

Scene 1

May 1916

Village called Boxford in Suffolk, outside St Mary's Church

Frank and Mabel Maywood's wedding day. They have just left the church after the ceremony. They stand facing each other.

Mabel: Seems so strange having a wedding with no bells Frank.
So quiet and peaceful. You'd hardly guess there was a war on.

Frank: Remember this moment, Mabel. You and me. The war can't last much longer, not now the last of us have been called-up. I don't want to leave you, not now, but trust me, I'll come back to you soon. To both of you. Then there'll be music and dancing in the streets again. For peace, and for a proper start to our marriage, a proper start for our family.

Mabel: I'll wait for that day, Frank. The day when these bells are ringing out loud and you are back in my arms.

Frank: Let's go and get that drink. I want to nail a coin to the beam above the pub fireplace, with those from the other lads who've already gone. Promised we'd all get them back when we return, and use them for a real celebration.

Mabel: Oh, I wish you didn't have to go.

Frank: I know. I'd give my right arm to stay here with you!

Mabel: Don't say that Frank.

Frank: Sorry Mabel. It's not time for jokes, I know.
 Here, let me take a small piece of lace, from your veil, to keep in my
 pocket.

Mabel hands Frank a piece of the lace, and he puts it into his pocket.

Mabel: I'll be waiting here at home for you. And when the time's right, you
 bring that piece of lace back, and god-willing, we'll stitch it into the
 christening gown. It won't be long Frank. Tell me it won't be long.

Frank: It won't be long, Mabel.

Scene 2

June 1916

Mabel's family home in Boxford, Surrey

Mabel: *(writing)* Darling Frank, I don't really know how to tell you this, so I'll just say it. I lost the baby. The stress of you leaving, and how hard things are back here probably didn't help. How I wish you were here with me. It was so lonely. We could've said a proper goodbye together. No one else even knows we were expecting. Now it has to be our secret forever.

But I will never forget her, our first child. I planted some snowdrop bulbs in the churchyard. When they first break the soil and feel the light, I pray that you will be back here to see them with me.
All my love, forever,
Mabel.

From somewhere behind the Frontline

Frank reading the letter, drops to his knees. Speaking to himself:

Frank: Oh Mabel, what else must we sacrifice for this damned war?

Scene 3

June 1917

Frank is at Netley Military Hospital, Southampton

Mabel is in temporary lodgings in Plumstead, South London

Both actors are talking directly to the audience

Frank: Shrapnel, right arm. Nearly ripped the whole thing right off. Western Front. Glad to be alive. Glad to be away from the front. They came and pulled me out of the mud. Mud? ... it was more like a stagnant river, too thick to flow, but too wet to stand up in. Never so relieved to see another face in my life. They pulled me out of that godforsaken mud. Who knows how they managed it. They call us heroes, but those stretcher bearers. The things they must have seen.

Mabel: It's over a year since I lost the baby. Only about a month after Frank was conscripted. I can't describe how it felt. No Frank, no baby. I couldn't even tell Mother. Oh blimey let's not talk about that. Life goes on. I'm here now: doing my bit. Board and lodgings in Plumstead. Only moved here a couple of weeks ago. I was in service when we married, but things were too hard back home, especially when ... and then what with my Frank ... Thank the Lord, he's still alive. That telegram. Never been so relieved ...

Frank: I was stretchered to the Regimental Aid Post then by ambulance to the Casualty Clearing Station. Assessed. Another ambulance to the Field Hospital. Not sure they can save the arm. Back to Blighty! Hospital Troopship to Southampton Docks. Stretchered off the boat to a train, then straight into the back of the hospital. And now here I am. Surgical ward, Netley. It's military. It's what they call a contained space. Sealed off from public scrutiny, so no visitors. Not even my Mabel! But I suppose I am one of the lucky ones!

Mabel: So this is my room for now. My friend Florrie's mum's put me up. Me and Florrie works at Woolwich. You know, Munitions, at the Armouries. Just til my Frank comes home. Moneys good and I feel like I'm doing my bit. When he comes home, we'll move back to Suffolk.

Frank: *(looking at his blue suit)* Look at me! Hospital Blues they call them. Enough to give you the blues more like. One size fits all! I don't think so. Some of us bursting out of them, trousers at half mast, and buttons stretched tight enough to take some poor blighter's eye out if they ever came off, and others, swamped in fabric - rolling up the legs like some half grown schoolboy. Oh blimey, I don't mean no offence to those who have the fabric pinned up. Some of us aren't lucky enough to have two arms and two legs anymore. Just one sad and lonely boot sticking out the end, and those poor buggers with no arm. Can't even tuck the empty sleeve into the pocket. There aren't any. Pins. That's all. Somehow I've still got my Mabel's piece of lace. No pockets. Pinned here. Inside my jacket.

Mabel: I don't really have anything nice to wear, and even if I did what would be the point. Once I'm at work, everything is covered with brown overalls anyway. There is no metal allowed in munitions. No hairgrips, no suspenders, no hooks, not even those little blouse buttons, you know, the metal ones covered with linen. None of that.

Frank: Everyone thought my arm was a goner but somehow they've managed to save it. Not sure it'll ever be much use again though. That joke with my Mabel, "I'd give my right arm .. you know .. Looked for a while like I might actually have to. One good thing though. I'm a left hander. All those years they tied my left arm behind my back, forcing me to use the right one, and now look at me!

Mabel: When you get to work, you strip down to your underwear, clothes into a kit bag, put on a buttonless overall and a mop cap - and those shoes!. Rubber soled clogs. Ooh they aggravate my corns something cruel. There were lots of us, all started together. We all had to line up. Take off everything except our skirts, then, we even had to lift those for the doctor. Thank the Lord it was a woman doctor, but still. Liberties! We get checked every week. Who knows what they're looking for.

Frank: *(writing)* My dearest Mabel,
My last operation went well, and the fever is at last subsiding. I must tell you of the cheerfulness, good humour and, let's face it, the modesty of the wounded men here at Netley. So many of us, in the prime of our lives, now with a slow recovery before us, but all of us joyful that we may soon be well again. The weather is simply perfect and really Mabel, you never saw such beautiful trees as in the grounds here.

And we had a surprise visit from the King and Queen. First royal visit to Netley for years. Queen Victoria came in the last war, but oh Mabel, what a boost to morale it was. Queen Mary arranged something for us convalescing soldiers. Sawdust Hearts they are - for us to pin patterns and words into. Messages of love for those back home, and so you know we are fine. Her Majesty believes that if we occupy our minds, the time will pass more quickly, and if we are thinking about pinning, we won't be thinking about ...well ... I do hope that she is right.

All my love

Frank

(Mabel holds the letter to her chest)

Mabel: It's good to hear that Frank is doing well. Seems like another form of torture not be able to go to visit him. You know, with him being so near and all. But rules is rules! More bloody rules! Anyway, what was I saying. Oh yes, first day at munitions. We were all allocated jobs. I was assigned to TNT. You know, filling the shells. Florrie's in the cases shop, so I don't get to see her much, except on the train sometimes, and Sunday's of course. Us TNT girls even have a separate canteen from the rest. Apparently because of the yellow. It stains anything it touches. Us included! Supposed to tuck all our stray hair in, under the bonnet, but without hairgrips, do me a favour, and anyway you know us girls. Don't want to look like nuns. That's why all this is bright ginger. They say it'll wear off.

Frank: I can't tell her what it's really like here. There is no daylight on the wards, and the nurses have to walk from ward to ward along corridors: as much as a quarter of a mile long. And it's so damp too - gets into your bones. Rheumatism, pneumonia and pleurisy are rife. It amazes me that not more of our boys die here, not from the wounds but from complications. But there's enough that do.

Mabel: (*writing*) My darling Frank,
How wonderful to hear that you are recovering well, and that there are plenty of things to keep you occupied. Florrie and I are happy at the munitions. We're proud to be making a difference, knowing the boys at the front need us to carry on. The money is good. I seem to be able to get my quota done easily. You always said I had nimble fingers. I work extra to make my bonus, and then help the other girls with their quota too.

Frank: *(not really listening to Mabel's letter)* Trains filled with the wounded come in every day or so, sometimes 150 men at a time. Men still covered in mud from the battlefields and all of them maimed, mutilated and disabled. Southampton Water is black with ships, bringing home the broken bodies, then sending out more poor bastards as cannon fodder. And what are we getting well for? From here men have a fortnight's leave before being sent back to the front again. It's hell on earth!

Mabel: *(still writing)* With Florrie's mother taking only a small amount for board and lodgings, I should be able to save some for when this whole thing is over and we are back together again as man and wife. We'll live in the country again, move back to Suffolk and raise that family in the clean air. All my love. Mabel.

(Frank holds the letter to his chest)

Mabel: I can't tell him what it's really like here. I'm terrified all the time. They tell us to get under the tables when the planes come. But what good would that do. The whole of Woolwich would be blown to smithereens if one hit. We can't walk on the ground neither. Everywhere is fitted with wooden platforms - in case a bit of grit makes a spark. Daren't tell my Frank I'm in TNT. He'd go mad, but I'm good at it, and ... well I've got to do something and I'm here now. I work in a hut with row upon row of benches. We do get to sit down at least. Some of the girls are on their feet for the whole 12 hour shift.

Frank: *(writing) (Mabel holds the pincushion heart)*
My darling Mabel, My arm doesn't seem to be improving much, but I'm managing well with the left one. Her majesty was right. I've so enjoyed making the pincushion. I used a little piece from the wedding lace. I hope you understand. I've pinned it on. I've still got a piece safe with me here. I'd never be without it my darling. But know that I am truly thinking of you. Keep my heart safe with you til I return - a Sweetheart Pincushion they call it. All my love, Frank.

Mabel holds the heart to her chest. Rocking slightly.

Mabel: We have to wear long gloves, and there are holes in the benches which our arms go through, and there's a little window - to see what we're doing. We have to pack white powder into little blue bags. The cover's supposed to stop the white powder from spreading. But it still goes everywhere. We get it in our eyes and up our noses. Even in our mouths, but Supervisor just says that should be reason enough for us to keep them shut and get on with our work. When you try to wash it off, the water turns blood red and your skin turns yellow. I'm scared. To be honest, I'm not sure if being half starved back at home wasn't better than this. I'm getting pains in my stomach at night too. They give us milk to drink which is supposed to help. But it doesn't seem to.

Mabel starts writing.

Darling Frank, The heart is precious, and so delicate. The pinning is so precise, - and one handed too. I hold it in my two hands and it's almost as if I can feel you through it. The love is caught in the fabric - our fabric. I've not been feeling so good, and am thinking of spending a few days back in Suffolk with Mother. I will take your heart with me. The snowdrops will have gone by now, but next year, Frank. Next year. All my love, Mabel.

Mabel: *(to audience)*

How can I tell him? Canaries they called us, because our faces were all yellow. It started off like I had a cold. Coughing, you know, and my skin, so itchy! Well we expected to feel poorly, but not like this. My skin turned perfectly yellow, right down through my body, legs and even my toenails. It's not right. It just can't be right, but 'shut up and put up' they tell us. One thing though, it has worn off. But only on the outside

Frank: *(writing)* My dearest Mabel, Wonderful News, my love! They've decided to take my arm off. Useless it was, useless! I'm better off without it. The pain has gone, and it means ... my darling, it means I am coming home and not just for two weeks leave and then...y'know. I'm being transferred to a convalescent hospital in Suffolk. They ain't sending me back to the Front! I've been medically discharged. Apparently too broken to fight, but not too broken to live, my love! Oh Mabel. Stay there with your mother. You'll be able to visit. I'll get a small pension. It's going to be alright! We can have our lives back. All my love.

Frank gets up, turns and leaves - pause

Scene 4

June 1918

Boxford in Suffolk, outside St Mary's Church

Frank and Mabel walk in together, Frank on right and Mabel's head on his shoulder. He is supporting her.

Mabel: Here they are, Frank! The snowdrops I planted for the baby. I did come to see them last year, without you. Oh Frank. Thank God you're here now!

Frank: Oh my sweet, beautiful love! Damned damned war! Friends dead, arm smashed – yeah! But this! This was way too much, Mabel!

Mabel: Oh Frank! *(collapses onto her knees)*
We've sacrificed more than you know!

Frank: *(kneels beside and comforts her)* Hey old girl! What d'you mean? It's alright now! I can cope with the one arm and we're still together ain't we? We can still have that family, y'know!

Mabel: *(turns to Frank)* They say there won't be no more babies, Frank. The war didn't only take your arm, it took my – my..... There won't be any more babies! *(turns away and buries head in hands)*

Frank: Mabel, my love, listen to me – we've still got – still got -

Mabel: *(angry, wild)* What? Each other!?

Frank: Yes - yes, each other. Do you love me, Mabel? Do you?

Mabel: Of course I do, y'daft -

Frank: Then we've still got a future, my love – *(they stare at each other)*

Frank: Together!

Mabel: Together!