well... no.

NAT                   An' after eighteen months of trudgin' the line, well I have to say it's something of a pleasure to be able to commend beauty once again.

IRENE                Thank you, I'm...

NAT                   Stan's gone to church.

IRENE                Oh...

NAT                   To say a prayer.

IRENE                That's nice.

NAT                   Husband an' wife bendin' their knees on a cold slate floor: eyes closed, hands together, thankin' the Almighty for a safe return - *that's what I call a picture!* Home an' family; can't beat it, can ya?

IRENE                No... I suppose I'd better be off...

NAT                   No, no, no, stay for a while, please Irene? There's no rush is there?

IRENE                Well...

NAT                   There's tea in the pot an' the mornin's bright an' warm. Let's share a bit of company - if you're willin', of course.

IRENE                I s'pose I *could* stay... a few minutes.

NAT                   A few minutes of your company, Irene would be lovely. Sit yourself down an' I'll be mother -

IRENE                Thank you.

IRENE *sits at the table.* NAT *begins to make tea.*

NAT                   This is cosy an' comfy an' no mistakin'. I can't tell you how it feels for me to be up here amongst such friendly people.

IRENE                I should imagine we all seem a bit quaint after London. It's a grand place, so I hear.

NAT                   Oh yes it's grand enough all right. But the people can be a little *too* formal there sometimes; a little bit cold an' reserved.

IRENE                I s'pose it's what ye're used to, really.

NAT                   I suppose so.

IRENE            If you're surrounded by society an' such, it's bound ter rub off.

NAT             (*Laughs*) It's catching - we think we're all dukes an' duchesses! But the real English roses are all up here, I'd judge. All them posh la-di-dah ladies an' such like aren't a patch on some of the fresh-faced creatures I've seen around here.

IRENE            *Go on!* London lasses 'ud put us ter shame for glamour.

NAT             I'm tellin' ya: it's all paint an' pastiche, lipstick an' pearls; pull on a string an' down fall the curls!

IRENE *laughs.*

                  You'd knock the spots off some of the so-called *society beau's* I've seen twirlin' their parasols along the Mall.

IRENE            *Me?!*

NAT             You'd not be so popular at the *palace do's* with the female aristocracy, I can tell ya.

IRENE            Oh no, now you *are* exaggerating.

NAT             Please yourself, but it's from the heart. It may sound corny put in my rough manner; but the truth is the truth, an' if I'm one thing, it's honest - you can carve my words in stone, Irene; I don't flatter for the say-so.

*Pause.*

IRENE            So, you're a friend o' Stan's?

NAT             He's a good lad.

IRENE            How did yer meet?

NAT             Our companies were billeted together. Fought the same trenches for nigh on six months; got wounded together.

IRENE            You're wounded too?

NAT             (*Laughs*) Had me toe shot off, me big toe.

IRENE            Oh... I'm sorry.

NAT             It's not so bad, bit of a limp, that's all. Got me a cane now.

*He grabs his stick and twirls it in a send-up music hall style.*

*Gives me a bit of character, what?* People think I'm a right toff, tappin' me way down the Strand!

IRENE *laughs.*

                  I like to hear a woman's laugh.

*Pause.*

I feel... do you mind me sayin' this; spoutin' on, I mean?

IRENE No, 'course not.

NAT Well, I feel so contented right now; so warm an' contented. I'm sittin' here on a bright English day in the house of a good friend; the sun's shinin' in through the door an' across from me sits... I feel sort of uplifted, you know? Your face, Irene... you make me feel good; just to see you, like - you're beautiful, you really are.

IRENE *(Rising)* I'd better be goin'...

NAT *(Rising too)* Oh Gawd, what have I done? Please don't go, Irene? I shouldn't have said that, I know!

IRENE *(Crosses to look out of the window)* No, it dun't matter.

NAT No, it does! I'm gettin' carried away with meself -too long away, you see. It's been mud an' slog for the past year; bombs an' bleedin' bullets an' all! I'm too excited, I suppose... I haven't seen anythin' really beautiful for such a long, long time. I just wanted to tell ya, tha's all. I didn't mean to... you know?

IRENE I'm not beautiful, Nat. Really I'm not.

NAT You are; you're very beautiful

IRENE There's other girls around 'ere...

NAT Never mind *other girls* - I'm not blind, I've travelled around, seen pretty maids all in a row from here to Timbuktu! I know a beautiful woman when I see one.

*Pause.*

Irene, could I see you sometime? Walk out together somewhere one afternoon?

IRENE I dun't know...

NAT Just a stroll. I'd so enjoy it. I'd be very honoured if you would.

*Pause.*

Well?

IRENE I s'pose we could. Just for an' hour or so, mind.

NAT Thank you.

*Pause.*

You look lovely against the light; the sun shinin' through your hair.

*He goes to her.*

I feel funny. Do you feel funny?

IRENE A bit nervous, but it's nice.

*NAT stands directly behind her and looks through the window, too.*

NAT Out there... across the sea, I mean; it's all black, all black an' red an' noisy: the sky tearin', the landscape rumblin' like a disgustin' sound from the earth's gut... But here, everything's green an' blue an' clear... an' peaceful. You look so pretty.

IRENE Do I?

*NAT turns her around and kisses her. They hold the embrace until a voice calls from outside.*

LOUIE *(Off)* Hello! Elizabeth!

IRENE It's me Mam!

*IRENE and NAT break from each other. LOUIE and UNCLE WILLY enter.*

LOUIE What are you doin' 'ere, Irene? You were s'posed t' be pickin' up 'washin' from Mrs Drayton.

IRENE I thought I'd pop in on Stan, on the way.

LOUIE Well Stanley dun't appear t' be 'ere.

NAT He's gone to say a prayer.

LOUIE I beg yer pardon?

NAT To church with his good wife.

IRENE This is Nat, Mam; Stan's friend, Ernie told us about.

*NAT extends his hand. LOUIE doesn't shake it.*

LOUIE *Nat?* What kind of a name's that?

NAT It's short for Nathaniel.

LOUIE If yer parents saw fit t' give you a decent Christian name, the least yer can do is use it properly. What would yer surname be, young man?

NAT Jones.

*LOUIE extends her hand and shakes with NAT.*

LOUIE Very pleased ter make yer acquaintance I'm sure, Mr Jones. I am Mrs Bradley. This is Uncle Willy.

WILLY *(Nods)* Hello.

*NAT smiles.*

LOUIE Well it seems you two have already bin acquainted.

IRENE *Mam -*

LOUIE            Nowt wrong wi' bein' friendly. We're all good neighbours an' good Christians, I'm sure. What d' you say, Uncle Willy?

WILLY            *Me?* Well, I... I s'pose we, er...

LOUIE            Yer dun't appear t' be dressed, young man.

NAT                I haven't been up very long.

LOUIE            I thought the army were s'posed t' teach yer ter tek a pride in yerself? It's fairly indecent sittin' around wi' braces danglin'; somethin' my husband never did.

NAT                (*Fastening shirt*) I wasn't expectin' company. If I'd have known...

WILLY            It's hot enough ter go wi'out shirt t'day though, Louie.

LOUIE            Just because savages run about naked in t' jungle, dun't mean we have ter give way to heathen standards every time the sun shines... I tek it you'll be stayin' here for a while, Mr Jones?

NAT                Stan kindly invited me over to meet his good family.

LOUIE            You're wounded too, I understand?

NAT                Lost me big toe. (*Smiles*).

LOUIE            Very unfortunate, I'm sure. But all for King an' Country. You can be certain we all appreciate the sacrifices our men have med for us.

NAT                We're very glad to know that, Mrs Bradley.

LOUIE            Aye... well, we're all united on that front, I'm sure.

IRENE *begins to exit.*

Aye, off yer go about yer business, Irene. Copper's on 'boil, so dun't be long. There's a load from vicarage ter boil through t'day, an' all.

IRENE *exits.*

We tek in washin' for a livin', amongst other things. My husband passed away some years back, so we manage the best we can.

*Pause.*

We'll wait 'ere for Stanley an' Elizabeth, if yer dun't mind, Mr Jones.

NAT                Be my guest -

*They all sit.*

WILLY            It's fair hot weather an' all t'day!

NAT                Nice to see the sun shine.

WILLY            It's bin a fair few weeks now: corn's ripe already. Reckon this'll be a summer ter remember.

*Pause.*

I'll, er... I'll just loosen me collar a bit, I think. If yer dun't mind o' course, like?

LOUIE As long as yer dun't go rippin' yer shirt off along wi' it.

UNCLE WILLY *laughs. It peters away to a silence. Pause.*

Did yer come straight 'ere from France?

NAT From the hospital just outside Paris.

LOUIE Have yer not bin ter see yer family on't' way?

NAT No.

LOUIE I should imagine they'll be wonderin' where you are. Surely you owed them a visit first off?

NAT They know I'm all right. I wanted to see Stan home first.

LOUIE Yer poor mother must be worried to high heaven!

NAT I sent her a letter.

LOUIE Very considerate of you, I must say.

NAT I wouldn't want them worryin' on my account.

*Pause.*

LOUIE I tek it yer a bachelor, Mr Jones?

NAT Foot-loose an' fancy free, Mrs Bradley! An' I take it you're a widow?  
*(Winks at her).*

UNCLE WILLY *laughs, but quickly turns it to a throaty cough as LOUIE turns her glare on him. STAN and BESS enter.*

BESS Mam, I din't know yer wor comin' over.

LOUIE *(Standing and smiling)* It's good ter see yer back, Stanley. I was very upset to hear of yer wound.

*She goes to him and kisses him on his cheek. He does not respond.*

Well now, here we are again: a family t'gether as it should be an' everythin' back ter normal!

WILLY Welcome back, lad.

STAN Hello, Uncle Willy.

WILLY Good ter see yer... Proud we are, aye proud... en't we Louie?

LOUIE Aye, we are that.

WILLY Aye, proud *(laughs)*. Aye...

NAT            Shall I mash up another brew? The kettle's full an' near to singin' for relief! A toast, eh?

WILLY        Nay lad, we'll toast wi' summat stronger than tea!

LOUIE        Tea will do fine, Uncle Willy.

WILLY        I thought we'd fetch out last o' brandy Wun't tek me a second ter nip out.

LOUIE        We'll save that for Friday.

WILLY        I just thought...

LOUIE        Aye, I know what you thought! Tea will do fine, Mr Jones.

*NAT prepares tea.*

BESS        Well now, let's mek ourselves comfortable, then -

*They all sit.*

NAT        You weren't away too long, Stan.

BESS        Church is on'y on 'corner.

NAT        Yeah, it don't take long to say a prayer, I suppose.

LOUIE        A prayer well said is worth a book o' words an' babble. Good ter know you took the trouble ter thank yer Maker for yer safe return.

*NAT hands the tea around.*

I noticed yer skipped the welcome at 'station. 'Mayor sent his car, an' all!

BESS        He din't want no fuss, Mam.

LOUIE        I'd put up wi' fuss if people'd troubled ter turn out an' welcome me. I on'y hope folk dun't tek wrong end o' stick.

STAN        What d'yer mean?

LOUIE        I on'y hope they dun't tek it as a sleight, tha's all.

BESS        I'm sure they'll understand.

LOUIE        I hope Mr Bainbridge does; sendin' chauffer an' band an' such-like.

NAT        We've not upset the Mayor, I hope! Stan wouldn't mean to do that, I'm sure.

LOUIE        It's a fine honour. There's a great many killed from this town - there's no band for them.

STAN        I just couldn't... tha's all... I din't deserve it; there's better men than me fightin'.

LOUIE        It's not often we get the chance ter celebrate nowadays: this war has took its toll on 'town. But our small handful have had their say in 'battle rolls by all accounts.

WILLY           Aye, Bosche'll know we wor around, what d'yer say, Stan..? I mean, I think, yer know, we must've gie'd 'em a blatherin' an all... I mean knowin' how some of'm felt around 'ere, like.

STAN            It's not that simple, Uncle Willy.

WILLY           Eh?

STAN            It's different out there... I can't explain.

LOUIE           Well you've done your bit now, Stanley. An' whatever yer think of it, you count yerself lucky ter be back in one...

                  NAT *smiles.*

                  Well ye're back anyroad, an' that's all that matters; an' you *are* lucky by all accounts.

STAN            Lucky?

LOUIE           Ye're still young an' got plenty o' time ter sort things out for yerself an' yer wife.

STAN            Oh aye?

LOUIE           It's no good feelin' sorry for yerself. We've got ter find you a job of sorts; some kind of occupation for when army money stops - you've got a wife, an' happen be bairns t' support.

STAN            (*Forceful, but quiet*) I can look after meself, I dun't need your advice.

BESS            Stan -

NAT             Excuse me, I must use the, er... Nice meetin' you, Mrs Bradley.

                  He smiles and exits. LOUIE glares at his back as he exits. Then turns back to STAN.

LOUIE           I'm sorry yer feel that way, Stanley. I'm sure I dun't want ter poke my nose where it's not wanted.

BESS            Oh Mam, Stan's upset, tha's all.

STAN            Yer Mam can mind her own business, an' you can stop mekin' excuses for me, an' all.

BESS            (*Upset*) Oh Stan...

LOUIE           It was a dreadful experience over there, I'm sure; an' yer nerves'll tek a while t' settle down. But I've got a daughter, an' I can't help concernin' myself for her welfare. (*Rises*) Come along, Uncle Willy. (*Almost an afterthought*) We're throwin' a little party for yer, Friday, a little dinner, just close family. Good ter have yer back, Stanley.

                  LOUIE begins to exit with UNCLE WILLY.

## DEAD WOOD REVIEWS

### *The Watermill Theatre, Newbury. September 1997.*

**Newbury Weekly News** - *Back from the trenches* - Being present at the premiere of *Deadwood* was a privilege I would not have missed for worlds. From the first moment the play did what I personally ask of any work of fiction, dramatic or literary: it took me into the closed circle of other people's lives, so that their problems became my problems, their joys my joys, their suffering, my suffering. Its main concern is war and particularly the aftermath of war. Alex Jones deals with this powerfully, exemplifying his theme with the return of two young soldiers from the appalling horrors of trench warfare of World War One. To reveal the plot, including as it does mystery, intrigue and surprise would be unfair, but I can say that the protagonists were varied and truthful. As Bess, the young wife of the wounded Stan, Verity Hewlett opened the play, working in her painfully tidy kitchen with utter conviction and setting then tone of realism for the rest of the evening. Her jilted sister Irene was equally brought to life by Sarah Malin. Stan and Nat, the two returning soldiers, unable to forget the terrible past or to envisage a future worth having were superbly played by James Buller and Callum Dixon, though in fact I hesitate to use the word 'played'. These actors *lived* their parts. All the characters were well rounded and many-faceted. Beatrice (Helen Dorward), who is a courageous widow, a loving strict mother and a determined survivor, also typified the head-in-the-sand attitude to the war, which was common at the time. Uncle Willy (Desmond McNamara), a fairly useless alcoholic showed himself not incapable of providing comfort and support. Jane Wood as Stan's own mother gave her son uncritical love. The evening was not without its lighter moments. Stephen Hoyle as the young brother Ernie made his ghoulish questions funny and true, and the family party complete with music hall songs was... for a time... a delightful period piece. The flavour of period dialogue excellently caught and the kitchen and its furnishings were those appropriate to a miner's cottage of the time. It was sensitively directed by Stephen Rayne. I have long believed that the poems of Wilfred Owen should be compulsory reading in schools and colleges. Now I would add to that a requirement that young people see a production of *Deadwood* by Alex Jones. It is all too easy to forget what war is really like. Last night I was most effectively reminded. *Valerie Maskell.*

**The Stage** - Two soldiers return from the trenches of the First World War with very different agendas in this impressive new play, which is premiering at the Watermill. Uppermost in Stan's mind is getting re-acquainted with his wife Bess and exploring the career prospects for a one-armed man, which he is now. But his Cockney pal Nat wants to overturn the whole social order, which in his view caused the war, and he does not mind starting his campaign in Stan's own mining community household. Dramatist Alex Jones explores this scenario with insight and Stephen Rayne's eloquent production does the play justice. There are particularly vivid performances by Callum Dixon as the troublemaker Nat and Sarah Malin as Irene, who sees in him her chances of happiness after a previous blighted affair. James fuller movingly conveys Stan's growing disillusionment, but Verity Hewlett's Bess does not quite come into focus. Sturdy support comes from Jane Wood as Irene's and Bess' formidable Mum and Stephen Hoyle as their cheeky kid brother Ernie. Fotini Dimou's set includes a wonderful old-fashioned range. *Roy Martin.*

**Oxford Times 'Hot Ticket'** - *Fine new play tells too much too soon* - The grate has been blacked. The whole house is spick and span. The best china is on the table. There's a real stew on the range - it smells delicious. Bess wants everything exactly right for her husband Stan when he returns from the war; she wants to show him "nowt's changed". Down at the railway station a municipal welcome is laid on. The town band is out and the mayor has provided his car for a ceremonial ride home. For Stan (James Buller) is a hero. He has been invalided away from the horrors of the First World War. In this new play Alex Jones builds up the anticipation most skilfully. Young Ernie (Stephen Hoyle) arrives prematurely to inspect the wounds and hear the gory details. Pruriently, you too wonder how disfigured Stan will look. Suddenly he's there, minus an arm and with the other shaking alarmingly as he holds a teacup. And Stan doesn't return alone. He comes accompanied by Nat (Callum Dixon), a Cockney wideboy, who seems less affected by his horrific experiences. But Bess's gloomy forebodings that Stan "will never be the

same again" are soon proved true. So far, so very good. You are drawn into the tight family circle by a combination of good dialogue and uniformly first-class acting from the whole cast. Even a stereotype mother-in-law (Jane Wood), hatchet of face and vicious of mouth, is excellently fleshed out in performance. The play begins by making its point simply and without lecturing the audience. But then Alex Jones goes and gives the game away too early. You don't get the chance to guess what might happen, you are told. With a few changes this could become a really moving play. As it is, *Deadwood* still serves as a grim reminder of the predictable and unpredictable after-effects of war - after effects which the Gulf War showed us are still not fully understood today. *Giles Woodforde*

**The Times** - The larks are singing, there's bacon in the larder, the hob has been polished and Stanley's coming back from the war - But Bess is riddled with nerves. She instinctively knows that things can't be the same with a one-armed, shell-shocked ex-soldier. Sensibly she has arranged to wait for him at the house, eschewing the brass band and the mayor's formal war-hero welcome down at the station. Above all they need to be alone. But when Stanley appears he's with Nat, his Cockney mucker from the trenches. Alex Jones has written a compelling, enjoyable First World War family drama, but the mysterious bond between Nat and Stan is submerged until the end. The playwright has been seduced by the techniques of suspense and so withholds the information, which would allow exploration of the idea more fully. The character of Nat (Callum Dixon) is pivotal: is he merely an opportunist, subversive force, or is he a truly radical voice? Stephen Rayne's production paints him as gnat-like as his name: small, malicious, tenacious. Verity Hewlett's performance as Bess is so rich and insightful that she has the audience wholeheartedly on her side. Sarah Malin is equally endearing as Bess's vivacious sister, Irene, and while James Buller's torn and mentally bleeding Stan evokes our sympathy, the cards are stacked on the side of domestic status quo rather than political upheaval. Fotini Dimou's lovingly recreated set only reinforces the sense - who would ever want to leave this cosy little nest once they'd got back to it? *Clare Bayley.*

**The Guardian** - The First World War is still raging when Stan returns to his northern pit-town home, invalided out of the services. To his wife's dismay, he brings with him an army mate, the former East End barrow boy Nat. The days that follow underline the gulf between the realities of war for those who fought it, and the assumptions of those who stay at home. Stan increasingly finds himself caught in a no-man's-land between his wife's desire to see him assimilated back into the world that sent him off to fight, and his friend's determination to exact revenge. Alex Jones's new play - one of two he is premiering this month is absorbing, moving and provocative and has a climax of considerable power. There are however some startlingly unsubtle acting. Honourable exceptions include Callum Dixon's Nat, whose Cockney chirpiness is convincingly edged with menace and James Buller's unsettled and unsettling Stan. *Mick Martin.*

**Reading Weekend Post** - *First World War theme that's well explored* - As a newspaper story recently reminded us - there are still unexploded bombs lying around from the First World War. There are also dormant themes from that period which the theatre has not explored and Alex Jones tackles them forcefully in *Deadwood*, which is having its premiere at the Watermill Newbury. It centres on Stan, returning from the front to a hero's welcome at his mining village, but bearing both physical and emotional scars. He brings with him a comrade-in-arms Cockney Nat, who seems at first to be just a Jack-the-lad type, but turns out to be nursing a revolutionary agenda which threatens the fragile equilibrium of Stan's family. This is a fine new play and Stephen Rayne's production certainly does it justice. There are particularly vivid performances by Callum Dixon as gadfly Nat and Sarah Malin as Irene, who sees in him her chance of happiness after a previous blighted affair. James Fuller movingly conveys Stan's disillusionment, and Jane Wood as Irene's and Bess's puritanical mum stands out in the excellent supporting cast.

**Letter to the theatre** - Sitting watching your excellent production of *Dead Wood* the other night, I couldn't help but be struck by the sheer daring of a lone provincial theatre, presenting a new play with no fewer than eight people in the cast! The fact that it was all done with such loving care only added to the miraculous nature of the event. We left the theatre filled with emotion and respect in equal doses.