

SCRIPT TITLE

Written by

Name of First Writer

Based on, If Any

Address
Phone Number

Copyright David Blackman

2012 All Rights Reserved

ANZAC DREAMS

David Blackman

101 Clyde St

Box Hill North 3129

61 3 438 201 731

CHARACTERS:

Ash/Ash Senior

Ash's Son

Swallow

Kitchener

Kane

Sweet

Blackmore

Brigadier

Turkish Soldier

Death (Doctor, Corpse, Denyer, Billy Hughes, Sweet's Father, Bluey McKinnon, MP,
Soldier)

Nurse

Beth

Etti Rout

Prostitute

Bailleau Gang members

(MORE)

(CONT ' D)

Songs (in chronological order):

For Good Old Britain
Boys of the Dardanelles
Sing Me to Sleep
Anzac Cove
Dinky Di
The Bells of Hell
The Sleeper Cutters' Camp
Ragtime Army
Fighting the Kaiser
I Wonder Who's Kissing Her Now
Just as the Sun Went Down
Hiding in the Ammunition Van
I'm Going Back to Yarrawonga
Mademoiselle She Bought a Cow
The Route March

Poems:

The Battle of Tofrek (Corporal G.H Ash)
Suakin (Corporal G.H Ash)

(MORE)

(CONT ' D)

PRODUCTION NOTES

Anzac Dreams is an epic play. Scene changes should be fluid. The set is abstract and minimal to allow for quick changes of locations and to suggest the events are taking place in ASH's mind. Unless the play is done in the round, a high trench wall could be upstage with steps leading to the top. With the number of disguises that Death uses in the course of the play, his persona should be unmistakable within each one. Masks and wigs could also be used to give each persona an exaggerated grotesqueness.

If a large cast is required, the various incarnations of Death can be played by a number of actors.

David Blackman

July 2013

ACT ONE SCENE ONE

LIGHTS on KITCHENER, SWALLOW, KANE and SWEET, four members of the AIF during World War One, quietly absorbed in a game of cards. They are wearing summer uniforms. There is no sound. The movements are methodical. Their weapons and packs are strewn around them. In the background the approaching SOUNDS of war as an artillery bombardment begins. Each man looks towards the sky in anticipation of what this means. The scream of shells gets louder and is now joined by the occasional screams of the wounded. LIGHTS on ASH SENIOR, in his early eighties wearing flannel pajamas and dressing gown squeezed between them holding his cards. Behind the men, ASH'S bed can be seen. There is a side table next to sit with an old radio on top of it. It suddenly explodes into life.

RADIO ANNOUNCER

Australian soldiers around the country are honouring their fallen comrades in so many conflicts this century, from Gallipoli to our most recent test, the Vietnam War. But what many Australians don't know is that this Anzac Day, 1985 is one where history and tradition meet. For this Anzac Day 1985 coincides with the 10th anniversary of the fall of Saigon and the end of our most recent conflict in the rice paddies of South East Asia. But there is another event that makes 1985 an even more special occasion...

ASH SENIOR

Special ...he never said there was anything special about it.

RADIO ANNOUNCER

For 1985 marks the centenary of the departure of Australia's first overseas force to the Sudan War...

ASH SENIOR

Sudan bloody war...

ASH SENIOR goes over to the radio and switches it off. He returns to the game. Pause. ASH SENIOR throws his cards on the floor.

ASH SENIOR (CONT'D)

There you go. Full house. Can't beat that.

One of the soldiers picks up his cards as the others throw down theirs. He begins to shuffle the deck and then deals out the cards. Cards are dealt to ASH SENIOR.

ASH SENIOR (CONT'D)

Enough with the fucking game already! Night after bloody night. You'll not fool me with this routine. Playin cards like we were still mates and all was right with the world. Well I won't have it do you hear me! How much more of this do you think I can take...

ASH starts to take the cards out KANE'S and KITCHENER'S hands then throws them to the ground. They passively pick them back up again. He tries to do the same with SWALLOW who grabs him by the wrist giving ASH SENIOR a fright. ASH stands up.

ASH SENIOR (CONT'D)

I'm the only one who remembers anything about you. Kane, I always thought you'd be the first and I was fucking right! Kitchener, you didn't even have the decency to let the enemy finish you off, Sweet...your fate was sealed even before you arrived in France! Don't go blamin me for what happened to ya! And Swallow...fuck, I fought so hard to keep you alive and you go and throw it all away for what!? You were our lucky charm! Nuthin could hurt ya.

Pause.

ASH SENIOR (CONT'D (CONT'D))

You bastards come back here one more time and there'll be trouble.

The four men continue with their game.

ASH SENIOR (CONT'D)

(Almost beside himself)

Listen fellas, he'll be here soon. He can't see any of you like this. He always comes today...once a year. I can't explain it to him no matter how hard I try. You just have to go...please.

LIGHTS on the DOCTOR and NURSE as they enter ASH SENIOR'S "room." ASH SENIOR, unnoticed, sneaks back to his bed. The four men continue their game. He lies there comatose.

DOCTOR

(Reading from a chart)

G.H Ash. 83 years old. High blood pressure...a second stent in the last 12 months, signs of dementia, anxiety and depression...refuses to take his medication.

NURSE

We changed it for him twice Doctor. Still won't take it. Says it causes his tongue to swell.

DOCTOR

A swollen tongue isn't going to change much.

NURSE

No Doctor.

DOCTOR

Fractured skull, swelling of the brain...this is recent...

NURSE

He was climbing up a ladder...not long after the stent was put in. He fell.

DOCTOR

Why don't you check on the next patient. I'll be with you shortly.

NURSE

Yes Doctor.

The NURSE leaves. The DOCTOR opens a black box and pulls out a formidable looking needle. He prepares to give it to ASH SENIOR. The DOCTOR rubs a couple of fingers over the radial artery in ASH SENIOR'S arm. As he is about to inject the needle, ASH SENIOR'S eyes open. He moves his arm away from the DOCTOR.

ASH SENIOR

Not so quickly Doc!

The DOCTOR grabs it back and prepares to stick in the needle.

DOCTOR

Your friends are waiting for you.

ASH SENIOR

I have no friends.

DOCTOR

Then who are they?

ASH SENIOR

What? You mean you can see'em?

DOCTOR

Of course.

ASH SENIOR

What kind of doctor are you?

DOCTOR

The kind you only visit once.

ASH SENIOR realises who is talking to.

ASH SENIOR

Please...you can't take me now.

DOCTOR

Why not?

ASH SENIOR

A visitor, a welcome one...he comes every year to see me. A special trip.

DOCTOR

Well today's not his lucky day. Or yours for that matter.

ASH SENIOR

It's the only time I ever see him... The only time he comes to see me...

DOCTOR

He'll understand.

ASH SENIOR

Just once more...I beg ya...please. He's all I have left.

DOCTOR

Anything?

ASH SENIOR

I'd give you my soul but it was forfeited long ago.

DOCTOR

That's the other fellow.

ASH SENIOR

Then name it! Let me be alive for one last visit then...do what you will...he comes this time every year. *It's my son.* There's things that have never been said between us that now...Whatever you want I'll do it.

DOCTOR

These visits mean that much to you?

ASH SENIOR

They're all I have left.

DOCTOR

Then if you wish to see him again, join your friends for one last hurrah.

Pause.

ASH SENIOR

No...no. I can't do that. They come every night but now like dogs with a scent they won't leave and I can't fucking stand it any more!

DOCTOR

And they won't willingly come with me till you join them for one last trip down memory lane.

ASH SENIOR

What do they want?

DOCTOR

You Mr. Ash. As you were...a young soul with hopes of an eternal future.

ASH SENIOR grabs the DOCTOR by the collar.

ASH SENIOR

That road is paved with blood...I shall not revisit it.

DOCTOR

You really have no choice ...do this and you shall see your son. Your reconciliation will be complete.

Pause.

DOCTOR (CONT'D)

Is it a deal?

ASH SENIOR reaches out with his hand. The DOCTOR shakes it.

ASH SENIOR

Where will I find you...

DOCTOR

I'll be with you all the way. You better get going. The men are waiting...

LIGHTS on SWALLOW, KITCHENER, SWEET and KANE in full kit. ASH SENIOR, tentatively gets out of bed and walks towards them. They begin to sing "For Good Old Britain."

ALL

We're from the land of the gum trees, where the sun is mighty hot,
Where the possum and the kangaroo reside;
From the far back country and many a lonely spot,
Where you have to know your way without a guide,
From the land of tea and damper, from the forest and the plain,
We have come to help our kindred in the war;
Because their blood, and ours, too, is of the same old strain -
It's British, and we don't ask any more...

DOCTOR (CONT'D)

You're one of them now Corporal. A soldier in the AIF. Sing!

ASH SENIOR leads them through the chorus in a sudden burst of patriotic fervour.

ASH SENIOR

For Britain! Good old Britain!
Where our fathers drew breath,
We'll fight like true Australians,
Facing danger, wounds or death,
With Britain's other gallant sons
We're going hand in hand;
Our war cry 'Good old Britain' boy,
Our own dear motherland.

ASH'S dressing gown is taken off to reveal an AIF summer uniform circa 1915. It is identical to the uniform of the other men. He should look the most surprised. One of the men brings him his boots which he throws on ASH SENIOR with the experience of a veteran. A slouch hat is popped onto ASH'S head. The men look at him with satisfaction. The transformation is complete. In body and mind, ASH SENIOR is now G.H ASH, a young man ready to go to war.

LIGHTS. The five men are on a troopship on the eve of the Gallipoli landings. They are staring out to shore.

ACT ONE SCENE TWO

LIGHTS.

SWALLOW

Christ...look at that, not a soul in sight.

KITCHENER

Maybe the Turks are all asleep. It is nighttime after all.

KANE

Armies don't sleep mate...they just change sentries.

SWALLOW

Doesn't look like much of a beach. How do they expect to land all of us on there..?

ASH

They don't. We're supposed to capture everything above the beach by breakfast.

KITCHENER

We move forward and kick the enemy out of their positions.

SWALLOW

Takin it all a bit seriously aren't ya mate? Thought we were supposed to shoot them first.

KANE

That's if they're even bloody well there...

KITCHENER

Let'em be there. No matter how many of them they got in those hills, they don't stand a chance.

SWALLOW

If they're still asleep when we land you might be right.

ASH

Navy's gonna pound the livin daylights out of those hills. Noise alone will drive'em off...

KANE

Or drive em deep into the ground.

Pause.

KANE (CONT'D)

That's what I'd do.

ASH

Well they better dig bloody deep. Otherwise might not survive the bombardment.

KITCHENER

Don't matter how many the bastards don't stand a chance.

KANE

Think it's true what they say about the Turk?

SWALLOW

What?

KANE

You know...they'll just cut and run once they see us stormin the beach.

KITCHENER

Must be true. Otherwise why would they say it? We come from better stock.

SWALLOW

What kind of stock is that?

KITCHENER

You know...the white Australian race.

ASH

Yeah...and this is their homeland.

KITCHENER

Not for long. After today it is part of another empire.

SWALLOW

Which one?

KITCHENER

The only one that matters.

SWALLOW

We're part of another empire...does that mean the Turks will be just like us..?

KITCHENER

Don't be such a smart arse...

KANE

What if the war ends before we even get a chance to prove ourselves?

SWALLOW

Fair point.

The early light of dawn.

ASH

There it is boys. First light. We'll be movin off...

SWALLOW

Hey Ashie...read us one of your old man's poems. Get us in the mood...

KANE

What? The mood for dying?

KITCHENER

Cut that sort of talk.

KANE

Well it's not likely we'll all be around at the end of all this.

SWALLOW

Depends of when the end comes doesn't it.

ASH

We'll all be fine. Just got to stick together.

SWALLOW

So where's the fearless leader?

ASH

Fair go. He only just got here. Give him a chance.

KANE

He's mixin with the officers. Doesn't join the ranks unless duty calls.

KITCHENER

Ashie's right.

SWALLOW

But we don't know him do we?

KANE

Not like the last bloke. Wouldn't shut up.

ASH

He wasn't much different from us. Maybe that's not a good thing.

KITCHENER

Heard Blackmore was educated in England.

SWALLOW

He should have stayed there.

KITCHENER

Family owns half of Victoria.

KANE

Which half?

Laughter.

SWALLOW

They're bloody farmers for Christ's sake.

ASH

He's a good sort. Just give him time.

KITCHENER

You just want him to sell you one of his properties when all this is over..

ASH

Push off...

SWALLOW

I admire your confidence Ash.

ASH

Corporals know everything. Didn't they ever tell you that?

KANE

Well...he better know his stuff.

ASH

Like all the other officers? Jesus give it a rest. We're all bloody amateurs at this. Hasn't been a decent war since South Africa.

KANE

My old man fought against the Boers. Got hit in the face. Docs managed to patch him up but he had this permanent leer...couldn't do nuthin about it. Everyone started callin him Shifty.

SWALLOW

So what do we call you if you cop it in the gob heh? Son of Shifty?

More laughter.

The barrage begins.

KITCHENER

You a bit of a poet Ash?

ASH

Me? Nah. My Dad wrote some in the Sudan War...

KANE

We were there?

ASH

New South Wales regiment I think but Dad fought with the Berks...Royal Berkshires.

SWALLOW

A real Gunga Din heh?

KITCHENER

You've memorised one or two surely?

ASH

How would you know?

KITCHENER

Heard you reciting them in your bunk...

SWALLOW

Go on Ashie. Give us something inspirational before battle.

A chorus of approval from the others. ASH thinks about it for a second before starting.

ASH

Alright then....

“In rallying square our men showed play
For two thousands were laid in quick time that day
The rebels they came with a rush and a bound
But only to fall at our feet on the ground
The few that escaped away to the Hills
Did run and soon all around was quiet and still
We finished our work as it got daylight
Then took a position for the night
The ground all a round us was heard
But our men they kept quiet and watched like a bird
The night it was...”

The bombardment becomes LOUDER.

SWALLOW

Why'd you stop...

ASH

I'll finish it once we beat the Turks...

KANE

Which battle was that Ashie?

ASH

Tofrek in 1885...

KANE

Wonder if anyone will remember today's battle...

ACT ONE SCENE THREE

The beaches of Gallipoli, SOUND and LIGHT of explosions behind them.

The SOLDIERS storm the beach. They sing “The Boys of the Dardanelles.” This song could be accompanied by a Chorus if used. LIGHTS on ASH.

ASH

The first wave hits the shore... sound of machine gun fire...Oh they’re gone...disappeared, maybe seeking cover...

KANE

I was shaking all over with nervousness and excitement...

ALL

Old England needs the men she breeds,
There’s fighting to be done.
Australians heard and were prepared,
To help her every son.
From out the bay they sailed away,
Our pride, Australia’s own,
And so today they’re far away,
And some in the great unknown.

ASH

The next wave hits the shore...a voice was heard through the megaphone, “Make your landing lads, where you can and hold on...”

SWALLOW

A shell this time. No mistaking that one. An unholy spray...but the tows kept coming some full of dead with no-one in control...

ALL

Boys of the Dardanelles,
They faced the shot and shells,
Down in hist’ry their fame will go,
Our children’s children their daring deeds will know.
Australian lads in khaki and in blue
Have shown the world what they can do
How they fought and fell the cables daily tell,
Boys of the Dardanelles.

ASH

And the next wave...moving into the gullies and slopes in search of the Turks...

KITCHENER

The machine gunning continues along with sniper fire...Bastards! We will show no mercy when it's our turn...

ALL

Beneath foreign skies with eager eyes,
 Those boys of the Dardanelles
 By the dear old flag with never a lag
 Have fought and served it well,
 From scraping keel, with plunging steel,
 They quickly got to work.
 In khaki kit they did their bit,
 And soon were upon the Turk.

ASH

At the end of the first day 16,000 had been put ashore...2000 had been killed...

ALL

Boys of the Dardanelles,
 They faced the shot and shells,
 Down in hist'ry their fame will go,
 Our children's children their daring deeds will know.
 Australian lads in khaki and in blue
 Have shown the world what they can do
 How they fought and fell the cables daily tell,
 Boys of the Dardanelles.

ASH

The Turkish army was looking down on us from the heights... years later you would always be able to identify an Aussie or British body by the bullet hole in the top of the skull...

ALL

When war is o'er, and home once more,
 Come boys from the Dardanelles.
 To them we'll raise our hats in praise,
 And we'll hear the stories they'll tell.
 It was their lot to get it hot,
 Some quite new at the game.
 Their gallant dash the foe to smash –
 Will live on the roll of fame.

LIGHTS on ASH. He stares grimly at the audience.

ASH

And so it goes...for months on end, a war of attrition, Chunuk Bair, Gully Ravine, Hill 60, the battle of Lone Pine and the Nek...as the numbers of dead wounded and missing grows larger and larger. The inferior Turk has shown his true colours as words are eaten within the entire British High Command. But we fight like men possessed, men who had never thought of taking a life now making it their life's work...

SWALLOW

I saw a man crawling down to the beach with a hand and half a leg missing...

KITCHENER

A young fellow was putting a cross over his brother's grave... a Turkish sniper shot him as he bent over...

LIGHTS on ASH. He surveys the grim nature of the battlefield.

ASH

“The night it...it was sickening from the smell of the dead
As they laid all around us so close to our heads
The morning it dawned we were on the alert
And to move all the bodies it was the first work
Some horrible sight meet our eyes all around
As we scarcely moved away over the ground
Many a brave soldier and sailor laid there that day
Let us hope that their souls are laying at rest
with Angels around them to guard and to bless...”

LIGHTS. The men are in near or complete nakedness, laying about, cleaning weapons. LIGHTS on the TURKISH SOLDIER on another part of the stage or on the parapet of the trench. He is saying morning prayers with the devoutness of someone who knows this will be the last time.

TURKISH SOLDIER

Allah-hoo Akhbar....(God is Great)
Subhaan-Allah was-hamdu Lillah wa ilaaha ill Allah wa Allah-hoo akbar wa laa hawla wa la quwwata illa Billaah...(Glory be to Allah, praise be to Allah, there is no god except Allaah, Allaah is Most great and there is no power and no strength except with Allaah...)

SOUND of Turkish marching music. The TURKISH SOLDIER gets to his feet, solemnly wraps up his prayer mat and stands ready for battle.

The SOLDIERS are aroused from their activities, get themselves sorted as far as clothing and weapons and prepare to fire.

LIGHTS on ASH.

ASH

The 19th of May, the Turks launch an attack on our positions. 40, 000 of them. Wave after wave continued the assault until their bodies lay in heaps all along No Man's Land, right up to the parapets of the trenches. When it was over, 10,000 lay dead in all sorts of positions...most of them shot or blown up so bad they barely looked human. One was caught in a burning bush set alight by an artillery shell. He was charred to the bone. Another was cut in half, his upper body some distance from the rest of him. There was nothing but silence at the end of it. At 2.30 am a suspension of arms begins to allow the dead to be buried...that morning the sky was clear as the bodies rotted in the burning sun...

LIGHTS. No Man's Land. ASH, KANE, KITCHENER and SWALLOW observe the destruction only feet away from their position. They are eating, smoking, cleaning weapons.

KITCHENER

Jesus...the stench...

SWALLOW

Thought you'd be used to it by now.

KANE

This is Turkish stench.

ASH

Worse than dead Aussie heh Kane?

SWALLOW

No fucking difference cobber.

KANE

Where do we bury ours?

SWALLOW

On our side of the lines you dimwit...

ASH is looking around the space.

KITCHENER

What's the matter?

ASH

Look how many...there must be...

KANE

Hundreds. Hundreds of'em.

KITCHENER

Thousands more like it.

KANE

If we keep this up they'll have to surrender.

SWALLOW

Or we will from sheer bloody exhaustion.

The SOLDIERS look at each other understanding the truth behind this statement.

KANE

Surely the Turks can't take any more of this...?

Smokes are lit. Sips taken from water bottles.

KANE (CONT'D)

Cos if it doesn't end soon I don't know...

ASH

Shut it.

KANE starts to move around uncomfortably.

SWALLOW

You still itchin down there Bob?

KANE

Comes and goes...

KITCHENER

I warned you about those Cairo brothels mate. You've got the first stages of the clap...

SWALLOW

Or the final stage in which case it'll soon drop off and you can use it to beat the Turks into submission. That'll be the final straw.

ASH

Why didn't you report yourself sick...

KANE

And get sent back in disgrace...locked up with no pay..? I've got a girl back home...

SWALLOW

Won't she get a surprise....

LAUGHTER all round.

ASH

Enough.

Pause.

KITCHENER

This silence is killing me. Let the shooting start up again I say. What do you reckon Ashie?

ASH

I could get used to it...but what's the point.

LIGHTS on the TURKISH SOLDIER standing apart from them.

KANE

What's he doing?

KITCHENER

Same as us I suppose.

SWALLOW

Why the hell should we help bury these pricks heh?

ASH

They're brave men. You saw'em comin through No Man's Land. Wouldn't stop..

SWALLOW

Fuck it. We're all brave me aren't we.

ASH

Look around you mate. It was a bloody slaughter. They just want to bury the dead.

SWALLOW

Well I'm not lifting a finger.

KITCHENER

And this is a change of behaviour?

Laughter relieves the tension for a moment.

ASH

Doctors talkin about a possible plague epidemic if these bodies are allowed to rot any further.

KANE

What's a plague?

SWALLOW

Pestilence. God's wrath on the unbelievers.

ASH

Whose God?

KANE

Do you think it's possible we or the Turks will run out of soldiers?

ASH

Dare say if they did they'd send the women over to do all the bloody fighting.

SWALLOW

If me Mum's any indication be a damned sight more organised. Four sons she could still knock on their backside without breaking a sweat.

More laughter.

KANE

Our little Turkish friend looks a little lost...

TURKISH SOLDIER

(In Turkish)

Come...over here...please come...

SWALLOW

See what the little prick is up to...

KITCHENER

Probably spying on our trench.

ASH

As we are on theirs...

The TURKISH SOLDIER calls the SOLDIERS over to his part of the stage. Cautiously they walk over. The TURKISH SOLDIER points to the ground. All the SOLDIERS are riveted to what they see. LIGHTS on two bodies tangled together.

KANE

They bayoneted each other...

KITCHENER

Christ they're all tangled up.

SWALLOW

Like some amorous couple tryin-

ASH

Yeah we get it.

KANE

Kind of a pity to disturb'em. Almost like they belong to each other after all this.

SWALLOW

Look at their faces...almost makes you forget about all the killing in this place...

The TURKISH SOLDIER removes his countrymen's body and drags it offstage. The others keep looking at the remaining corpse.

KANE

What do we do?

SWALLOW

Check his tunic for identification...valuables.

ASH

I'll do it. Make sure they get to his family.

LIGHTS on ASH. He goes through the pockets of the CORPSE. The CORPSE comes alive.

CORPSE

What are you lookin for?

ASH

(Lunging back in fear)

What the fuck! Oh...sorry.

CORPSE (CONT'D)

You can swear if you like. I don't mind.

The CORPSE starts looking for his cigarettes.

ASH

What are you doing?

CORPSE

Lookin for me smokes...

ASH

Top pocket right hand side...

CORPSE (CONT'D)

Thievin little bastard are ya...

ASH

You're dead...what difference will it make...

The CORPSE finds his cigarettes, takes one out and lights it. He takes a much appreciated drag. ASH looks on in envy and disbelief.

ASH (CONT'D)

Can I have one?

The CORPSE thinks about it for a second.

CORPSE

Sure you can.

He throws the packet to ASH who greedily takes one out and lights it and takes his own deep drag from the very bottom of his lungs.

ASH

It's been a week since I had a good smoke...

CORPSE

Lot's of Turkish tobacco about....

Pause.

ASH

Fuck! I'm sharin a ciggie with a corpse!

CORPSE

Does that scare you?

ASH

I...I don't know. What about the others? They gonna wake up too?

CORPSE

They'll be makin a bit of noise in the afterlife.

ASH

How could you know that..?

CORPSE

I'm here talkin with you now... a minute ago I was a maggot infested corpse...need I say more?

ASH suddenly becomes scared.

ASH

I want to go home...

CORPSE

Where might that be lad...

ASH

Melbourne...had meself a future, gonna get married...the lot.

CORPSE

And now?

ASH

This place is sendin me around the bend it is.

CORPSE

We can't have that now can we...

ASH

What can you do about it? They'll keep use here till we're all like you...no offence.

CORPSE

None taken.

ASH

Till there's nuthin left but putrefication.

CORPSE

Just nature's way of reclaiming you as it's own...

ASH

You're not supposed to have a bird's eye view...it ain't civilised.

CORPSE

What if I told you I could send you back to your fiance one more time...

ASH

I'm talkin to a bloody corpse...

CORPSE

Not just any corpse lad.

ASH

What d'yer mean...

CORPSE

Take a guess.

ASH

You're...the corpse maker.

CORPSE

In the rotting flesh.

ASH

(Genuinely frightened)

Jesus Christ.

CORPSE

Remember him well. Those bloody nails hurt like buggery but he hardly raised a whimper. Some of you fellas could take a lesson from his prayer book.

ASH starts to pull something out of his tunic.

ASH

Beth...her name's Beth...I have a photo...

CORPSE

No need. You could be with...Beth just like you used to on a Sunday afternoon walkin by the Yarra hand in hand after a leisurely tram ride from Richmond...

ASH

How did you know that...

CORPSE

What secret's could you keep from me heh?

ASH

I miss those Sundays...think about'em all week I would.

CORPSE

I can bring her here with you and away from all those gutless bastards who haven't joined up yet, waiting for your name to appear on this weekly list of dead wounded or missing.

ASH

Beth wouldn't. She's too loyal.

CORPSE

The heart stops burning, the legs start-

ASH

All right I get it. But how can I? Me mates are just over in that trench...the truce is about to end. Fact is I shouldn't even be out here. A Turkish sniper might already have me in his sights.

CORPSE (CONT'D)

Someone else has that privilege this fine evening...

ASH
Who?

CORPSE
Can't be tellin you that.

ASH
I chose to stay out here.

CORPSE
Don't I know it! You made an agreement Corporal and I'm here to see you keep it.

ASH
Agreement..?

CORPSE
Can't be takin no shortcuts to the afterlife. I give you a chance to be alive with your fiance and survive this little fiasco...

ASH
Where is she...

LIGHTS on BETH looking lost.

CORPSE
There you go. Take a look old son. That melancholy visage, beaten down by a thousand stares from a thousand hungry eyes...

ASH
She can't see me like this...

CORPSE
Don't worry lad. Just sing her a tune and she'll never be the wiser...

ASH
Out here?! I'll be a sittin duck!

CORPSE
Maybe this might help.

The CORPSE clicks his fingers. LIGHTS on the radio from ASH SENIOR'S bedside which blares across the stage. (Note: this should be the only aspect of ASH SENIOR'S room that can be seen. The radio could be positioned wherever suitable for the production.

It could be with the CORPSE). ASH sings the first verse of “Sing Me to Sleep” along with the radio VOICE.

LIGHTS on BETH.

ASH

Sing me to sleep where bullets fall,
 Help me forget the war and all.
 Damp is my dugout, cold are my feet,
 Nothing but biscuits and bully to eat.
 Sing me to sleep where bombs explode,
 With shrapnel shells around the mould.

BETH sees ASH.

BETH

Hello Ashie.

ASH

Beth...

BETH

Why'd you bring me here..?

ASH

It hasn't been that long...you couldn't have forgotten...

BETH

Of course I remember.

ASH

Thought you'd be glad to see me.

BETH

We're all so proud of you Ashie. The newspapers-

ASH

Are full of horseshit.

BETH

What do you mean?

ASH

Nuthin.

BETH

You were so keen to join you were, talked about all those Turks you were going to kill.

ASH

Seen enough dead Turks to last a lifetime. Make that several.

BETH

Shouldn't talk like that. They're the enemy.

ASH

Don't see too many of 'em around here. Beth, I just want you to know I'm comin back and that...I'm yours no matter what.

BETH

Even if you're dead...

ASH

What are you talkin like that for..?

BETH

We've all seen what's comin back, how many are left behind.

ASH

I'll survive don't you worry. Nothin's gonna kill me. I'm lucky...

BETH

If only...

ASH

How many of those gutless bastards are hoverin around...

BETH

They're just concerned-

ASH

I'll fucking kill every one of them.

BETH

It's you I want Ash. But the letters aren't enough.

ASH

You have my word.

BETH

Tell me you'll do anything to come back. Look at me Ash. Swear you won't get killed.

ASH

I'll do anything. I swear it. I'll take on the whole Turkish army if I have to but I'm comin back...in one piece. Just like you see me now.

BETH is somewhat relieved by his reassurances.

BETH

We could find a quiet spot if you want to...

ASH

There's only so far this dream will take me love.

BETH

Tell me it's not true...those rumours of the misery of it all.

ASH

Can't believe that rubbish. We're havin a fine old time when we're not givin Johnny Turk a good serve.

BETH

I've got to go. One of the girls at work, she's going to see her boyfriend at the hospital...they're finally taking the bandages off his face. She wants to see whether...you know...

ASH

Yeah. Please try and write. I haven't received anything since Egypt...and I've sent you-

BETH

I've read them all. More than once. But...

ASH gives her a tender kiss. They sing the final verse of "Sing Me to Sleep."

ASH/BETH

Sing me to sleep where campfires glow,
 To two three course dinners I wouldn't say no.
 Dreams of the Savoy, the opera as well,
 Wishing that all of the Turks were in heaven -
 Far from the Lone Pine I want to be,
 Lights of Australia I'd rather see.
 Think of me standing; my guard I'll keep,
 But I'd rather have my girl to sing me to sleep.

They kiss passionately. BETH breaks away and disappears.

LIGHTS on ASH and the CORPSE.

CORPSE

You almost had me in tears...

ASH

Will she wait for me..?

CORPSE

You heard that old saying, be careful what you wish for.

ASH

Bugger off! You're not takin me now.

LIGHTS on KANE in No Man's Land.

CORPSE

Just in time.

The CORPSE throws a packet of cigarettes at KANE.

CORPSE (CONT'D)

Fancy a smoke old son?

KANE catches the packet. SOUND of a gunshot.
Darkness creeps over KANE'S body.

CORPSE

(To ASH)

Go on. Your mates are waiting for you.

ASH

What'll I tell them?

CORPSE

Nothing. They think you're a hero, draggin his body back to the trench.

LIGHTS on ASH, SWALLOW and KITCHENER
standing in front of KANE'S body.

SWALLOW

We tried to stop him but he wouldn't have a bar of it.

ASH

A sniper had me pinned down.

KITCHENER

C'mon then. Let's bury the poor bastard.

Mournfully the three men place a poncho over his body as they begin to sing "Anzac Cove." (Alternatively, if a Chorus is used, this song could one of theirs).

ALL

There's a lonely stretch of hillocks;
 There's a beach asleep and drear;
 There's a battered broken fort beside the sea.
 There are sunken, trampled graves;
 And a little rotting pier:
 And winding paths that wind unceasingly.
 There's a torn and silent valley:
 There's a tiny rivulet
 With some blood upon the stones beside its mouth
 There are lines of buried bones:
 There's an unpaid waiting debt:
 There's the sound of gentle sobbing in the south.

ASH

We left quietly in the middle of the night, trusting our dead in the hands of the enemy.
 We were taken the Lemnos where we were given Christmas billets from home. A kangaroo was printed on each one of them using its tail to pitch a Turk off the Peninsula into the sea. It was the kangaroo that was learning to swim.

LIGHTS.

ACT TWO

ACT TWO SCENE ONE

A troop ship on the way to the Western Front. The SOLDIERS are seated on their lockers in a huddle polishing their boots. KITCHENER is reading a newspaper.

ASH

Anything worth reading that's not about our daring exploits...?

KITCHENER

Some bloke's been fined a 100 quid for calling our exploits a "capitalist war that should be fought by the capitalists"...at the Royal Hotel in Tumbarumba. They were going to give him six months jail on top but his son was already fighting in this capitalist war so they decided to go easy.

SWALLOW

Lenient bastards...

KITCHENER

I heard you say the same thing just the other day...

SWALLOW

I called it a crappy war in private...there's a difference.

They laugh.

ASH

Any good news?

KITCHENER

Yeah. If you've got a trace of German in ya you're fucked...expelled from clubs and associations, fired from your job. Towns with German sounding names are gettin'em changed.

ASH

Lucky there's no Turks back home...they'd all be dead by now.

SWALLOW throws his boot on the floor in frustration.

SWALLOW

Don't know why we bother with all this. A few weeks on the line our toes'll be poppin out of the end of'em.

KITCHENER

It's all about the discipline mate. That's why I've done mine already.

SWALLOW

It's about keeping your mind occupied so you don't think about sittin on a rusty boat that could sink at any moment.

ASH

Don't go on about that again Ray.

SWALLOW

Why not? Bloody hell Lord Kitchener's dead. If they can get him none of us are safe.

KITCHENER

He shouldn't have travelled by boat.

SWALLOW

Don't it make you feel sad Sergeant? Your namesake endin up in the drink?

ASH

The reason we keep polishing these boots cos they're likely to be the only thing remaining after the first barrage.

KITCHENER

Remind us we're still in the army.

SWALLOW

How could we forget? Especially after that bloody March in Egypt...three days of searing heat and not enough water. Officers screaming at us from their horses...heartless bastards.

KITCHENER

Think after the Dardanelles they'd ease off a bit.

ASH

We didn't win did we? No retreat's a bloody success.

SWALLOW

Still, we took everything those Turks threw at us and didn't budge.

ASH

Where were we supposed to budge? In the bloody Aegean? Christ if we were stuck out there from a bloody attack the Royal Navy would be sitting around with a thumb stuck its arse watching us go down the gurgler.

SWALLOW

Couldn't have put it better meself.

KITCHENER

That's a bit harsh.

ASH

Is it? What have we really learnt from this caper? Most officers haven't got a bloody clue what's going on...half of them couldn't care less about casualties...

SWALLOW

The shine been taken off his majesty has it?

ASH

Blackmore's just a bit too much like the Poms and as far as they're concerned we're a ragged bloody army not fit enough for a real war.

KITCHENER

It wasn't just us...British French, hell there was even a Indian regiment fighting on those beaches.

ASH

They placed us in an impossible situation and the only general who had enough sense to see it for what it was is now dead.

SWALLOW

Yeah...Kitchener was all right.

KITCHENER

Well, at least the food's better...haven't had a steak like that since-

SWALLOW

They're fattenin us up aren't they? We'll be stripped back to skin and bone before you know it.

ASH

Ray, where we're goin there's not likely to be much time to lose weight.

KITCHENER

Couldn't be worse than Johnny Turk.

ASH

Gerry's got artillery pieces in their thousands. Whole battalions go missing in a day.

KITCHENER

That's not in the news...

ASH

Talk to some of the sailors who had brothers, mates in the first wave that went over in 1914. They're all gone...

LIGHTS on PRIVATE SWEET. He is wearing his webbing and backpack, holding his rifle, looking every much the ungainly soldier. He is obviously unsettled by the conversation.

KITCHENER

Give it a miss Ash.

SWALLOW

Bit quiet over there isn't it? Hey mate you got a name?

SWEET

Sweet. Private Sweet.

SWALLOW

Just call me Private Sour.

ASH

So you're one of the Fair Dinkums heh?

SWEET

I guess I am.

SWALLOW

So what stopped you joinin up the first time heh?

SWEET

I hadn't turned eighteen when the call went out...

KITCHENER

Lay off him Ray. He's here now.

SWALLOW

Mother didn't have enough strength in her arms to hold her little babe..?

SWEET

She died...some time ago.

KITCHENER

You got your answer Private.

SWALLOW

Fair bloody Dinkums heh? Looked at a few casualty lists, saw a few broken diggers and that makes you a sobering judge of modern bloody war!

ASH

Shut up Ray.

KITCHENER

(Reading from the newspaper)

Listen to this..."You Boast of Your Freedom, Come and Fight for It"...or this one..."Defend Your Homes Your Women and Children..."

SWALLOW

Which one made you join....

SWEET

Recruiting posters like that are all over Melbourne. I just wanted to do my part...serve my country.

SWALLOW

You'll know what fair dinkum is when the shells are fallin and the bullets flying at you by the dozen and all you can hear are the screams of the man next to you...or what's left of him.

Pause. A very uncomfortable silence. SWEET has no idea what to say. ASH and KITCHENER look almost as helpless.

ASH

So...you all settled in?

SWEET

Yes Sergeant.

ASH

I'm a corporal. He's the sergeant.

SWEET

Yes Corporal.

KITCHENER

Good lad. We only lost one of our little band over there so if this next job is over in a year or two you have a fifty fifty chance of surviving.

SWEET

Another year or two? That long?

SWALLOW

Oh I see! You volunteered for the short war. In that case you deserve your money or your life back.

ASH walks over to SWEET and starts adjusting his gear.

ASH

Who showed you how to put this on? Christ, you're a fine sight. Get that pack off.

SWEET complies.

Give me a look at your rifle.

SWEET hands it over. ASH inspects it.

ASH (CONT'D)

Got to keep it clean even when you don't fire it Private!

SWEET

Sorry Corporal.

ASH pulls SWEET'S bayonet out of its scabbard. He checks its sharpness.

ASH

This won't cut cheese let alone a man's belly...empty your pack.

During the following dialogue, ASH empties his backpack, discarding what he thinks is unnecessary.

SWEET

The other man...the one killed, how did it happen?

ASH

Why the fuck do you want to know that for?

SWEET

Well...I don't want to make his mistakes.

ASH

You expect to live out this mess?

SWEET

Some of us should don't you think?

ASH

Fair enough.

SWEET

I just don't want to go back broken that's all...

ASH

You're talkin to the wrong person.

SWEET

Will you help me stay alive?

ASH

If you don't shut up I'll help kill you.

SWEET

I've been told Death is your friend. He listens to what you have to say.

ASH freezes in his spot.

ASH

What?

SWEET

I've been told...*Death is your friend.*

ASH

Who the hell are you?!

SWEET

They all saw you. The whole AIF saw you talking to *him*...making a deal so one of the others would die in your place...

ASH

Shut it or I'll...

SWEET

Kane died because of your cowardice...

ASH leaps violently on top of SWEET.

ASH

You say another fucking word and I'll smash your face in!

KITCHENER rushes over and pulls him off.

KITCHENER

Let him go Ash! The kid hasn't said a word. You just pounced on him like some fuckin animal.

SWALLOW

Don't mind him young fella. He's still tryin to figure out why people die in a war.

SWEET

(Visibly scared)

Of...of course. I'll be a good soldier Corporal.

ASH

Just do what you're told...eat, shit, sleep when I say so and the rest is not worth worrying about.

SWEET

Why is that Corporal?

ASH

Cos there's absolutely nothing you can do about it.

ACT TWO SCENE TWO

An Australian military base in England.

LIGHTS on the SOLDIERS. They are all wearing greatcoats. They begin to sing “Dinky Di.” (To the tune of “Sweet Betsy from Pike”).

ALL

“He went up to London and straight up he strode
To Army Headquarters on Horseferry Road,
To see all the bludgers who dodge all the strafe
By getting soft jobs on the headquarters staff.

Dinky-di dinky-di
For I am a digger who won't tell a lie.”

LIGHTS on the BRIGADIER.

BRIGADIER

To all Australian soldiers serving in His Royal Majesty's armed forces. I am anxious that members of the Australian divisions should drop the use of the two words in particular which unfortunately are too commonly heard at the present time. Probably everyone knows that these two words are “fuck” and “bastards.” They are both beastly words, especially the first. In fact the use of that word implies a low attitude of mind towards all our women folk.

SWALLOW

What the hell is this bastard talkin about?

ASH

No fuckin idea...

ALL

“Dinky-di dinky-di
For I am a digger who won't tell a lie.”

ASH

To welcome our arrival in France, the British High Command sent us to a place called Fromelles...

ALL

“The lousy lance corporal said ‘pardon me please
You've mud on your tunic and blood on your sleeve
You look so disgraceful that people will laugh,’
Said that lousy young corporal on headquarters staff.
The digger just shot him a murderous glance,
And said ‘We're just back from the balls up of France...
Where whizzbangs are flying and comforts are few,
And brave men are dying for bastards like you..’”

“Dinky-di dinky-di
For I am a digger who won’t tell a lie.”

ASH

We attacked on the 19th of July. 5560 Australians were killed, wounded or captured in the space of a week.

KITCHENER

My tunic was covered in blood...rotten with it, brain splatter all over the place...

ALL

“We’re shelled from the left and shelled from the right
We’re bombed all the day and we’re bombed all the night...
And if something don’t happen and that mighty soon,
There’d be nobody left in the bloody platoon.’

“Dinky-di dinky-di
For I am a digger who won’t tell a lie.”

ASH

At another place called Pozieres...22,826 of us are killed, wounded or captured to win 1500 metres of ground...

SWEET

When your equipment was lost or damaged, you just picked it off the dead...

SWALLOW

I had a dead man’s helmet...

KITCHENER

I had a dead man’s gas mask...

ASH

I had a dead man’s bayonet.

SWALLOW

October 1916, the rains begin...now we had the mud and the cold to add to the misery...

ALL

“Dinky-di dinky-di
There’ll be nobody left in the bloody platoon”.

ASH

There were 9000 dead by the end of 1916...some men could not cope, they shot themselves or deserted, some went mad...but most just lost hope and wished to die with good grace..

ALL

“The story soon got to the ears of Lord Gort
Who gave the whole matter a great deal of thought...
He awarded that digger a V.C. with bars
For giving that corporal a kick up the arse!
Dinky-Di, Dinky-Di, for giving that corporal a kick up the arse,

Dinky-di dinky-di
For I am a digger who won't tell a lie.”

KITCHENER

But Passchendale was the worst...all five Australian divisions committed...

SWEET

38,000 Australian casualties...

SWALLOW

The AIF was close to breaking point...

ALL

Dinky-di dinky-di
For I am a digger who won't tell a lie.”

SOUND of explosions getting louder and louder. By this stage each man has retreated to a particular corner of the stage, awaiting their fate, demented with fear, shaking like leaves. KITCHENER stares at his hands, unable to hide his fear that threatens to tear his mind apart. SWALLOW frailly repeats the chorus of the song to himself while SWEET weeps like a helpless child, crying for his mother. ASH stands frozen in the middle of this maelstrom, about to implode with his own fear.

ASH

STOP IT NOW OR I'LL GO MAD! PLEASE SHOW YOURSELF GOD KNOWS I'VE PRAYED HARD ENOUGH!

ASH collapses to the ground in exhaustion. All goes quiet. There is no movement on the stage. Quietly, in case he wakes up DEATH and brings his wrath back down upon their heads, ASH crawls to each of the men and tries to comfort them. He checks to see that they are alive, looks into their sleeping faces. ASH hears SOUND. LIGHTS. MR. DENYER enters singing “The Bells of Hell.”. He is holding a suitcase.

MR, DENYER

The bells of hell go ting-a-ling-a-ling,
 For you but not for me,
 And the little devils how they sing-a-ling-a-ling,
 For you but not for me.
 Oh death, where is thy sting-a-ling-a-ling,
 Oh grave, thy victory?
 The bells of hell go ting-a-ling-a-ling
 For you but not for me.

ASH grabs his rifle and points it in DENYER’S direction.

ASH

Who goes there.

MR. DENYER

I come bearing gifts.

ASH

What’s in the suitcase?

MR. DENYER

That would be telling too much.

ASH

I want to know!

MR. DENYER

You called didn’t you?

ASH

I was readin a newspaper from back home. Saw your ad...

MR. DENYER

I’m just an honest businessman Corporal.

ASH

They've been through hell...

MR. DENYER

Only in the literal sense. Never you mind. I'll be gone before they know it. A faint memory of a possible future they may or may not have to endure...

ASH

You're not gettin past unless I see what's in the suitcase.

DENYER thinks about it for a second.

MR. DENYER

All right.

DENYER methodically places the suitcase on the ground and opens it. The lid should obscure the audience from seeing what's inside. Tentatively, ASH peers into the suitcase. His face looks as if he has just opened Pandora's Box. He steps back, visibly disturbed by what he has just seen.

ASH

No one wants what you're sellin. Get out of here now...

MR. DENYER

I'll make you a little deal Corporal. Any man who purchases my wares will be spared death on the battlefield.

ASH

How can you guarantee that?

MR. DENYER

I'm no ordinary businessman. My customers go back a millenium or two.

ASH

What's the catch? C'mon, it can't be that simple.

MR. DENYER

You're right. I'll come clean. Whatever appliance your men choose shall be their fate. But let that be our little secret.

ASH

You're wastin your time.

MR. DENYER

Can you deny your men the opportunity, the chance to survive all this? Roll the dice
Corporal and trust in the Fates!

ASH

Go on then.

LIGHTS. The others slowly begin to notice his presence
and gather around.

MR. DENYER

So how are we all? A bit numbed by all the racket? Heard nothing like it. If the people
back home only knew what it was really like! Well, I'm here to tell you they don't want
to know ha ha! Seen enough already they have. What with the boatloads of wounded
streaming out of the hospital ships like some deformed cargo from another world, which
let's face it, it really is. Not quite the celebration people expected when they see little
Bertie or Dickie carried down the gangplank swathed in bandages like an Egyptian
mummy, nothing but a lump of flesh...

SWALLOW

What ya sellin? Go on...get on with it.

MR. DENYER

Denyer Brothers are pleased to offer its latest range of artificial limbs, made to order for
every kind of amputation as illustrated here with all accessories namely, knife, fork, hook,
knife, brush and gloves. The hand is of rubber with ductile fingers, giving a perfectly
natural experience. Write us for prices and full particulars...Gawd what's that smell..?

SWALLOW

Lice.

MR. DENYER

(Rattling his suitcase)

Got something for that.

SWALLOW

Rats.

MR. DENYER

Got something for that.

KITCHENER

Dead rats...

MR. DENYER

Got something...I think.

SWEET

Dead men.

MR. DENYER

I'm not a miracle worker gents! I must say how do you put up with it I have no idea. Saw a fellow on the way here calmly smoking a cigarette by the side of the road and as I walked past noticed half his head was missing.

SWALLOW

A man died in the latrine the other day...

MR. DENYER

Wounded?

SWALLOW

Tired. Couldn't get out. No-one heard'im cos of the noise.

KITCHENER

But when you gotta go you gotta go.

MR. DENYER

Well...wounded. I'm here to let you know Denyer Brothers has a range of attachments for all your needs. Whatever you may have lost we can replace!

KITCHENER

Man lost his bollocks the other day. Bloody awful. Like mashed pudding.

MR. DENYER

Limbs...only limbs gentlemen. Odd face mask is case of permanent facial disfigurement. Bollocks is not our business haha!

No one laughs. He opens his suitcase and prepares to show his wares. No one moves.

MR. DENYER (CONT'D)

C'mon men. You must accept the possibility, the inevitability that if you're...lucky, Denyer Brothers will be there to look after you.

KITCHENER

How much?

MR. DENYER

In good time Sergeant. In good time.

MR. DENYER pulls out various attachments. The men gather around, curious. He starts to hand out individual attachments to each soldier.

MR. DENYER (CONT'D)

There you go...something for a lost leg, a lost hand, amputated arm, a face no one's likely to forget, take a look, hold it tight, feel the grip...almost like a real hand except for the rubber of course. Don't be shy, a lot of thought has gone into these designs so you men, if you survive of course, can fit right back into society, amongst your pals, your family, unencumbered by these unfortunate wounds! We use only our patent rubber feet in the construction of our limbs. Crutches at a special quality price. Denyer Brothers, manufacturers of trusses, abdominal belts, elastic hosiery, deformity appliances, surgical and veterinary instruments.

As ASH watches the scene unfold, each man with a particular appliance walks off to examine their choice. DENYER begins to sing the second verse of the song.

MR. DENYER (CONT'D)

The bells of hell go ting-a-ling-a-ling,
For you but not for me,
And the little devils how they sing-a-ling-a-ling..

The men look downcast. DENYER stops and turns to them.

MR. DENYER (CONT'D)

C'mon then....In your hands you have a free pass from all this horror...a pact with Fate to avoid Death's almighty grip. I shan't make this offer again.

SWALLOW

What's the catch?

MR. DENYER

You Australians are far too cynical.

ASH

Go on. Tell them.

MR. DENYER

Whatever you have picked will be your...destiny. But at least you'll be alive.

KITCHENER

(To ASH)

Why aren't you takin one?

MR. DENYER

The good Corporal has made his own arrangements.

ASH

I've agreed to nuthin with the likes of you...

MR. DENYER

As you wish. C'mon men, this should be a cause for celebration! Sing!

The men join in.

ALL

The bells of hell go ting-a-ling-a-ling,
 For you but not for me,
 And the little devils how they sing-a-ling-a-ling,
 For you but not for me.
 Oh death, where is thy sting-a-ling-a-ling,
 Oh grave, thy victory?
 The bells of hell go ting-a-ling-a-ling
 For you but not for me!

MR. DENYER

Bravo!

They all hold up their prosthetic devices in a kind of victory salute. The men, realising what they are actually holding in their hands, throw them away in disgust.

MR. DENYER (CONT'D)

(To ASH)

Your men would rather choose a glorious death than a broken life. Just like I'd hoped.

In a sudden panic, KITCHENER gets on his knees and starts going through the appliances, picking up a hand, and arm, a leg, a face, carefully examining each one, putting them down and then finally gathering them all up. He throws them into the suitcase.

KITCHENER

I'll take all of'em.

LIGHTS.

ACT TWO SCENE THREE

LIGHTS on ASH.

ASH

By 1918 our spell in the trenches grew longer with consistently high casualty rates. Numbers were going down fast. Battalions went into a fight with 100...150 men, down from the usual 300.

LIGHTS. ASH, KITCHENER, SWEET and SWALLOW are huddled in a circle.

SWALLOW

There won't be no more AIF before long.

KITCHENER

The officers know there's not much left in us.

ASH

If they send us out again there's gonna be trouble...

SWALLOW

They're squeezin us dry that's no doubt.

KITCHENER

Monash'll look after us...

ASH

Monash threw us right back in...

SWALLOW

The officers want to break us up...separate the Battalion after everything we'd been through.

KITCHENER

The other battalions won't allow it.

ASH

They've taken the cookhouses away and we've got no rations left.

SWEET enters.

SWEET

The other units have halved their rations and sent them to ours.

SWALLOW

Where are the officers?

ASH

They've been withdrawn.

SWALLOW

That means they're planning something...they shoot deserters...

KITCHENER

We're not deserters. This is a strike.

SWALLOW

How's that gonna stop 'em arrestin the bloody lot of us.

ASH

We elect our own officers...as long we maintain discipline they'll back off.

LIGHTS on the BRIGADIER.

BRIGADIER

ALL MEN OUT ON PARADE! ON THE DOUBLE!

The men look at each other for a brief moment before hurrying into action and lining up to attention.

BRIGADIER (CONT'D)

Now men, if this mutiny continues...guns will be used...on you!

SWALLOW

If you do that...the whole brigade will attack them!

KITCHENER

Anyhow...this ain't a mutiny, its a strike!

BRIGADIER

There is no industrial action in the army. This is enough men. You are on parade and under orders. Give me the roll.

He looks at the list in his hand.

BRIGADIER (CONT'D)

Private Swallow...you report to the Battalion.

SWALLOW

I refuse Sir!

BRIGADIER

Put that man under arrest!

Nothing happens.

BRIGADIER (CONT'D)

Sergeant Kitchener...you are to report to the Battalion.

Pause.

BRIGADIER (CONT'D)

Sergeant Kitchener...you are to report to Battalion!

KITCHENER

I respectfully ...refuse sir!

BRIGADIER

Put that man under arrest!

Nothing happens.

BRIGADIER (CONT'D)

Private Sweet...REPORT TO THE BATTALION!

SWEET

I...I...re...refuse SIR!

BRIGADIER

Put that man under arrest!

SWALLOW

(Under his breath)

Good lad.

Brigadier...
ASH

What is it Corporal?!
BRIGADIER

I have a question sir...
ASH

BRIGADIER
(Threatening)
A question about what constitutes a mutiny...

ASH
This isn't a mutiny sir. It's an industrial action.

BRIGADIER
There is no industrial action in the army!

ASH
In the Australian army -

BRIGADIER
Your question!

ASH
How long can a man be away before your arrest him?

BRIGADIER
What?!

ASH
Because I didn't hear you and I'm going Absent Without Leave.

ASH walks off.

SWALLOW
So am I Brig.

KITCHENER
We all are. C'mon Sweet.

They prepare to leave singing "The Sleeper Cutter's
Camp."

ALL

If another war is starting, I'll hang out with the " jibs",
Not much in being a hero, with a bayonet 'tween your ribs.
Hard fighting for the Froggies, pushing Huns across the Rhine...

LIGHTS. PRIME MINISTER BILLY HUGHES enters
screaming at the top of his lungs.

HUGHES

STOP! DO YOU HEAR! THIS MUTINY MUST STOP!

They stop singing.

SWALLOW

Who the fuck are you?

HUGHES

Who the fuck am I?! I am your fucking prime minister you insubordinate fool!

SWEET

What's he doing here?

HUGHES

Do you have any idea what your actions are doing to Australia's reputation? Heh? Any idea whatsoever?

ASH

Don't care.

KITCHENER

Not interested.

SWALLOW

Couldn't give a stuff.

HUGHES

Don't talk to me like that lad. I'm the only thing standing between you and a firing squad. Haig and his general staff are crying out for an Australian sacrifice to British military discipline but I won't let them!

ASH

Bullshit. It's the Australian public that won't let ya Billy. You know they won't keep supportin the war if you side with those bastards and start executin Aussies for breaches of military discipline.

HUGHES

Mutiny is no minor breach of discipline. In any other army you'd be shot within 24 hours but no, not the Australian Imperial Force. We're special. We can do what the hell we like because we've suffered a few casualties...

ALL

FEW!?

HUGHES

I've seen all the French, British and German dead, their corpses piled sky high. It a sight to behold!

KITCHENER

Has he lost it? What's he talkin about?

SWALLOW

Few he says! Let me at'im. I don't give a fuck if he's the prime minister. He could be King bloody George for all I care...

The others restrain SWALLOW from attacking HUGHES, who remains unperturbed by this action.

HUGHES

This can't go on. The reputation of the AIF is at stake. My reputation as a wartime leader is at stake. Two referendums on conscription defeated in the space of 12 months while the fate of the British empire hangs by a thread.

ASH

Maybe your future does but the Empire's got everything it can out of us. More than enough cannon fodder out there...

HUGHES

Some reputations, many must die to protect.

KITCHENER

Men shouldn't be forced to come out here anyway. That's not what the AIF is all about.

HUGHES

(With deadly seriousness)

I'll tell you a little secret. There is no "AIF." There is the Triple Entente of which we are a part by virtue of our loyalty and allegiance to Britain. Your sacrifices thus far...yes, I know, quite significant in relation to our size as a country, will give us a seat at the victory table along with all the major powers.

(MORE)

HUGHES (CONT'D)

Australia will represent itself as an independent nation for the first time. But not with a mutiny. My God, we're not the French...

SWALLOW

What? The French mutinied?

HUGHES

Thousands of them. Their whole bloody army came to a standstill. If the Germans had found out you'd all be swimming back home.

ASH

Brigadier?

BRIGADIER

No comment.

HUGHES

Australians are made of sturdier stuff!

ASH

Tell that to a Frenchman.

HUGHES

This is your last chance.

SWALLOW

Sorry Billy. We've had enough. You're not going to squeeze us dry then split us up. The battalion's all we've got. And that's all we've got to say.

HUGHES

Socialism in the military will not work!

ASH

Tell that to the Russians.

HUGHES

If other battalions become aware of what you are doing, the AIF could become a spent force. You have a choice men. To return home as heroes, standing or in any position you care to mention, or in chains, hobbling down the gangplank for all of Australia to see. Your deeds will be forgotten, only to be replaced with the dishonour and cowardice of this moment...

KITCHENER

He called us fucking cowards...let me at'im!

KITCHENER is restrained.

SWALLOW

(To HUGHES)

I'd watch my language if I were you. One more outburst like that...

HUGHES

That is how your countrymen will see it, courtesy of every newspaper in the country. Make no mistakes, lads, better to lie here in an untimely grave than return to that kind of welcome.

SWALLOW

What do ya say Ash?

HUGHES

Yes Corporal, what do you say? Death has been kind to you...

ASH

I don't need his favours.

HUGHES

He's worse than fate you know. Hates to be taken for granted.

ASH

The battalion won't be split.

HUGHES

What's your problem Corporal? Why stand in the way of...the natural order of things?

ASH

This is our only chance of survival...to get out of here alive.

HUGHES

I will come for you, for all of you no matter where you hide. No place will be safe in front or behind the lines.

ASH

What kind of a Prime Minister are you?

HUGHES

The wrathful kind. As old as time.

ASH turns to the others.

ASH

It's over lads. As long as the Battalion stays together...that's all that matters.

HUGHES

Good lad. Go on...sing the rest of your song. I'll join you if you like...

HUGHES begins the first line.

HUGHES (CONT'D)

They can take Alsace and Flanders and Normandy for mine!
All I'm needin' is a pozzie where the ground is not too damp,
'Neath azure skies of Aussie, just a sleeper cutters' camp.

Here, sitting in a dug-out, a rifle on my knees...

The rest begin to join in.

ALL

I fancy I am back there, once again, among the trees,
With long lost friends I'm chatting, by the camp-fire's ruddy glow,
Where we boiled the old black billy, in the days of long ago,
The signal comes to "Fall-in", I can hear the Diggers tramp.
Farewell, perhaps forever, to the sleeper cutters' camp.

LIGHTS on ASH.

ASH

We were a citizen army, better paid than any other Empire force including the Poms. We fought like soldiers and behaved like men, men who knew they still had rights that needed to be respected. If anything separated us from the Tommy, it was this lack of blind obedience, the need to question and be treated like a human being by those above us. Killing the enemy was never a problem.

ACT TWO SCENE FOUR

LIGHTS. A London street. The SOLDIERS are stumbling along drunk as they sing "Ragtime Army."

ALL

We are the Ragtime Army, the A-N-Z-A-C,
We cannot shoot. We don't salute

(MORE)

ALL (CONT ' D)

What bloody use are we?
 And when we get to Berlin,
 The Kaiser he will say,
 "Mein Gott, mein Gott,
 What a bloody rotten lot, the A-N-Z-A-C!"

LIGHTS on ETTIE ROUT. Dressed in austere black, she floats down from the sky like a cross between the Angel of Death and Mary Poppins. She could be carrying a black umbrella which she uses pointedly. ETTI stands in the path of the four of them with her arm raised.

ETTIE ROUT

Stop!

ALL

JESUS!/FUCK!/BLOODY HELL!

ETTI closes her umbrella.

SWALLOW

Who the hell are you?

KITCHENER

(Very drunk)

If you want a root love you just have to tell us your price...

SWALLOW

Shut up Kitch. We don't know what it is yet.

ETTIE ROUT

My name is Etti Rout. And I am *not* a prostitute out to solicit her wares...

SWALLOW

Etti fuckin Rout...now I know I'm pissed...

ETTIE ROUT

Where are you going?

KITCHENER

What's that to you love?

ETTIE ROUT

Do not speak to me that way Sergeant.

ASH

We're off to sample the exotic nature of British womanhood.

ETTI ROUT

In this weather I shan't expect there'd be too many of that kind out tonight.

KITCHENER

You are...

ROUT sticks her umbrella into KITCHENER'S chest.

ETTI ROUT

I'm not any woman Sergeant.

SWALLOW

Alright, keep your skirt on. We're not about to rip it off in a hurry.

ETTIE ROUT

Are you aware of the dangers involved?

SWALLOW

Yeah, if I don't get my end tonight there isn't a dog in London that's safe.

KITCHENER

Or cat...

ETTIE ROUT

Do not be disgusting Private!

The MEN recoil in fear.

ROUT

I am well aware of your intentions but are you taking any precautions...

ASH

Precautions..?

SWALLOW

What precautions..?

ETTIE ROUT

Have you got your Blue Label outfit?

ASH

She's got to be kidding..

SWALLOW

What the fuck is that?

KITCHENER

Yeah I saw those...someone was handin'em out back at the base.

ETTIE ROUT

That was me you insolent fool!

SWALLOW

Thought you looked familiar.

ASH

You're that Aussie shiela tryin to get us all to stop rootin...

SWALLOW

Can't do that sweetheart. Give Australians a bad name if we stopped rootin'...

ETTIE ROUT

First of all I am from New Zealand and I am not trying to stop you from doing anything but destroying your own lives and that of those closest to you. I have fought your superiors from Cairo to Paris to accept what is natural for a man to do when faced with severe privation and possible death. He wouldn't have it any other way!

ASH

Whose he?

ETTI ROUT

The father of all men in extreme distress. But you must co-operate to ensure that VD is not spread back to your homes and families...

KITCHENER

Is this a shiela talkin..?

ETTIE ROUT

Your Blue Label outfit should be kept on you at all times when on leave. Where are they!

SWEET

I got one!

SWEET pulls out his Blue Label outfit from inside his tunic.

ETTI ROUT

Good lad. But he has other plans for you.

ROUT takes the package from his hands and gives it to one of the other men.

ETTIE ROUT

I've brought along several more.

ETTI pulls them out of her bag and hands them to the others. They curiously take them.

ETTIE ROUT (CONT'D)

Now open them carefully ...

They follow her instructions.

ETTIE ROUT (CONT'D)

You have several small tubes of chemicals which you use just before and immediately after connection...

ASH

Connection?

ETTIE ROUT

Sexual intercourse.

KITCHENER

Fucking.

SWALLOW

So I just rub this over my old fella and no clap!

ETTIE ROUT

Not quite. Your partner must also use the ointment carefully rubbing it into her genitals...

SWALLOW

I can do that!

ETTIE ROUT

It 's not quite that simple. The ointment can cause an itch and be quite irritable.

KITCHENER

Just like Swallow's old fella...

SWALLOW

Get fucked.

ASH

When do we do all this?

ETTIE ROUT

Immediately after sex. Men, it is essential you follow every step. VD has become the scourge of the allied armies that must be eradicated.

SWALLOW

Forget it love. Last thing I need is to do a medical inspection once I got Mademoiselle's undergarments splashed all over the floor.

ETTIE ROUT

What about your future - is this what you want to bring back to Australia. An epidemic of VD?!

SWALLOW

Jesus Christ love...before we even get VD we have to survive exposure, anthrax, dysentery...

KITCHENER

...enteric, frostbite...

SWEET

...nephritis, pneumonia...

ASH

So who said we're goin back? None of us care about what we pick up along the way love. For most of us this is our last step. Let us enjoy it in peace.

ETTIE ROUT

You do what I say and none of these ailments shall touch you. Each of you can have sexual relations with as many women as you like without a worry in the world! Just follow my instructions and all manner of death shall avoid you...

They clutch their packages now like some ancient talisman.

SWALLOW

You're not kidding?

ETTI ROUT

As I live and breath.

KITCHENER

Who would have thought...we can fuck our way to salvation.

SWALLOW

We need another song...something uplifting...

SWALLOW (CONT'D)

I got it!

SWALLOW begins singing "Fighting the Kaiser."

SWALLOW sings the first line and the rest quickly join in.

ALL

Fighting the Kaiser, fighting the Kaiser,
Who'll come a fighting the Kaiser with me,
And we'll drink all his beer,
And eat all his sausages,
Who'll come a fighting the Kaiser with me.
Hooray!

ETTI grabs ASH and pulls him aside. The others exit.

ETTI ROUT

Their fate shan't be yours.

ASH

You want to see my Blue Label...got one if that's all you're worried about.

ETTI ROUT

Someone special wants a word Corporal.

ASH

Who?

ETTI ROUT

Over there...

ETTI looks towards another part of the stage. LIGHTS.
ASH is alone. LIGHTS on the ENGLISH
GENTLEMAN sitting on a park bench wearing a bowler
hat and carrying an umbrella. ASH notices him. He sobers
up quickly.

ASH

Who are you?

ENGLISH GENTLEMAN

I don't think you really want to know.

ASH

Then fuck off.

ENGLISH GENTLEMAN

Oh no Corporal. I do the fucking off around here.

ASH

So what do you want?

ENGLISH GENTLEMAN

A little company on this beautiful evening.

ASH

You're lookin for...I don't do that sort of thing.

ENGLISH GENTLEMAN

Pray tell? What might that be?

ASH

Buggery...two men havin it off...saw it couple of times in the trenches...

ENGLISH GENTLEMAN

Of course two men sticking bayonets into each other is something else entirely, eh what?

ASH

You're a bloody whoremaster aren't ya? Can't fool me in that get up.

ENGLISH GENTLEMAN

The drink has dulled your senses more than usual. I am merely a messenger.

ASH

For whom?

ENGLISH GENTLEMAN

A great prophet.

ASH

I don't do religion either.

ENGLISH GENTLEMAN

But this prophet is never wrong.

ASH

Where does he live?

ENGLISH GENTLEMAN

Somewhere between heaven and hell.

ASH

Then how come I haven't met him yet? Ha ha ha.

ENGLISH GENTLEMAN

He has a message just for you Corporal.

ASH

Yeah? So what is it.

ENGLISH GENTLEMAN

Cheer up old son. Not long to go.

ASH

That's it? That's all this prophet has to fuckin say? I'm about to cop it!

ENGLISH GENTLEMAN

No! The slaughter. The monumental waste of human life that everyone is thinking about but still can't bear to discuss in polite company.

ASH

So it's about to end. The war...

ENGLISH GENTLEMAN

Maybe another year or so.

ASH

(crushed)

No don't say that...

ENGLISH GENTLEMAN

Could have been earlier but your side wouldn't accept German terms.

ASH

Why not?!

ENGLISH GENTLEMAN

Nobody wants to admit its all been a terrible mistake. Victory or Death. And he's not complaining.

ASH

A chance for peace and nobody took it...!

ASH lets out a God Almighty scream. He looks very much on the verge of collapse. A sob is painfully emitted from his body which he attempts to stifle with all his strength.

ASH (CONT'D)

I can't...I can't take it anymore...

ENGLISH GENTLEMAN

That's why I'm here. To make sure you do.

ASH

All I hear is screams, not sure if they're mine or some other poor bastard...

ENGLISH GENTLEMAN

The journey will end in a merciful silence.

ASH goes back on the attack.

ASH

Now I've got it! You're a spy aren't ya! And here I am colludin with the enemy...

ENGLISH GENTLEMAN

Don't be so tough on those Germans. They're really having a hard time of it you know. Turnips can only go so far.

ASH

The Gerries want to surrender...We didn't hear nuthin about that..

The ENGLISH GENTLEMAN gives ASH a pitiful look as a god would to a creature incapable of saving itself.

ENGLISH GENTLEMAN

You dear dear boy. Shame really. It's getting rather full up. Thousands per week all smelly and various states of decay or dismemberment. But still arguing with each other...makes a hell of a racket I must say.

ASH viciously grabs the ENGLISH GENTLEMAN who remains completely unperturbed.

ASH

Where the hell are you from?

ENGLISH GENTLEMAN

Relax old boy.

ASH

Am I going..?

ENGLISH GENTLEMAN

Can't be telling secrets now can I? No man should know his own fate. Particularly when the odds are so stacked against you.

ASH

Please...

ENGLISH GENTLEMAN

No. Never beg. I might be civilised but I am not sentimental.

ASH

What about the others..?

ENGLISH GENTLEMAN

Your "mates"?

ASH nods his head.

ENGLISH GENTLEMAN (CONT'D)

Their time is near. But that's not why I'm calling..

ASH

Why have you come...

ENGLISH GENTLEMAN

I'm here to offer you a little solace, a timely port in a storm..

LIGHTS on ASH SENIOR'S radio next to the ENGLISH GENTLEMAN. He turns it on. SOUND of "Who's Kissing Her Now?"

ASH

It's been such a long time...

ENGLISH GENTLEMAN

Here she comes...on cue. The siren call of the damned....

The ENGLISH GENTLEMAN gets up to go.

The PROSTITUTE enters. She accompanies the VOICE on the radio. This following verse should continue under the remaining dialogue between ASH and the ENGLISH GENTLEMAN.

PROSTITUTE

I wonder who's kissing her now,
 Wonder who's teaching her how,
 Wonder who's looking into her eyes
 Breathing sighs, telling lies;
 I wonder who's buying the wine,
 For lips that I used to call mine,
 Wonder if she ever tells him of me,
 I wonder who's kissing her now.

ASH

So you are a fucking whoremaster! I knew it...

ENGLISH GENTLEMAN

It's meagre comfort but the only kind available on such short notice. She's not a bad sort. The face of an angel and the body of Salome. As close as any man will come to kingly pleasures. I save her for special cases and you certainly do qualify old son.

ASH

I'm not gonna be with the likes of her...

ENGLISH GENTLEMAN

Wait till she is naked. Or you could kill her if you like. Some of you colonials have chosen that option. But I shouldn't be too fussy. She doesn't have too much time left herself so do be kind.

The ENGLISH GENTLEMAN prepares to leave.

ASH

You're holding out on me! Somethin you're not tellin me. I just know it.

ENGLISH GENTLEMAN

The second time around is proving more arduous for you than I first thought. A calm port in the storm might be just the tonic...

ASH is visibly stunned by this admission.

ASH

Second time round...

ENGLISH GENTLEMAN

Must be off! There's a Boche corporal who's showing a lot of promise, dodged us a few times. Recently missed a mortar shell that killed most of his platoon. Not a scratch on him. He might get a free pass for the next one.

ASH

Next one...there couldn't be another, not after all this...

ENGLISH GENTLEMAN

This is just the beginning old boy. War to end all wars? Don't be ridiculous!

He exits. ASH is approached by the PROSTITUTE.

PROSTITUTE

Where ya goin love?

ASH

In circles.

PROSTITUTE

Why don't you rest your behind over here with me?

ASH is silent.

PROSTITUTE (CONT'D)

Lost are we? Mates forgotten one of their own?

ASH

We got separated...

PROSTITUTE

I dare say they're probably shacked up with a lady not quite unlike myself...doin what you should be yourself.

ASH

I don't pay for it love.

The PROSTITUTE laughs.

PROSTITUTE

The whole bloody army does love. You haven't been wounded up here by any chance?

ASH

I'm fine.

PROSTITUTE

And down there's functionin' alright..?

ASH

You want to give it an inspection...

PROSTITUTE

Not without discussing terms first.

ASH

Terms? How about I give you my terms...

PROSTITUTE

Heavy...

ASH

I take you over to those bushes and have my way with you...fuck yer and leave yer...

PROSTITUTE

No problem with that love, as long as there's a few bob in the kitty at the end of it.

ASH

I thought you Pommie chicks did it for the love and adventure. That's why you's all swarm over the troops like you've never seen a man in your life.

PROSTITUTE

Can't say the air ain't a little freer down here, away from all that preachin about marriage and kids with no advice how to feed them once all the fathers have disappeared...

ASH

I don't have a few bob...

PROSTITUTE

You're a bloody Australian! Best paid troops in the British Army.

ASH

We're not in the British Army. Love.

PROSTITUTE

Anyways, I haven't met an Aussie yet who isn't willing to pay for it.

ASH

How do I know you ain't diseased.

PROSTITUTE

Do I look it?

ASH

How can you bloody tell?

PROSTITUTE

If I drop me knickers you can do an inspection.

ASH

By then it might be too late.

PROSTITUTE

How do I know your litte fella isn't green like a banana?

ASH

Is that what happens to it..?

PROSTITUTE

Haven't seen it in the barracks love..?

ASH

Not somethin' you flash about...

PROSTITUTE

Guess not. So what'll it be? Look, normally I wouldn't care less and move on to the next drunken soldier but you seem a reasonable sort...we can take a bit of a walk, pretend we're like together in the real sense...out for an evening stroll under the stars...

ASH

And then...

PROSTITUTE

These bushes are quite comfortable...hasn't rained for a week so the grass is nice and dry.

ASH

Out here in public...

PROSTITUTE

Half the bloody British army has done it out here in Hyde Park...when was the last time you held your sweetheart?

ASH

1915.

PROSTITUTE

Three years is a long time between drinks. Has she written back to you?

ASH is silent.

PROSTITUTE (CONT'D)

Why don't you just imagine I'm her if it makes it any easier...

ASH

You're nuthin like her.

The PROSTITUTE becomes BETH.

BETH

I'm not waitin for you Ashie.

ASH

What are you talking about?

BETH

It's been too long...and I've met someone.

ASH

Why isn't he here with us?

BETH

He does important work...can't talk about it. Government stuff.

ASH

(Bitterly)

Too important for the trenches heh?

BETH

(Despairingly)

Not everyone's meant to die over there...

ASH

I haven't stopping thinking about you all these years, haven't stopped writing...

BETH

*I can't read them...*no more, not after the things you describe.

ASH

That's how it is.

BETH

But not how I want to see it. Not anyone for that matter. Too many reminders at home.

ASH

I love you.

BETH

Please Ash. Don't make it harder. You know you won't make it back. One day you're going to be killed over there.

ASH

I've survived this long. Death and I, we've come to an understanding.

BETH

So have I. My only brother gone, all my uncles. Lost count of the others. I want to be in the land of the living.

ASH

I'm alive Beth.

BETH

You've given up Ashie. I can tell. It's in your voice.

ASH

The war's gonna end soon...

BETH

This war'll never end till we're all broken and used up.

ASH

Let me kiss you. That's all I want...

ASH kisses BETH. She becomes the PROSTITUTE.

PROSTITUTE

Wouldn't be the first time you paid for it.

Pause.

ASH

How long you been doin this...

PROSTITUTE

Not long after the war started. Thousands of us love and we're not all hard luck stories.

ASH

No one's saying.

PROSTITUTE

I know what you're thinking...what all soldiers think but I don't care so don't you start judging me...

ASH

Love...I seen things...done things...

PROSTITUTE

Haven't met a soldier who feels good about what he's doing across the Channel...why should you be any different...

ASH

We're all gonna die over there you know...not one of us will survive, even if our bodies are still standing when it's all over.

Pause.

ASH (CONT'D)

I thought I'd be better at this...killing. My Dad, he wrote poems about it you know that?

PROSTITUTE

I do now. Why don't you recite me one? Serenade me...

In his drunken state, ASH tries to straighten himself up before reciting. He Looks away from the PROSTITUTE.

ASH

A song I will sing to you all pay attention
About our late troubles in the Sudan
It's not to run down our brave English generals
(MORE)

PROSTITUTE (CONT'D)

But the way England treating her brave fighting men
 To leave her brave sons in such a vile country
 A disgrace Old England I think you will agree
 To be scorched by the sun is worse than a slaughter
 To the Sons of Old England the land of the free
 Now one word I will say about our sick soldiers...

ASH does not continue. The PROSTITUTE becomes
 BETH once more.

BETH

Why don't you go on Ashie..?

ASH

It's not my favourite.

BETH

Your father doesn't seem to keen on fighting. Not like his son...

ASH

I haven't even gone over there yet Beth.

BETH

(Almost swooning)

But you will and you'll have plenty of stories to tell about how many Turks's you'd
 killed and all the brave things you did for the glory of Australia! And we'll sit by the
 Yarra reading your poems of all the battle you fought in.

ASH

Don't think I'll be writin any Beth...

BETH

Why not?

ASH

He was never frightened,,,not like me.

BETH becomes the PROSTITUTE once more.

PROSTITUTE

Right, we can't have that kind of talk now can we? Course you'll survive, it's written all
 over that handsome mug of yours! No German shell's gonna touch you love now what
 you need is another drink.

ASH

What about...

PROSTITUTE

We can discuss that later. For the time being there's a place nearby ...

ASH

Take all your soldier friends there..?

PROSTITUTE

Only the one's I think are gonna live to be a hundred. What's the name of this fiance of yours?

ASH

Beth.

PROSTITUTE

Alright. You can call me Beth...I'll be everything you want me to be. C'mon then...

The PROSTITUTE grabs ASH'S arm. LIGHTS. She begins to sing. ASH joins in...

ASH AND PROSTITUTE

If you want to feel wretched and lonely and blue,
 Just imagine the girl you love best
 In the arms of some fellow who's stealing a kiss
 From the lips that you once fondly pressed.
 But the world moves a pace and the loves of today
 Flit away with a smile and a tear.
 So you never can tell who is kissing her now,
 Or just whom you'll be kissing next year.

They exit.

ACT TWO SCENE FIVE

LIGHTS on ASH. He is reading from a letter.

SWEET'S FATHER

"Ash understands that this war is not for all men. Yet he himself is a real Anzac father. A man any country would be proud of. No empire could survive without soldiers like him.

LIGHTS on SWEET'S FATHER sitting on a high backed chair in his study.

SWEET'S FATHER (CONT'D)

You've got him fooled haven't you Corporal? The rot is well and truly setting in. Your leave in England wasn't quite the tonic you expected.

LIGHTS on SWEET in uniform and combat gear. He sits writing a letter.

SWEET

"I know my chances of surviving and coming back in one piece are much greater with he as my immediate superior. So...there's no need to worry."

SWEET'S FATHER

But I do worry son. Two years on the Western Front and you have not managed to distinguish yourself in any manner befitting a true warrior.

ASH

He's alive...

SWEET'S FATHER

Many a fine son has returned to our shores cloaked in the glory of battle.

ASH

And they're either dead or worse ...

SWEET'S FATHER

There is talk that you have either deserted or done whatever possible to avoid fighting...how else to explain...

ASH

He's done his duty! He's just not suited for this-

SWEET'S FATHER

A decision has been made. If you wish to return to home and hearth then glory and honour must be yours.

ASH

The war may soon end...

SWEET'S FATHER

The only news I wish to hear is of your bravery and derring do. Nothing more. The author of such news is inconsequential. If you get my meaning.

SWEET nods.

SWEET'S FATHER (CONT'D)

I've written to Blackmore. He's a good lad. Knows what's expected.

LIGHTS. ASH approaches SWEET who scrambles to attention. SWEET'S FATHER watches the conversation with great interest.

ASH

Relax. We head off in about an hour.

He notices the letter.

ASH (CONT'D)

Your old man written again...

SWEET

Yes.

ASH

It's been a while. Special occasion..?

SWEET

My birthday.

ASH

You never mentioned...how old?

SWEET hesitates.

SWEET

I turned seventeen last week.

ASH

What?

SWEET

I...turned seventeen last week.

ASH

I hear you. When?

SWEET

The night of the last raid.

ASH

Well... why didn't you say something..?

SWEET

We were fighting for our lives if I remember correctly.

ASH

Where you from Sweet?

SWEET

Albury.

ASH

Bit soft for a country boy don't you think...

SWEET

It would seem so...

ASH

What about your parents? Did you run away

SWEET

I was encouraged to join...do my part. It Was my father's idea. He was all for it.

ASH

And you?

SWEET

We all have to do our duty don't we..?

ASH

Indeed. Still...you're not of age.

SWEET

I'm not the only one. My father took me to the recruiting station. Said he'd swear I was the right age...whatever it took.

ASH

Did your father have any idea how unsuited you are to this business?

SWEET

He thought it'd be good for me...make me more like him.

ASH

And what's his fucking qualifications for this business?

SWEET'S FATHER

I fought the Boers. Won a medal.

ASH

I'm sure the Boers didn't have a thousand bloody guns shelling him 24 fucking hours a day...

SWEET'S FATHER

And I was wounded three times.

Pause.

ASH

Sweet...we can't be lookin out for you every five minutes...wonderin whether you've gotten yourself lost or fallin in the wrong bloody trench.

SWEET

You won't have to Corporal. I'll try harder.

ASH

Like you did at bayonet drill the other week...missed the target...made a right fool of yourself, of all of us.

SWEET

You were laughing too...

ASH

Not on the inside.

Pause.

ASH (CONT'D)

Why'd you volunteer for this patrol?

SWEET

Blackmore says I'm not pulling my weight...our families have known each other for years. There's talk back home.

Pause.

ASH

I've done all I can to protect you...

SWEET

I know.

Pause.

ASH

Join the others. We go over in an hour.

SWEET hurriedly exits leaving the letter behind. ASH notices it and picks it up. LIGHTS on SWEET'S FATHER.

SWEET'S FATHER

You shouldn't be so hard on him Corporal. They can't all be warriors like you.

ASH

You've sent him to his death.

SWEET'S FATHER

Can't avoid the inevitable.

ASH

I tried to save him you know. Keep him out of harm's way.

SWEET'S FATHER

As to manner of death...

ASH

What does it matter? He was cloaked in glory.

SWEET'S FATHER

It is a father's right to know.

Pause.

ASH

We were spotted on our patrol so hightailed it out of there fast...100 yards from out trenches...75 yards from our trenches, 50 yards from our trenches. All the men were back or so I thought. We hear a scream...like a child who's seen a ghost. I looked around and just knew it was Sweet. I went back out and found him in the mud that was up to his waist. He was drowning in it, his pitiful moans getting worse. There no way I could pull him out. Gently I slid down behind him...he didn't know I was there, placed one arm around his forehead and the service revolver to his temple...

SWEET'S FATHER

So much left out of your letter.

ASH

I made him the hero he deserved to be.

SWEET'S FATHER

It was better that way. Not knowing. A quick death. No lingering wounds. No shattered soul to carry for eternity. Much like your own.

LIGHTS. SWEET is alone and sings "Just as the Sun
Went Down."

SWEET

In the mist of the battlefield, just at the close of day,
Wounded and bleeding upon the field two dying soldiers lay.
One thought of mother at home alone, feeble and old and grey.
One of his sweetheart he'd left in town, happy and young and gay.
One held a ringlet of thin, grey hair, one kissed a lock of brown.
Bidding each other their last farewell, just as the sun went down.

ACT TWO SCENE SIX

LIGHTS. ASH and SWALLOW sitting at a table in an
estaminet (bar-brothel). Two other PATRONS stand at
the bar talking to one of the girls.

SWALLOW

I don't understand you Ash...why won't you have a go with one of'em.

ASH

Don't need to. Got my fill in Blighty.

SWALLOW

What are you talkin about? That story of yours doesn't wash.

ASH

How so?

SWALLOW

We found you half bloody unconscious next to a park bench. Thought you were dead.

ASH

So what. We did it in the bushes.

SWALLOW

In the state you were in nothing bloody well happened except in your dreams. This is your chance for the real thing.

ASH

I'm not doing anything with these French whores. Pox ridden bitches the lot of 'em. Most of the blokes get it over here and spread it back in Blighty.

SWALLOW

Well when it's my turn I'm goin. Never know Ash, every time could be your last.

ASH

Maybe I'd like the last time to be worth rememberin.

SWALLOW

So you maulin that English rose was your idea of a fond recollection?

ASH

What are you talkin about?

SWALLOW

One of them cuties was found bashed near half to death not far from where we found ya. Lucky it was us and not the local constabulary.

ASH

Nuthin happened Ray. I swear it.

SWALLOW

Yeah...

ASH

There was no time in the bushes. I drunk myself stupid. Trying to blot everything out.

SWALLOW

Maybe you don't remember what you did...

ASH

That's not me. Never has been.

SWALLOW

Ashie boy, we've all done things nobody, least of all ourselves,,ever thought we could. Nuthin we're proud of.

ASH

That's different. Out in the trenches it's about survival.

SWALLOW

Never mind. Could have been any one. I might have done it for all ya know.

ASH

You got to believe me Ray. I was alone.

Pause.

SWALLOW

Then now's your time to make up for it. Wouldn't have a spare quid on you by any chance...?

LIGHTS on KITCHENER. He is accompanied by BLUEY MCKINNON. Both are smartly dressed in civilian clothing.

KITCHENER

Still the bloody same aren't ya Ray... short for a bob when you need it most.

SWALLOW

My God it's lord bloody Kitchener back from the dead...

MCKINNON

Can I buy you two boys a drink?

SWALLOW

What the hell...of course you can.

MCKINNON pulls up a seat uninvited.

ASH

Make yourself welcome.

SWALLOW

You've made some new friends since leaving hospital.

MCKINNON

And so he has.

ASH

Your family know of your resurrection?

KITCHENER

We haven't been in touch. No matter...doubt if any of us will ever see Australia at the end of all this...

SWALLOW

Blackmore thinks you're officer material.

KITCHENER

Not in this army.

ASH

With a medal and all the trimmings...

KITCHENER

He'll get us all killed if the Gerries don't do it first.

ASH

Judgin' by your threads you've made some new friends...

SWALLOW

Don't tell me you're a sandbagger...

KITCHENER

What do you take me for? Rob and kill my own? Those bastards were scum even before we got here.

ASH

What does that make you?

Pause.

KITCHENER

I've joined Bluey Mckinnon's mob.

ASH

The Bailleu Gang.?

MCKINNON

You've heard of-

SWALLOW

Of course we've bloody well heard.

ASH

They're a bunch of-

KITCHENER

Survivors Ash. Not accepting we have to go to our deaths like lambs to the slaughter. And make a few quid on the side.

SWALLOW

If the provosts catch you it'll be ten years minimum, maybe the firing squad.

KITCHENER

I'd rather take my chances with them. The odds are much better.

ASH

Aren't you scared we'll dob you in?

MCKINNON

Not really. Those blokes over there is armed. They'll plug you if you so much as raise your voices.

ASH

(To MCKINNON)

And who the hell are you?

MCKINNON

Bluey Mckinnon. Pleased to meet ya.

SWALLOW

Why you here then...

ASH

Bluey's lookin for some new recruits.

MCKINNON smiles.

KITCHENER

You could always figure things out one step ahead of the rest couldn't ya Ash..?

ASH

Shut up Kitchener. Your mate's the one we interested in talking too.

SWALLOW

What do ya want?

MCKINNON

When Kitchener joined us I asked him if had some mates who had survived the worst of it and maybe had had enough...might even be lookin to make a few quid before it's all over.

ASH

What makes you think this will ever end?

SWALLOW

Ashie's right. Last time I checked the Gerry's are still waitin across No Man's Land and just as many guns pointed at us.

MCKINNON

You've been at the front too long fellas. Haven't seen what's comin up from Blighty these past months...more guns, equipment, supplies, more men than ever before. It's endless, not just for a big push. It's like this all the time. The Yanks are here and Germany's all done in at home. They can't keep up.

SWALLOW

Now you're makin me feel sorry for the bastards.

ASH

(To MCKINNON)

What are you lookin at doin?

SWALLOW

(To ASH)

You're not thinkin of deserting?

MCKINNON

I want to set up some more gambling schools between here and Paris. Can't keep up with demand. The pickings are ripe and we'll make a fortune. But I needs reliable men who aren't scared to have a go.

ASH

Why us?

MCKINNON

It's been three years. Nobody's luck hold out that long. There's a shell or bullet with your name on it. It's just a matter of time.

ASH

(To KITCHENER)

Is that what turned you over?

KITCHENER

You couldn't find me after the last barrage. I was buried in my trench. Could feel the weight of the earth pressing against my chest and ribs. My helmet was forcing my chin down so I couldn't even raise my voice. This is it I thought. Nuthin could be done.

ASH

We thought you'd been blown to kingdom come...

KITCHENER

I'd just about stopped breathing.

SWALLOW

We thought you were dead.

KITCHENER

None of you came looking for me. Why was that heh?

ASH

Blackmore was convinced you had taken a direct hit. Ordered us out that trench line before another barrage hit us.

SWALLOW

How'd you get out?

KITCHENER

Sergeant from another unit finds me. Saves my life. Takes me to the field hospital. Tells me he's had enough himself and is planning on joining the Bailleu Gang. Smartest thing I'd heard since we got here. So when I was discharged...

SWALLOW

You were the last I'd ever thought would do this...what with all your patriotic fervour.

KITCHENER

I still love Australia.

ASH

Good for you. And how you ever gonna see it again as a deserter?

MCKINNON

There are ways. How many blokes do you think joined up under a false name heh? With the right connections and a bit of dosh anything's possible.

KITCHENER

C'mon fellas, I told Bluey you were sure to join once I explained it all to you.

ASH

The only thing you've explained is what a gutless bastard you are.

ASH leans over the table and grabs KITCHENER by the collar. He pulls a knife from his boot and places it under KITCHENER'S jaw.

SWALLOW

(To those at the bar)

Nuthin to worry about fellas. Just overcome with emotion.

ASH

If I want to stop bein in this war I'll do it my own way and get out of the whole thing altogether...not hang about like some bloody parasite, makin money off the misery of others.

MCKINNON

You're soundin like a Bolshie.

ASH

Maybe those Russkies got the right idea...not scurrying about like a bunch of crims, reinvent the bloody wheel and start all over. I'm not like you. You're a pathetic sod and If I ever run into you again...

MCKINNON pulls out a pistol and sticks it to ASH'S head.

MCKINNON

That's no way to treat a mate now is it?

ASH

He's no mate of mine.

MCKINNON

Yes but now he's mine. So let him go before I plaster your brains all over his clothes.

SWALLOW

C'mon Ash. Let's get out of here.

MCKINNON

Do you really know who you're dealing with here?

ASH

Why don't you shoot?

MCKINNON

You're a shepherd mate and there's still a few sheep you have to get to pasture. Just like we agreed.

MCKINNON turns the gun onto SWALLOW. ASH lets KITCHENER go and MCKINNON puts his pistol back inside his jacket.

KITCHENER

Bluey could have you killed you know that..?

SWALLOW

You gonna tell him that's what he should do..?

KITCHENER shakes his head.

MCKINNON

Now get the hell out of here and take your mate with ya.

SWALLOW

My regards to your tailor.

SWALLOW exits.

MCKINNON

I'll be his guardian angel. He'll have nothing to fear but...

ASH

Yourself.

KITCHENER gets up to leave followed by the TWO at the bar. ASH SENIOR'S radio is sitting on the bar. KITCHENER turns it on. They begin to sing "Hidin in the Ammunition Van."

KITCHENER

Have I been in battle? Have I been in gaol?

Did I die for England? Listen to my tale.

(MORE)

KITCHENER (CONT 'D)

One good Friday Tuesday, down in Timbuc-three,
I was with my regiment, I was there with me.

Me and three more corporals 'neath the broiling sun
Went to view the battle - after it was won.
Twenty thousand Frenchmen raised the battle cry,
But while the boys were fighting, where, oh where was I?

KITCHENER is joined by the others in the bar.

ALL

I was hiding in the ammunition van!
Midst the shot and shell I've been,
While me comrades fought as comrades ought,
I was nowhere to be seen.

I was covered over with the flag
Listening to the din and strife,
And when the war was o'er, out once more,
And that's how I saved my life!

LIGHTS. Split scene. ASH is alone with MCKINNON.
The GANG MEMBERS at the bar suddenly turn on
KITCHENER and repeatedly stab him to death. He falls
to the floor.

MCKINNON

There's nothing you can do cobber. He owed money and wanted to get out. No return
policy.

ASH tries to go to KITCHENER'S aid.

ASH

Out of my fucking way!

MCKINNON effortlessly stops him.

MCKINNON

You're starin at the future. Like I said, he'll never die at the hands of the enemy.

ACT TWO SCENE SEVEN

LIGHTS on SWALLOW. He sings, "I'm Going Back to Yarrowonga."

SWALLOW

"Now Digger was a soldier and he sailed across the sea,
 With the first Anzac Brigade,
 And Digger was a soldier, brave as one could be,
 And a grand old name he's made,
 From the landing at Gallipoli till the war clouds left the skies,
 He wandered round the Continent a tourist in disguise,
 Then after years of battling when three parts full of lead,
 The M.O said, 'We 'll send you home,'
 T'was then Old Digger said,
 'I'm going back to Yarrowonga,
 In Yarrowonga I'll linger longer,
 I'm going back again to Yarrowonga,
 Where the skies are always blue,
 And when I'm back again in Yarrowonga,
 I'll soon be stronger than old Mahonga,
 You can have your Tennessee and Caroline,
 France and Belgium thrown in,
 I'll take the whole lot for mine,
 I'm going back to Yarrowonga,
 And the land of the kangaroo,
 I'm going roo.'"

LIGHTS . SWALLOW stands outside a hospital tent guarded by the MP. SWALLOW tries to enter.

MP

STOP. Who goes there?

SWALLOW

Hindenburg...who else.

MP

Then I'll have to shoot ya won't I?

SWALLOW

Relax. I'm here to see my brother...heard he was sent to this clearing station after the last attack...

MP

Does this look like a clearing station to you?

SWALLOW

It's got a friggin red cross on it.

MP

Don't get smart with me lad. If I find you're a deserter there'll be no end to the strife I'll put you through.

SWALLOW

What's so bad in there they need you keepin guard?

MP

We've had all types tryin to get in here laddie. A bloke was 'ere just the other day carryin' a sandbag of God knows what, I'm thinkin, rations, minor stores and I tell him he's goin in the wrong tent but he says he's at the right place cos this is where they take all the worst cases and fixes 'em up and before I could correct his view of what lies beyond this tent flap, he shows me the contents of said bag. "Me mate Private Redai is in there. That's what a shell can do." He's thinkin his mate can still be put back together but of course he's just lost his marbles. How are yours lad?

SWALLOW

They're just fine sergeant. Now let me in so I can pay me respects....

MP

This tent is for the seriously wounded. Understand laddie?

SWALLOW

They told me this is where I'd find him and he's receivin the best medical treatment available.

MP

Medicine hasn't caught up with what these men received for their troubles.

SWALLOW

I'll take one look to see if he's in there. If not I'll be on my way,

MP

You promise you won't breath a word to anyone?

SWALLOW

Promise.

MP

War's got to have it's little secrets or else chaps like you will never come back...

SWALLOW

Come back to what...

MP

The bleedin war! Go on then... off you go, one peak and never tell a soul...

LIGHTS on ASH.

ASH

Ray walked in and at first he couldn't tell one man from the other but then it was clear this one had the top part of his head blown off, his mate next to him no legs, another no arms, another no legs and arms, the whole one his lungs so full of gas you coughin up black liquid..men blinded, no eyes, half a face gone, no face at all, one without eyes, another missing a jaw with his eyes wide open staring at a whole new world, burns, disembowelments, can't eat can't shit, life not worth living...that sort of thing. Bullets in the brain, bullets in the heart...bullets in so many places the surgeon didn't know where to start! Ha ha. Ray finally found who he was looking for, his leg decomposing from all the wounds, doctors preparing to cut off more flesh to save what's left. He turned and ran out of there till the smell of antiseptic death was gone. It was all he could do to stop from goin mad...only problem was, he didn't stop running...

LIGHTS. SWALLOW darts about the stage in a mad panic. LIGHTS on the MP.

MP

WHERE THE HELL DO YOU THINK YOU'RE GOING?! THE FRONT IS THAT AWAY!

SWALLOW freezes like a rabbit caught in the headlights. The MP walks over and grabs him from behind. LIGHTS on ASH with his weapon. He raises it towards the MP.

ASH

LET HIM GO!

MP

This is the last one Corporal. The journey is almost over. Your bargain will be kept.

ACT TWO SCENE EIGHT

LIGHTS on ASH and SWALLOW behind the lines. Faint SOUND of a bombardment in the distance.

SWALLOW is sitting down smoking a cigarette while
ASH, rifle in hand, watches over him.

ASH

C'mon, you've had your rest.

SWALLOW doesn't move.

SWALLOW

C'mon he says...what's the rush.

ASH

The rush is I don't want to be fucking out here any more than you do so let's get a move on.

SWALLOW

You're a dog Ash...escortin a man to his execution.

ASH

That hasn't been decided.

SWALLOW

Bullshit. It's a bloody formality.

ASH

Well you shouldn't have run away should ya..?

Silence.

ASH (CONT'D)

Wanderin around like some half wit. What did you think would happen?

SWALLOW

I wasn't wanderin.

ASH

What were you then?

SWALLOW

I was hiding. Didn't want to get caught.'

ASH

You bolted for real..?

SWALLOW

You with all the fucking questions...course I bloody well did! Christ Almighty I'm sick of fucking death and if he was real I'm sure he would be too. Do you understand Ash? Thought I could handle it, kiddin meself that the more I saw...the more I'd get used to it.

ASH

You really are fucking stupid.

SWALLOW

I didn't have an education, what's your excuse?

ASH

The more I see, the more dead I feel.

SWALLOW

Then it's not worth living is it..?

ASH

Where the hell did you think you were gonna go? Heh? Thousands of troops between here and Blighty. Military police lookin for anyone not dead and walking in the wrong direction.

SWALLOW

I was walking in the right direction alright...away from all this. They've bled us Ashie, the fucking Brits have bled us dry, thrown us into the cauldron time and time again...

ASH

How poetic.

SWALLOW

And every time we gain some ground, push the Gerrys back, we seal our own fate, proof we can do what the others can't cos the other's know it's bloody useless!

ASH

It's not just us...the Canadians, South Africans are carrying a heavy load...the Yanks too albeit a bit late...

SWALLOW

More cannon fodder for the Empire, that makes me feel a lot better.

They both laugh. ASH pulls out a cigarette and offers one to SWALLOW who accepts.

SWALLOW (CONT'D)

I thought you wanted to get moving.

ASH

Not in a rush are ya?

SWALLOW

I'm glad it's you takin me there...

ASH

Why?

SWALLOW

Cos I don't like you and wouldn't want a friend takin me to my bloody execution.

ASH

You don't have any friends.

SWALLOW

Probably right.

ASH

They won't execute you. Government won't allow it. You can only get killed with a rifle in your hand or a bayonet up your arse...

SWALLOW

Or by your own hand...

ASH

Don't talk like that...

SWALLOW

I can't do prison, not in Blighty...not after livin in the trenches.

ASH

At least you'll be dry.

SWALLOW

Yeah... with Pommie guards beatin the livin crap out of ya for say in one word out of line. They just love Aussie deserters. How long do you think I'll last?

ASH

Should have thought of that before takin off.

Pause.

SWALLOW

I had three brothers Ash...two dead, the other better off...they all joined up at the same time after Gallipoli...

ASH

Didn't you write to 'em?

SWALLOW

Once they heard of our daring exploits on the Dardenelles there was no stopping them.

ASH

You wrote...surely, tellin' em what happened...

SWALLOW

The fact that I survived gave them hope. I didn't say anything to change their minds. They thought I'd bring the family luck. Once I saw what France was like, it was too late, they were all in.

ASH

You never mentioned...

SWALLOW

What was I gonna say? Hey fellas just got the news me brother took a bullet in the head from a sniper and was in a casualty ward for days before they let him die of neglect, the other only days after the first with half his side blown off, saw his wounds, his life bleedin out of him before he gone minutes later. Real upliftin stuff. My youngest, the baby of the family, he was in one of those tents for the hard cases. They were cuttin pieces of rotting flesh off his leg each day to prevent gangrene...his face was burnt off. I couldn't even bring myself to go near him, hold his hand. So I just ran out of there like some raw recruit and didn't stop.

ASH

Not a word in three years...

SWALLOW

I figured we were here to win a war, kill the enemy before they kill us. No need to yapper one about it in our spare time.

ASH

We've survived the lot of them Ray. Three years, you couldn't share anything with the blokes..?

SWALLOW

I'm not your brother.

ASH

No. After this, we should be closer.

SWALLOW turns to ASH with great seriousness.

SWALLOW

It if was anyone else takin me in Ash, I'd as soon kill'em before I let them hand me in to those bastards.

ASH

You figurin out whether you could kill me...

SWALLOW

I'm not gonna be responsible for what happens to you. Fate bloody well owes you that one.

Silence.

SWALLOW (CONT'D)

(Breaking down)

I don't want to die Ash...I don't want to die...

SWALLOW starts crying.

ASH

You should have...you should have...

ASH puts his hand on SWALLOW'S shoulder.

SWALLOW places his hand on top of ASH'S.

ASH (CONT'D)

It's alright mate.

With sudden resolve, ASH stands up.

ASH (CONT'D)

C'mon. Get up.

SWALLOW doesn't move.

ASH (CONT'D)

I said get up.

SWALLOW slowly lifts himself up. ASH chambers a round in his rifle.

SWALLOW

What...what are you doin..?

ASH lifts his rifle.

ASH

You're not going back there. At least, I'm not takin ya.

SWALLOW

Make it quick Ash. Better you I guess.

ASH raises his rifle. He hesitates. Aims again. SOUND of gunshot. SWALLOW is still standing, just staring at ASH.

ASH

Christ, the prisoners escaped.

SWALLOW is frozen.

ASH (CONT'D)

Go on then.

SWALLOW darts off.

ASH (CONT'D)

Good luck mate.

ACT TWO SCENE NINE

LIGHTS on BLACKMORE in his quarters. ASH enters.

BLACKMORE

There you are. A patrol is waiting for you to lead out in preparation for an attack at Montbrehain.

ASH

Another attack...we're nearly spent Captain.

BLACKMORE

These are orders from Monash himself. The Germans must be kept on the backfoot...

ASH

They're bloody well on their backside...can't anyone at headquarters see that?!

BLACKMORE

The attack will take place.

ASH

I led the last two patrols.

BLACKMORE

And this will be your third. No doubt it will be just as successful.

ASH

Each patrol has suffered 50% casualties.

BLACKMORE

And gathered valuable information.

ASH

Yeah...the enemy is still firing at us. Highly valuable.

BLACKMORE

Don't worry Ash. You're a survivor. It would have to be a very cruel God to let something happen to you at this stage of the game and I don't believe God is cruel. At least not intentionally. You better get some rest, you'll be going out in a few hours.

ASH

Captain...

ASH prepares to leave.

BLACKMORE

By the way Corporal, you may be relieved to know that Swallow has returned...

ASH

What?

BLACKMORE

Yes. Just sauntered back into camp as if nothing had happened.

ASH

So he hasn't deserted...

BLACKMORE

He is presently under guard. After the next attack, which Swallow will take part in, he will then be charged with assault as well as desertion.

ASH

God Almighty Captain, he's returned. Swallow may have lost his nerve for a brief moment but he's no coward...

BLACKMORE

He assaulted a military policeman who questioned where he was going..

ASH

Even though it was in the right direction. They'll give him ten years...

BLACKMORE

The British found him. And that's what they usually do to deserters.

ASH

Jesus Captain. So he took off. What did you expect? He's seen his full of battle.

BLACKMORE

So have we all.

ASH

Really...

BLACKMORE

Careful Ash. I could have you brought up on charges with a tone like that.

ASH

Begging your pardon Sir. Swallow has been in the thick of it since Gallipoli. He's fought in every major battle over here.

BLACKMORE

And survived. Damn sight luckier than a lot of the others wouldn't you say?

ASH

What's so damn lucky about surviving all this? Why would you want to survive this...for three years all we've seen are thousands of our countrymen blown to bits and most of those left shattered beyond hope. What good we will be to anyone!?

Pause. ASH himself appears on the verge of a breakdown.

BLACKMORE

I understand you've been through a great deal Corporal. But Swallow failed in his duty. He must therefore pay the price.

ASH

(Almost pleading)

Swallow...men like him...hold it together for every one else. Most of the men don't know what happened. Just spread the word he was found in some army brothel drunk as a skunk kickin up his heels...do as much to raise the men's spirits...give them something to smile about. C'mon Captain...he came back! This is all he has left and he's prepared to die for it.

BLACKMORE

He tried to attack a military policeman...

ASH

Which makes him even more of a soldier in the eyes of anyone in this battalion...

Pause. BLACKMORE considers ASH for a moment. He takes a swig from his flask.

BLACKMORE

Turn a coward into a source of inspiration. Turn a deserter into a scally wag.

ASH

What the hell are you on about?

BLACKMORE

(Reproving)

Corporal...

ASH

Bugger your tone Captain. Frankly, you can stick it where the sun don't shine.

BLACKMORE

You will pay for this insubordination.

ASH

And when will you pay Captain?

BLACKMORE

Pay for what? You've known me long enough Corporal. I am not a coward and would never consider deserting.

ASH

I've watched Swallow earn three military crosses which you never approved. We haven't seen you earn anything.

Pause.

BLACKMORE

Now turn around...walk out and I will consider letting you off with a lesser punishment than what you deserve.

ASH turns around. He takes a few steps to walk out. Relieved, BLACKMORE goes back to his flask. ASH stops and turns around.

ASH

You started all gung ho didn't you Captain? Had most of us fooled...at least for a while. But your cracks started to show even before we got to France.

BLACKMORE does not take his eyes off ASH, as if he has suddenly become his greatest threat.

BLACKMORE

I have never faltered in my duty.

ASH

How many attacks that faltered you're the last to be found heh? Emerge from some shellhole with some bullshit story of almost winning the battle but some lone Gerry got in the way. Or if we've penetrated their lines there you are all of a sudden like some bleedin sprinter, pushin men aside to get to the enemy...most of them dead or surrendering anyhow. You've never led from the front...exposed yourself to the greatest risk. Left that to the others.

BLACKMORE

That is a lie.

ASH

Is it Captain? Other men spotted it long before I did. A lot of them are dead now. I still had to be convinced. Sure enough...after the last attack, there you were. Or were not.

BLACKMORE

This has nothing to do with Swallow.

ASH

(Angry)

Swallow has exposed himself to the greatest danger in just about every attack since Fromelles...he's always been in the thick of it. Any leader with a sense of decency would give him another chance...

BLACKMORE

You and Swallow have almost split this platoon on many an occasion. If the shoe was on the other foot I doubt that he's be here trying to save your life.

ASH

I don't care what he would do! Swallow's fought his last battle. He should have been wounded or dead by now but his isn't. What's left of him is of no use so get him out of the front line.

BLACKMORE

That's up to a medical board to decide.

ASH

He's proven himself ten times over.

BLACKMORE

Maybe this is his way out. If he cannot fight...if as you say, what point is there after all that's happened.

ASH goes right up to BLACKMORE, barely holding back the impulse to strangle him.

ASH

What the fuck are you saying?! He deserves to get out of all this muck. Understand? As much as any of us. More so than a coward like you.

BLACKMORE'S hand goes to his holster. ASH is spent. He turns away.

ASH (CONT'D)

You won't be needin that...

BLACKMORE

If...when you return, you will face disciplinary action. In fact, while you are leading the next patrol, I will be preparing my report. Dismissed.

BLACKMORE turns his back on him. ASH pulls out a pistol from inside his coat jacket, calmly aims it at BLACKMORE.

ASH

Captain...

BLACKMORE

What is it.

ASH calmly shoots BLACKMORE in the back of the head. He does not move. ASH fires again. Nothing. BLACKMORE turns on the radio sitting on his desk. SOUND of church bells becoming louder and louder. ASH stumbles around the stage disorientated.

ASH

I've just killed ya...

BLACKMORE

And I am dead.

ASH

Then why...

BLACKMORE

Do you hear that Corporal? It means you've finally arrived. My murder has liberated your soul.

ASH

Arrived where?

BLACKMORE

The end of the war. And all the horrors that went with it.

BLACKMORE offers ASH a swig from his flask. ASH accepts. LIGHTS. An explosion of SOUND and MOVEMENT as the stage is filled with SOLDIERS and CIVILIANS celebrating the end of the war, dancing and carousing around. They begin to sing, "Mademoiselle She Bought a Cow." It is loud and boisterous.

ALL

Mademoiselle, she bought a cow, parlez vous,
 Mademoiselle, she bought a cow, parlez vous,
 (MORE)

ALL (CONT'D)

Mademoiselle, she bought a cow, but how to milk it she didn't know how,
Inky-pinky-parlez vous.

She pulled its tail instead of its tits, parlez vous,
She pulled its tail instead of its tits, parlez vous,
She pulled its tail instead of its tits,
and all she got was a bucket of - inky, pinky parlez vous!

ACT TWO SCENE TEN

THE SOLDIER is seated where ASH was in the previous scene. He is not wearing his tunic or helmet. His rifle leans against the chair. He is busy writing inside of a diary that is the worse for wear. LIGHTS on ASH. THE SOLDIER is startled by his appearance. He stands, grabs his weapon and presents the end of the bayonet towards ASH. He has traces of a Yorkshire accent.

THE SOLDIER

Halt!

He stares intently at ASH.

THE SOLDIER (CONT'D)

Ah. It's you. Taken your time. Been waiting a while.

ASH

Where am I?

THE SOLDIER

Bundoora Psychiatric Hospital. I think that's how they say it in this part of the world.

ASH

It's not possible. I got home from the war, married my sweetheart, moved to the country...lived in a tent where the child was born...

THE SOLDIER

Then you hit the grog and eventually it became too much for her. Common story for a soldier. Shouldn't be too surprised.

ASH

How do you know so much about me?

THE SOLDIER

Been watching you for decades. Lent a hand on occasion like when you shot your commanding officer. I made sure an artillery shell blew his head off while leaving you without a scratch.

Pause. ASH is alarmed by this information.

ASH

Right how do I get out of here...there must be a way...

THE SOLDIER

You don't old son.

ASH

I'm not spendin the rest of my life in some loony bin.

THE SOLDIER

Here...is where you've been the better part of fifty years.

ASH

(With a rising panic)

This place...a fucking psych ward?

THE SOLDIER

One of the better ones I'm told. Big improvement since my day. Soldiers' invisible wounds were just as calamitous in the Sudan as in your war. They were treated as lepers.

ASH

Fifty years...that means I'm...

THE SOLDIER

83. Not a day younger.

ASH

The whole world going by without me...I think I'm going to go crazy...

THE SOLDIER

Well at least you're in the right place.

ASH

Hang on. What day is it?

THE SOLDIER

April 25th 1983.

ASH

What!?! I've got a visitor coming...he'll be here soon. What the hell am I talking to you for..!

THE SOLDIER

Is this who you're expecting?

LIGHTS on ASH'S bed from the opening of the play.
ASH'S SON sits mournfully by his father's bedside dressed in the uniform from a different war. Behind them, in the shadows, stand KITCHENER, SWALLOW, KANE and SWEET.

ASH

But I'm not there!

THE SOLDIER

He doesn't know that.

ASH

I have to get to him, there are things we never discussed...never had a chance to say before...

THE SOLDIER

I'm afraid that's not possible Corporal.

ASH

You mean I'm already....

THE SOLDIER

No. At least not yet.

ASH is struck by the awful realisation that his son has already died.

ASH

He can't be...he's my son...

THE SOLDIER

Who's been dead for years but you've been waiting for him, the same day every year, lost in your Anzac dreams.

ASH

How?

THE SOLDIER

That was his last visit before going off to the next great war.

ASH'S SON stands and leaves his father's bedside. In his hand is a diary identical to that of THE SOLDIER. During this beat, THE SOLDIER dons his tunic and cap which reveals a soldier from another war, another century.

SWALLOW

Where ya off too?

ASH'S SON

My father has gone.

KITCHENER

Don't you worry. He'll be here soon.

ASH'S SON

How do you know?

KANE

We've been waiting for years.

SWEET

All you got to do is read to him.

ASH'S SON

But what?

SWALLOW

(To ASH'S SON)

What you got in your hand?

ASH'S SON

Something he gave me...

KITCHENER

Go on then...see if you can do a better job than your old man...

ASH

He got them...

THE SOLDIER

It seems so...

ASH'S SON

Now one word I will say about our sick soldiers
That dying in hospital day after day
The place they are sent to is shocking to witness
They die one by one and are carry away
For soldiers to die in those cruel countries
And no one to try for their lives for to save...

He falters over the last two lines.

ASH'S SON (CONT'D)

They are placed...

THE SOLDIER prompts him across the span of time.

THE SOLDIER /ASH'S SON

They are placed under ground after horrible suffering..

ASH'S SON

And thus...

THE SOLDIER/ASH'S SON

And thus end their days in an untimely grave...

THE SOLDIER

And so they did...

ASH stares incredulously at THE SOLDIER. He grabs the diary out of THE SOLDIER'S hand and looks inside.

ASH

"Corporal G.H Ash, Royal Berkshire Regiment...1885."

THE SOLDIER

At your service.

ASH

But that means...

THE SOLDIER

Yes.

ASH

(With great resolve)

Where's that Doctor..? Tell him I'm ready.

THE SOLDIER

Ah. Well he's busy with another patient if you know what I mean. But he has left me with his medical kit and instructions...our friend believes it is I who should have the honours...

ASH

(Pointing to KITCHENER, SWALLOW,
SWEET and KANE)

And what of them?

THE SOLDIER

This will be their final resting place, no haunted dreams in the afterlife. Your journey has calmed their souls and your son's will be in our embrace for eternity.

ASH

Let's go...

ASH suddenly turns around.

ASH (CONT'D)

So...what was the final count?

THE SOLDIER

Count? Oh. Right. 200 odd thousand barely escaped his grip with a decent 60,000 firmly nestled in his bosom.

ASH nods grimly. He walks over to the bed and slowly, ritually gets in and leans back for the last time. THE SOLDIER opens the kit and prepares the needle to send ASH to the afterlife. He places a kiss on ASH'S forehead before administering the injection. Darkness envelopes both of them as the last breath of life leaves ASH'S body. In the last moment, the SOLDIER turns on ASH SENIOR'S radio on the bedside.

LIGHTS. ASH'S SON, SWALLOW, KITCHENER,
SWEET and KANE sing "The Route March."

ALL

Did you hear the children singing, O my brother? O my sisters?
Did you hear the children singing as our troops went marching past?
In the sunshine and the rain as they'll never sing again –
Hear the little schoolgirls singing as our troops went swinging past?

Did you hear the children singing, O my brothers? O my sisters?
Did you hear the children singing for the first man and the last?
As they marched away and vanished, to a tune we thought was banished –
Did you hear the children singing for the future and the past?

Shall you hear the children singing, O my brothers? O my sisters?
Shall you hear the children singing in the sunshine or the rain?
There'll be sobs beneath the ringing of the cheers, and 'neath the singing
There'll be tears of orphan children when Our Boys come back again!

LIGHTS fade.

The End.