

WHEN FRANK RETURNS

A radio play

by

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Synopsis

It is November 1918 and the Germans have surrendered. Lily and her best friend Clara are worried they will be spinsters as so many young men have died. Private Frank is promised to Mary, Lily's older sister. But, perhaps when he returns from service he may find the beautiful, younger Lily irresistible.

CHARACTERS

NARRATOR	Either female or male
LILY	Young woman aged 19
CLARA	Lily's best friend, aged 19
MARY	Lily's older sister, aged 22
PRIVATE FRANK	AIF soldier, Mary's intended
DR BARRAT	Army medical officer

SCENE ONE: INSIDE LILY'S HOUSE

NARRATOR Monday, 11th November, 1918. News that Germany had surrendered and signed the armistice spread like wild fire. In the streets of Melbourne jubilant crowds gathered in rowdy celebration.

AUDIO: URGENT KNOCKING ON FRONT DOOR

LILY Clara! Come in. How excited you look!

CLARA (*EXCITEDLY*) I am ... I am ... Can you believe ... it's all over.

LILY What? The war?

CLARA Yes! Yes!

LILY Are you sure?

CLARA Yes! The city is crowded with revellers.

LILY Golly. (*PAUSE*) That means the boys will be home soon.

CLARA Probably.

LILY (*SIGHS*) Oh, Clara. We're 19 – do you think we'll ever get married?

CLARA I hope so. I don't want to end up a miserable old spinster.

LILY Heaven forbid. No.

CLARA Is Mary home? We should tell her.

LILY My goody two-shoes big sister is away.

CLARA (*QUIZZICALLY*) Where?

LILY Helping Ivy on the farm ... you remember her ... she's a family friend.

CLARA Oh, yes. Hasn't she got a son? Did he volunteer?

LILY Not with his limp ... George would never have been accepted.

CLARA Ooh! Perhaps Mary will fall in love with him.

LILY I wish she would instead of waiting for Frank to return. (*SIGHS DEEPLY*) I do so want to get married and have lots of children.

CLARA Me too.

LILY Do you think there'll be enough boys left to go around – I mean ones with four limbs.

CLARA (*GIGGLES*) You are dreadful.

LILY Well, I hope Frank will be home soon ... he's maddeningly handsome.

CLARA And Mary's intended.

- LILY** But he's jolly attractive, don't you agree?
- CLARA** He is and so are you ... but what would Mary think if ...
- LILY** Oh, you know Mary. So prim and proper, always has been, even when we were children.
- CLARA** But ...
- LILY** I mean what sort of person would go away when her soldier hero is due home any day.
- CLARA** I'm not sure its right to make Frank choose between you both.
- LILY** You are a silly. Don't you know all's fair in love and war?
- CLARA** (*DOUBTFULLY*) Maybe ... but Mary ... she *is* your sister.

AUDIO: WORLD WAR 1 MUSIC

SCENE TWO: INSIDE LILY AND MARY'S HOME

- NARRATOR** Wild victory celebrations continued throughout Melbourne day and night. Out of control young men smashed windows and derailed tramcars, and in Bourke Street, girls enthusiastically kissed every soldier they saw.
- MARY** (*ANNOYED*) Girls! Stop your giggling and help me hang out all this washing. Most of it seems to be yours Lily!
- LILY** (*PETULANT*) Oh Mary, don't go on so. We want to be in the city kissing all the soldiers, not hanging out washing!
- MARY** I'm not the least bit happy with you going. The Argus reported lots of shirkers are causing trouble and damage. Why didn't they enlist instead of leaving it to Frank and others to fight for them?
- CLARA** Don't worry, we'll only go to Bourke Street.
- LILY** Oh yes, more solders to kiss there! It's so romantic!
- MARY** You must be reading too many Penny Dreadfuls filling your head with such notions. Real life is far from romantic. Working on the farm with George taught me that. It was hard and tough.
- LILY** (*SULKILY*) Well YOU offered to go and help, even though Frank was coming back from the War!

MARY It was the right thing to do Lily. I actually enjoyed being outside milking cows and feeding chickens. And George was so charming ... he really appreciated my help.

LILY (*SULKY*) Oh, so now you have TWO beaus to choose from, and Clara and I have none!

MARY Don't be so silly; you will find a young man now the troops are coming home.

CLARA Come on Lily. Let's hang out this washing so we can go to the City!

MARY Thank you. (*PAUSE*) But you must promise me to be very careful and look out for each other.

CLARA & LILY (*GIGGLING*) Yes Mary, we will. We will!

AUDIO: WORLD WAR 1 MUSIC

SCENE THREE: AT A DANCE

NARRATOR After the Armistice, Australian troops were repatriated under the direction of Sir John Monash. Amongst the first to return were long-serving soldiers. They were warmly lauded at welcome-home dances and balls.

AUDIO: BAND PLAYING IN BACKGROUND. VOICES, GLASSES CLINKING. DOOR OPENS AND CLOSSES. NOISES FADE AWAY

LILY Oh Frank, it's lovely being at the Dance with you. I thought about you all the time you were away.

FRANK Really? (*PAUSE*) You *have* become a beautiful young woman in my absence.

LILY Not *that* young. I'll be twenty next month.

FRANK And quite the belle of the ball. You must've had lots of requests to dance.

LILY Oh yes, but I only want to be with you.

FRANK (*COUGHS*) Right ...

LILY (*ENTHUSIASTICALLY*) Was the war exciting? Did you get frightened? Did you see the Pyramids?

FRANK Slow down Lily. Time for questions later. We should join the others. Mary will be wondering where we are.

LILY Mary ... as if she cares.

FRANK Meaning?

LILY She ... um ... all she does is talk about George and the farm.

FRANK (*SLOWLY*) I see ... George.

LILY They're always writing to each other.

FRANK Well, *we* came here to dance, and dance we will! (*PAUSE*) Please, give me your hand ...

LILY I've never had my hand kissed before. How romantic!

AUDIO: **DOORS OPEN – MUSIC AND VOICES ARE HEARD AGAIN**

SCENE FOUR: DOCTOR'S SURGERY

NARRATOR Approximately 55,000 Australian troops were treated for venereal disease. Penicillin was yet to be discovered so the infection was treated by multiple injections of heavy metals including mercury, arsenic and silver.

AUDIO: **RUSTLING OF PAPERS**

DOCTOR Hmm. You served four years in the Middle East, Private.

FRANK Yes Doc. Campaigns in Egypt and Palestine.

DOCTOR And luckily no serious physical injuries.

FRANK No ... but it's the nightmares Doc. They don't stop and sometimes I have a fit of the shakes out of the blue.

DOCTOR War is no picnic. But it's time to put it behind you now Private and get on with your life.

FRANK (*QUIETLY*) Everyone says that.

DOCTOR There is one more matter. You visited Cairo?

FRANK Had a period of leave there, Doc ... enjoyed some good food and beer.

DOCTOR And I'm assuming you also enjoyed visiting ladies of the night.

FRANK Ladies?

DOCTOR Prostitutes, Private. Prostitutes. The ones who gave you venereal disease.

FRANK Oh. I see ...

DOCTOR Failure to maintain a high standard comes at a high price, Private.

FRANK I won't be discharged, then?

DOCTOR Not immediately. I'll be recommending that you have treatment first.

FRANK In the barracks?

DOCTOR No. I'll arrange for you to be transferred to the Military Hospital in Langwarrin.

FRANK How long will I be there?

DOCTOR Until your treatment is successful and you return a negative result. *(PAUSE)*
Do you have a sweetheart, Private?

FRANK There is a girl I'm rather fond of.

DOCTOR Let me remind you, you have a duty not to infect her.

FRANK *(MUMBLING)* Ahh, yes ... I'll keep that in mind.

AUDIO: WORLD WAR 1 MUSIC

SCENE FIVE: THE HOTEL WINDSOR

NARRATOR On their return home, soldiers tried to pick up the threads of their previous lives. But many were so badly traumatised by their wartime experiences life could never be the same.

FRANK I'm so glad you accepted my dinner invitation Lily. You look wonderful tonight.

LILY I've never been to such a grand Hotel as The Windsor so I wanted to look my very best for you.

FRANK You look entrancing.

LILY Do you like the forget-me-nots in my hair. *(GIGGLES)* Don't want you to forget me. *(GIGGLES)*

FRANK As if I could! More champagne?

AUDIO: DRINK BEING POURED

FRANK Will you come up to my room after dinner? Just for a short while. I have my medals and photos from Cairo to show you.

LILY *(CONCERNED)* I don't think I should Frank, I have no chaperone.

FRANK You'll be perfectly safe with me. You do want to see my mementoes, don't you?

LILY (*ENTHUSIASTICALLY*) Oh yes, of course I do! Do your photos show you at the Pyramids? Are there camels too?

FRANK (*LAUGHING*) Yes. And I have a gift for you...

LILY How sweet.

FRANK You must know by now ... I'm becoming very fond of you.

LILY (*SWOONING*) Oh, Frank!

AUDIO: **WORLD WAR 1 MUSIC**

SCENE SIX: INSIDE LILY AND MARY'S HOUSE

NARRATOR Thousands of returned soldiers applied for land under the Soldier Settlement Scheme. Few had prior farming experience and the small size of blocks combined with the men's poor physical and mental health meant it was very difficult to succeed.

AUDIO: **KNOCKING ON FRONT DOOR**

MARY Clara. Come in. Lily's in the kitchen. She hasn't been feeling well this week.

CLARA Lily dearest, you do look a bit pale. Hope it's nothing serious.

LILY Just some passing bug ... (*HESITATINGLY*) I suppose.

MARY What else could it be? Would you like some lemonade, Clara?

CLARA That would be nice.

AUDIO: **DRINK BEING POURED**

CLARA Hmm. Delicious.

LILY Mary has some wonderful news. Can I tell her?

MARY (*HESITATINGLY*) If you like.

LILY George has asked her to marry him. And she's said yes!

CLARA Really! Congratulations, Mary. I hope you'll both be very happy.

LILY Imagine. My big sister a farmer's wife. (*PAUSE*) I would hate that. Stuck in the middle of nowhere.

CLARA And no shops or moving picture theatres. It would be so boring.

MARY *(LAUGHS)* It's not for everyone. *(PAUSE)* Clara? Is that a letter you're holding?

CLARA Ooh sorry. Here you are. The postman arrived at the same time as me.

MARY It's from Frank.

LILY What! Why is he writing to you? Open it. Quickly.

AUDIO: **ENVELOPE BEING OPENED**

LILY *(IMPATIENTLY)* What does he say. Read it to us.

MARY *Alright. (CLEARS THROAT) Dear Mary and Lily. It has been wonderful seeing you both again. I thought I should let you know that I have been allocated some land in the Western District under the Resettlement Scheme. I expect to be living in a tent for a while until something more permanent can be arranged. But after the War I'm used to primitive conditions. When I'm settled I will write and let you know my address. Perhaps you will visit. Yours sincerely Frank.*

CLARA Oh no, Lily. Now what will you do?

AUDIO: **WORLD WAR 1 MUSIC**

THE END