

ACT II
SCENE ONE

Two weeks later. Evening.

ALISON is standing over the gas stove, pouring water from the kettle into a large teapot. She is only wearing a slip, and her feet are bare. In the room across the hall, JIMMY is playing on his jazz trumpet, in intermittent bursts. ALISON takes the pot to the table C, which is laid for four people. The Sunday paper jungle around the two armchairs is as luxuriant as ever. It is late afternoon, the end of a hot day. She wipes her forehead. She crosses to the dressing table R., takes out a pair of stockings from one of the drawers, and sits down on the small chair beside it to put them on. While she is doing this, the door opens and HELENA enters. She is the same age as ALISON, medium height, carefully and expensively dressed. Now and again, when she allows her rather judicial expression of alertness to soften, she is very attractive. Her sense of matriarchal authority makes most men who meet her anxious, not only to please but impress, as if she were the gracious representative of visiting royalty. In this case, the royalty of that middle-class womanhood, which is so eminently secure in its divine rights, that it can afford to tolerate the parliament, and reasonably free assembly of its menfolk. Even from other young women, like ALISON, she receives her due of respect and admiration. In JIMMY, as one would expect, she arouses all the rabble-rousing instincts of his spirit. And she is not accustomed to having to defend herself against catcalls. However, her sense of modestly exalted responsibility enables her to behave with an impressive show of strength and dignity, although the strain of this is beginning to tell on her a little. She is carrying a large salad colander.

ALISON: Did you manage all right?

HELENA: Of course. I've prepared most of the meals in the last week, you know.

ALISON: Yes, you have. It's been wonderful having someone to help. Another woman, I mean.

HELENA: (*crossing down L.*) I'm enjoying it. Although I don't think I shall ever get used to having to go down to the bathroom every time I want some water for something.

ALISON: It is primitive, isn't it?

HELENA: Yes. It is rather. (*She starts tearing up green salad on to four plates, which she takes from the food cupboard.*) Looking after one man is really enough, but two is rather an undertaking.

ALISON: Oh, Cliff looks after himself, more or less. In fact, he helps me quite a lot.

HELENA: Can't say I'd noticed it.

ALISON: You've been doing it instead, I suppose.

HELENA: I see.

ALISON: You've settled in so easily somehow.

HELENA: Why shouldn't I?

ALISON: It's not exactly what you're used to, is it?

HELENA: And are you used to it?

ALISON: Everything seems very different here now — with you here.

HELENA: Does it?

ALISON: Yes. I was on my own before —

HELENA: Now you've got me. So you're not sorry you asked me to stay?

ALISON: Of course not. Did you tell him his tea was ready?

HELENA: I banged on the door of Cliff's room, and yelled. He didn't answer, but he must have heard. I don't know where Cliff is.

ALISON: *(leaning back in her chair)* I thought I'd feel cooler after a bath, but I feel hot again already. God, I wish he'd lose that damned trumpet.

HELENA: I imagine that's for my benefit.

ALISON: Miss Drury will ask us to go soon, I know it. Thank goodness she isn't in. Listen to him.

HELENA: Does he drink?

ALISON: Drink? *(Rather startled.)* He's not an alcoholic, if that's what you mean. *They both pause, listening to the trumpet.* He'll have the rest of the street banging on the door next.

HELENA: *(pondering).* It's almost as if he wanted to kill someone with it. And me in particular. I've never seen such hatred in someone's eyes before. It's slightly horrifying. Horrifying *(crossing to food cupboard for tomatoes, beetroot and cucumber)* and oddly exciting.

Alison faces her dressing mirror, and brushes her hair

ALISON: He had his own jazz band once. That was when he was still a student, before I knew him. I rather think he'd like to start another, and give up the stall altogether.

HELENA: Is Cliff in love with you?

ALISON: *(stops brushing for a moment).* No... I don't think so.

HELENA: And what about you? You look as though I've asked you a rather peculiar question. The way things are, you might as well be frank with me. I only want to help. After all, your behaviour together is a little strange — by most people's standards, to say the least.

ALISON: You mean you've seen us embracing each other?

HELENA: Well, it doesn't seem to go on as much as it did, I admit. Perhaps he finds my presence inhibiting — even if Jimmy's isn't.

ALISON: We're simply fond of each other — there's no more to it than that.

HELENA: Darling, really! It can't be as simple as that.

ALISON: You mean there must be something physical too? I suppose there is, but it's not exactly a consuming passion with either of us. It's just a relaxed,

cheerful sort of thing, like being warm in bed. You're too comfortable to bother about moving for the sake of some other pleasure.

HELENA: I find it difficult to believe anyone's that lazy!

ALISON: I think *we* are.

HELENA: And what about Jimmy? After all, he is your husband. Do you mean to say he actually approves of it?

ALISON: It isn't easy to explain. It's what he would call a question of allegiances, and he expects you to be pretty literal about them. Not only about himself and all the things he believes in, his present and his future, but his past as well. All the people he admires and loves, and has loved. The friends he used to know, people I've never even known — and probably wouldn't have liked. His father, who died years ago. Even the other women he's loved. Do you understand?

HELENA: Do you?

ALISON: I've tried to. But I still can't bring myself to feel the way he does about things. I can't believe that he's right somehow.

HELENA: Well, that's something, anyway.

ALISON: If things have worked out with Cliff, it's because he's kind and lovable, and I've grown genuinely fond of him. But it's been a fluke. It's worked because Cliff is such a nice person anyway. With Hugh, it was quite different

HELENA: Hugh?

ALISON: Hugh Tanner. He and Jimmy were friends almost from childhood. Mrs. Tanner is his mother —

HELENA: Oh yes — the one who started him off in the sweet business.

ALISON: That's right. Well, after Jimmy and I were married, we'd no money — about eight pounds ten in actual fact — and no home. He didn't even have a job. He'd only left the university about a year. (*Smiles.*) No — left. I don't think one "comes down" from Jimmy's university. According to him, it's not even red brick, but white tile. Anyway, we went off to live in Hugh's flat. It was over a warehouse in Poplar.

HELENA: Yes. I remember seeing the postmark on your letters.

ALISON: Well, that was where I found myself on my wedding night. Hugh and I disliked each other on sight, and Jimmy knew it. He was so proud of us both, so pathetically anxious that we should take to each other. Like a child showing off his toys. We had a little wedding celebration, and the three of us tried to get tight on some cheap port they'd brought *in*. Hugh got more and more subtly insulting — he'd a rare talent for that. Jimmy got steadily depressed, and I just sat there, listening to their talk, looking and feeling very stupid. For the first time in my life, I was cut off from the kind of people I'd always known, my family, my friends, everybody. And I'd burnt my boats. After all those weeks of brawling with Mummy and Daddy about Jimmy, I knew I couldn't appeal to them without looking foolish and cheap. It was just before the General Election, I remember, and Nigel was busy

getting himself into Parliament. He didn't have time for anyone but his constituents. Oh, he'd have been sweet and kind, I know.

HELENA: (*moving in C.*) Darling, why didn't you come to me?

ALISON: You were away on tour in some play, I think.

HELENA: So I was.

ALISON: Those next few months at the flat in Poplar were a nightmare. I suppose I must be soft and squeamish, and snobbish, but I felt as though I'd been dropped in a jungle. I couldn't believe that two people, two educated people could be so savage, and so-so uncompromising. Mummy has always said that Jimmy is utterly ruthless, but she hasn't met Hugh. He takes the first prize for ruthlessness — from all comers. Together, they were frightening. They both came to regard me as a sort of hostage from those sections of society they had declared war on.

HELENA: How were you living all this time?

ALISON: I had a tiny bit coming in from a few shares I had left, but it hardly kept us. Mummy had made me sign everything else over to her, in trust, when she knew I was really going to marry Jimmy.

HELENA: Just as well, I imagine.

ALISON: They soon thought of a way out of that. A brilliant campaign. They started inviting themselves — through me — to people's houses, friends of Nigel's and mine, friends of Daddy's, oh everyone: The Arksdens, the Tarnatts, the Wains —

HELENA: Not the Wains?

ALISON: Just about everyone I'd ever known. Your people must have been among the few we missed out. It was just enemy territory to them, and, as I say, they used me as a hostage. We'd set out from headquarters in Poplar, and carry out our raids on the enemy in W1, SW1, SW3, and W8. In my name, we'd gatecrash everywhere — cocktails, week-ends, even a couple of houseparties. I used to hope that one day, somebody would have the guts to slam the door in our faces, but they didn't. They were too well-bred, and probably sorry for me as well. Hugh and Jimmy despised them for it. So we went on plundering them, wolfing their food and drinks, and smoking their cigars like ruffians. Oh, they enjoyed themselves.

HELENA: Apparently.

ALISON: Hugh fairly revelled in the role of the barbarian invader. Sometimes I thought he might even dress the part — you know, furs, spiked helmet, sword. He even got a fiver out of old Man Wain once. Blackmail, of course. People would have signed almost anything to get rid of us. He told him that we were about to be turned out of our flat for not paying the rent. At least it was true.

HELENA: I don't understand you. You must have been crazy.

ALISON: Afraid more than anything.

HELENA: But letting them do it! Letting them get away with it! You managed to stop them stealing the silver, I suppose?

ALISON: Oh, they knew their guerrilla warfare better than that. Hugh tried to seduce some fresh-faced young girl at the Arkdens' once, but that was the only time we were more or less turned out.

HELENA: It's almost unbelievable. I don't understand your part in it all. Why? That's what I don't see. Why did you —

ALISON: Marry him? There must be about six different answers. When the family came back from India, everything seemed, I don't know — unsettled? Anyway, Daddy seemed remote and rather irritable. And Mummy—well, you know Mummy. I didn't have much to worry about. I didn't know I was born as Jimmy says. I met him at a party. I remember it so clearly. I was almost twenty-one. The men there all looked as though they distrusted him, and as for the women, they were all intent on showing their contempt for this rather odd creature, but no one seemed quite sure how to do it. He'd come to the party on a bicycle, he told me, and there was oil all over his dinner jacket, it had been such a lovely day, and he'd been in the sun. Everything about him seemed to burn, his face, the edges of his hair glistened and seemed to spring off his head, and his eyes were so blue and full of the sun. He looked so young and frail, in spite of the tired line of his mouth. I knew I was taking on more than I was ever likely to be capable of bearing, but there never seemed to be any choice. Well, the howl of outrage and astonishment went up from the family, and that did it. Whether or no he was in love with me, that did it. He made up his mind to marry me. They did just about everything they could think of to stop us.

HELENA: Yes, it wasn't a very pleasant business. But you can see their point.

ALISON: Jimmy went into battle with his axe swinging round his head — frail, and so full of fire. I had never seen anything like it. The old story of the knight in shining armour — except that his armour didn't really shine very much.

HELENA: And what about Hugh?

ALISON: Things got steadily worse between us. He and Jimmy even went to some of Nigel's political meetings. They took bunches of their Poplar cronies with them, and broke them up for him.

HELENA: He's really a savage, isn't he?

ALISON: Well, Hugh was writing some novel or other, and he made up his mind he must go abroad — to China, or some God-forsaken place. He said that England was finished for us anyway. All the old gang was back — Dame Alison's Mob, as he used to call it. The only real hope was to get out, and try somewhere else. He wanted us to go with him, but Jimmy refused to go. There was a terrible, bitter row over it. Jimmy accused Hugh of giving up, and he thought it was wrong of him to go off forever, and leave his mother all on her own. He was upset by the whole idea. They quarrelled for days over it. I almost wished they'd both go, and leave me behind. Anyway, they broke up. A few months later we came up here, and Hugh went off to find the New Millennium on his own. Sometimes, I think Hugh's mother blames me for it all. Jimmy too, in a way, although he's never said so. He never mentions it. But whenever that woman looks at me, I can feel her thinking "If it hadn't been for you, everything would have been all right. We'd have all been happy." Not that I dislike her — I don't. She's very sweet, in fact.

Jimmy seems to adore her principally because she's been poor almost all her life, and she's frankly ignorant. I'm quite aware how snobbish that sounds, but it happens to be the truth.

HELENA: Alison, listen to me. You've got to make up your mind what you're going to do. You're going to have a baby, and you have a new responsibility. Before, it was different — there was only yourself at stake. But you can't go on living in this way any longer. *(To her.)*

ALISON: I'm so tired. I dread him coming into the room.

HELENA: Why haven't you told him you're going to have a child?

ALISON: I don't know. *(Suddenly anticipating Helena's train of thought.)* Oh, it's his all right. There couldn't be any doubt of that. You see — *(she smiles)*. I've never really wanted anyone else.

HELENA: Listen, darling — you've got to tell him. Either he learns to behave like anyone else, and looks after you —

ALISON: Or?

HELENA: Or you must get out of this mad-house. *(Trumpet crescendo.)* This menagerie. He doesn't seem to know what love or anything else means.

ALISON: *(pointing to chest of drawers up R.)*. You see that bear, and that squirrel? Well, that's him, and that's me.

HELENA: Meaning?

ALISON: The game we play: bears and squirrels, squirrels and bears.

Helena looks rather blank.

Yes, it's quite mad, I know. Quite mad. *(Picks up the two animals.)* That's him.... And that's me....

HELENA: I didn't realise he was a bit fey, as well as everything else!

ALISON: Oh, there's nothing fey about Jimmy. It's just all we seem to have left. Or had left. Even bears and squirrels seem to have gone their own ways now.

HELENA: Since I arrived?

ALISON: It started during those first months we had alone together — after Hugh went abroad. It was the one way of escaping from everything — a sort of unholy priest-hole of being animals to one another. We could become little furry creatures with little furry brains. Full of dumb, uncomplicated affection for each other. Playful, careless creatures in their own cosy zoo for two. A silly symphony for people who couldn't bear the pain of being human beings any longer. And now, even they are dead, poor little silly animals. They were all love, and no brains. *(Puts them back.)*

HELENA: *(gripping her arm)*. Listen to me. You've got to fight him. Fight, or get out. Otherwise, he *will* kill you.

Enter Cliff.

CLIFF: There you are, dullin'. Hullo, Helena, Tea ready?

ALISON: Yes, dear, it's all ready. Give Jimmy a call, will you?

CLIFF: Right. (*Yelling back through door.*) Hey, you horrible man I Stop that bloody noise, and come and get your teat (*Coming in C.*) Going out?

HELENA: (*crossing to L.*) Yes.

CLIFF: Pictures?

HELENA: No. (*Pause.*) Church.

CLIFF: (*really surprised*). Oh! I see. Both of you?

HELENA: Yes. Are you coming?

CLIFF: Well ... I-I haven't read the papers properly yet. Tea, tea, tea! Let's have some tea, shall we?

He sits at the upstage end of the table. Helena puts the four plates of salad on it, sits down L., and they begin the meal. Alison is making up her face at her dressing table. Presently, Jimmy enters. He places his trumpet on the bookcase, and comes above the table.

Hullo, boyo. Come and have your tea. That blinkin' trumpet — why don't you stuff it away somewhere?

JIMMY: You like it all right. Anyone who doesn't like real jazz, hasn't any feeling either for music or people. *He sits R. end of table.*

HELENA: Rubbish.

JIMMY: (*to Cliff*). That seems to prove my point for you. Did you know that Webster played the banjo?

CLIFF: No, does he really?

HELENA: He said he'd bring it along next time he came

ALISON: (*muttering*). Oh, no!

JIMMY: Why is it that nobody knows how to treat the papers in this place? Look at them. I haven't even glanced at them yet — not the posh ones, anyway.

CLIFF: By the way, can I look at your *New* —

JIMMY: No, you can't! (*Loudly.*) You want anything, you pay for it. Like I have to. Price —

CLIFF: Price ninepence, obtainable from any bookstall! You're a mean old man, that's what you are.

JIMMY: What do you want to read it for, anyway? You've no intellect, no curiosity. It all just washes over you. Am I right?

CLIFF: Right.

JIMMY: What are you, you Welsh trash?

CLIFF: Nothing, that's what I am.

JIMMY: Nothing are you? Blimey you ought to be Prime Minister. You must have been talking to some of my wife's friends. They're a very intellectual set, aren't they? I've seen 'em.

Cliff and Helena carry on with their meal.

They all sit around feeling very spiritual, with their mental hands on each other's knees, discussing sex as if it were the Art of Fugue. If you don't want to be an emotional old spinster, just you listen to you dad!

He starts eating. The silent hostility of the two women has set him off on the scent, and he looks quite cheerful, although the occasional, thick edge of his voice belies it.

You know your trouble, son? Too anxious to please.

HELENA: Thank heavens somebody is!

JIMMY: You'll end up like one of those chocolate meringues my wife is so fond of. My wife — that's the one on the tom-toms behind me. Sweet and sticky on the outside, and sink your teeth in it, (*savouring every word*) inside, all white, messy and disgusting. (*Offering teapot sweetly to Helena.*) Tea?

HELENA: Thank you.

He smiles, and pours out a cup for her.

JIMMY: That's how you'll end up, my boy — black hearted, evil minded and vicious.

HELENA: (*taking cup.*) Thank you.

JIMMY: And those old favourites, your friends and mine: sycophantic, phlegmatic, and, of course, top of the bill — pusillanimous.

HELENA: (*to Alison*). Aren't you going to have your tea?

ALISON: Won't be long.

JIMMY: Thought of the title for a new song today. It's called "You can quit hanging round my counter Mildred 'cos you'll find my position is closed". (*Turning to Alison suddenly.*) Good?

ALISON: Oh, very good.

JIMMY: Thought you'd like it. If I can slip in a religious angle, it should be a big hit. (*To Helena.*) Don't you think so? I was thinking you might help me there. (*She doesn't reply.*) It might help you if I recite the lyrics. Let's see now, it's something like this:

I'm so tired of necking,
of pecking, home wrecking,
of empty bed blues —
just pass me the booze.
I'm tired of being hetero
Rather ride on the metero
Just pass me the booze.
This perpetual whoring
Gets quite dull and boring
So avoid that old python coil
And pass me the celibate oil.
You can quit etc.

No?

CLIFF: Very good, boyo.

JIMMY: Oh, yes, and I know what I meant to tell you — I wrote a poem while I was at the market yesterday. If you're interested, which you obviously are. (*To*

Helena.) It should appeal to you, in particular. It's soaked in the theology of Dante, with a good slosh of Eliot as well. It starts off "There are no dry cleaners in Cambodia!"

CLIFF: What do you call it?

JIMMY: "The Cess Pool". Myself being a stone dropped in it, you see —

CLIFF: You should be dropped in it, all right.

HELENA: *(to Jimmy)*. Why do you try so hard to be unpleasant?

He turns very deliberately, delighted that she should rise to the bait so soon — he's scarcely in his stride yet.

JIMMY: What's that?

HELENA: Do you have to be so offensive?

JIMMY: You mean now? You think I'm being offensive? You under-estimate me. *(Turning to Alison.)* Doesn't she?

HELENA: I think you're a very tiresome young man.

A slight pause as his delight catches up with him. He roars with laughter.

JIMMY: Oh dear, oh dear I My wife's friends I Pass Lady Bracknell the cucumber sandwiches, will you?

He returns to his meal, but his curiosity about Alison's preparations at the mirror won't be denied any longer. He turns round casually, and speaks to her.

Going out?

ALISON: That's right.

JIMMY: On a Sunday evening in this town? Where on earth are you going?

ALISON: *(rising)*. I'm going out with Helena.

JIMMY: That's not a direction — that's an affliction.

She crosses to the table, and sits down C. He leans forward, and addresses her again.

I didn't ask you what was the matter with you. I asked you where you were going.

HELENA: *(steadily)*. She's going to church.

He has been prepared for some plot, but he is as genuinely surprised by this as Cliff was a few minutes earlier.

JIMMY: You're doing what?

Silence.

Have you gone out of your mind or something? *(To Helena.)* You're determined to win her, aren't you? So it's come to this now! How feeble can you get? *(His rage mounting within.)* When I think of what I did, what I endured, to get you out —

ALISON: *(recognising an onslaught on the way, starts to panic)*. Oh yes, we all know what you did for me! You rescued me from the wicked clutches of my

family, and all my friends! I'd still be rotting away at home, if you hadn't ridden up on your charger, and carried me off!

The wild note in her voice has re-assured him. His anger cools and hardens. His voice is quite calm when he speaks.

JIMMY: The funny thing is, you know, I really did have to ride up on a white charger — off white, really. Mummy locked her up in their eight bedroomed castle, didn't she. There is no limit to what the middle-aged mummy will do in the holy crusade against ruffians like me. Mummy and I took one quick look at each other, and, from then on, the age of chivalry was dead. I knew that, to protect her innocent young, she wouldn't hesitate to cheat, lie, bully and blackmail. Threatened with me, a young man without money, background or even looks, she'd bellow like a rhinoceros in labour — enough to make every male rhino for miles turn white, and pledge himself to celibacy. But even I under-estimated her strength. Mummy may look over-fed and a bit flabby on the outside, but don't let that well-bred guzzler fool you. Underneath all that, she's armour plated — *(He clutches wildly for something to shock Helena with.)* She's as rough as a night in a Bombay brothel, and as tough as a matelot's arms. She's probably in that bloody cistern, taking down every word we say. *(Kicks cistern.)* Can you 'ear me, mother. *(Sits on it, beats like bongo drums.)* Just about get her in there. Let me give you an example of this lady's tactics. You may have noticed that I happen to wear my hair rather long. Now, if my wife is honest, or concerned enough to explain, she could tell you that this is not due to any dark, unnatural instincts I possess, but because (a) I can usually think of better things than a haircut to spend two bob on, and (b) I prefer long hair. But that obvious, innocent explanation didn't appeal to Mummy at all. So she hires detectives to watch me, to see if she can't somehow get me into the *News of the World*. All so that I shan't carry off her daughter on that poor old charger of mine, all tricked out and caparisoned in discredited passions and ideals! The old grey mare that actually once led the charge against the old order — well, she certainly ain't what she used to be. It was all she could do to carry me, but your weight *(to Alison)* was too much for her. She just dropped dead on the way.

CLIFF: *(quietly)*. Don't let's brawl, boyo. It won't do any good.

JIMMY: Why *don't* we brawl? It's the only thing left I'm any good at.

CLIFF: Jimmy, boy —

JIMMY: *(to Alison)*. You've let this genuflecting sin jobber win you over, haven't you? She's got you back, hasn't she?

HELENA: Oh for heaven's sake, don't be such a bully! You've no right to talk about her mother like that

JIMMY: *(capable of anything now)*. I've got every right. That old bitch should be dead! *(To Alison.)* Well? Aren't I right?

Cliff and Helena look at Alison tensely, but she just gazes at her plate.

I said she's an old bitch, and should be dead! What's the matter with you? Why don't you leap to her defence!

Cliff gets up quickly, and takes his arm.

CLIFF: Jimmy, don't!

Jimmy pushes him back savagely, and he sits down helplessly, turning his head away on to his hand.

JIMMY: If someone said something like that about me, she'd react soon enough — she'd spring into her well known lethargy, and say nothing! I say she ought to be dead. *(He brakes for a fresh spurt later. He's saving his strength for the knock-out.)* My God, those worms will need a dose of salts the day they get through her! Oh what a bellyache you've got coming to you, my little wormy ones! Alison's mother is on the way! *(In what he intends to be a comic declamatory voice.)* She will pass away, my friends, leaving a trail of worms gasping for laxatives behind her — from purgatives to purgatory.

He smiles down at Alison, but still she hasn't broken. Cliff won't look at them. Only Helena looks at him. Denied the other two, he addresses her.

Is anything the matter?

HELENA: I feel rather sick, that's all. Sick with contempt and loathing.

He can feel her struggling on the end of his line, and he looks at her rather absently.

JIMMY: One day, when I'm no longer spending my days running a sweet-stall, I may write a book about us all. It's all here. *(Slapping his forehead.)* Written in flames a mile high. And it won't be recollecting in tranquillity either, picking daffodils with Auntie Wordsworth. It'll be recollecting in fire, and blood. My blood.

HELENA: *(thinking patient reasonableness may be worth a try)*. She simply said that she's going to church with me. I don't see why that calls for this incredible outburst.

JIMMY: Don't you? Perhaps you're not as clever as I thought.

HELENA: You think the world's treated you pretty badly, don't you?

ALISON: *(turning her face away L.)*. Oh, don't try and take his suffering away from him — he'd be lost without it.

He looks at her in surprise, but he turns back to Helena. Alison can have her turn again later.

JIMMY: I thought this play you're touring in finished up on Saturday week?

HELENA: That's right.

JIMMY: Eight days ago, in fact.

HELENA: Alison wanted me to stay.

JIMMY: What are you plotting?

HELENA: Don't you think we've had enough of the heavy villain?

JIMMY: *(to Alison)*. You don't believe in all that stuff. Why you don't believe in anything. You're just doing it to be vindictive, aren't you? Why — why are you letting her influence you like this?

ALISON: *(starting to break)*. Why, why, why, why! *(Putting her hands over her ears.)* That word's pulling my head off!

JIMMY: And as long as you're around, I'll go on using it.

He crosses down to the armchair, and seats himself on the back of it. He addresses Helena's back.

The last time she was in a church was when she was married to me. I expect that surprises you, doesn't it? It was expediency, pure and simple. We were in a hurry, you see. *(The comedy of this strikes him at once, and he laughs.)* Yes, we were actually in a hurry! Lusting for the slaughter! Well, the local registrar was a particular pal of Daddy's, and we knew he'd spill the beans to the Colonel like a shot. So we had to seek out some local vicar who didn't know him quite so well. But it was no use. When my best man — a chap I'd met in the pub that morning — and I turned up, Mummy and Daddy were in the church already. They'd found out at the last moment, and had come to watch the execution carried out. How I remember looking down at them, full of beer for breakfast, and feeling a bit buzzed. Mummy was slumped over her pew in a heap — the noble, female rhino, pole-axed at last! And Daddy sat beside her, upright and unafraid, dreaming of his days among the Indian Princes, and unable to believe he'd left his horsewhip at home. Just the two of them in that empty church — them and me. *(Coming out of his remembrance suddenly.)* I'm not sure what happened after that. We must have been married, I suppose. I think I remember being sick in the vestry. *(To Alison.)* Was I?

HELENA: Haven't you finished?

He can smell blood again, and he goes on calmly, cheerfully.

JIMMY: *(to Alison)*. Are you going to let yourself be taken in by this saint in Dior's clothing? I will tell you the simple truth about her. *(Articulating with care.)* She is a cow. I wouldn't mind that so much, but she seems to have become a sacred cow as well!

CLIFF: You've gone too far, Jimmy. Now dry up!

HELENA: Oh, let him go on.

JIMMY: *(to Cliff)*. I suppose you're going over to that side as well. Well, why don't you? Helena will help to make it pay off for you. She's an expert in the New Economics — the Economics of the Supernatural. It's all a simple matter of payments and penalties. *(Rises.)* She's one of those apocalyptic share pushers who are spreading all those rumours about a transfer of power. *(His imagination is racing, and the words pour out.)* Reason and Progress, the old firm, is selling out! Everyone get out while the going's good. Those forgotten shares you had in the old traditions, the old beliefs are going up — up and up and up. *(Moves up L.)* There's going to be a change over. A new Board of Directors, who are going to see that the dividends are always attractive, and that they go to the right people. *(Facing them.)* Sell out everything you've got: all those stocks in the old, free inquiry. *(crosses to above table.)* The Big Crash is coming, you can't escape it, so get in on the ground floor with Helena and her friends while there's still time. And there isn't much of it left. Tell me, what could be more gilt-edged than the next world! It's a capital gain, and it's all yours. *(He moves round the table, back to his chair R.)* You see, I know Helena and her kind so very well. In fact, her kind are everywhere, you can't move for them. They're a romantic lot.

They spend their time mostly looking forward to the past. The only place they can see the light is the Dark Ages. She's moved long ago into a lovely little cottage of the soul, cut right off from the ugly problems of the twentieth century altogether. She prefers to be cut off from all the conveniences we've fought to get for centuries. She'd rather go down to the ecstatic little shed at the bottom of the garden to relieve her sense of guilt. Our Helena is full of ecstatic wind — *(he leans across the table at her)* aren't you?

He waits for her to reply.

HELENA: *(quite calmly)*. It's a pity you've been so far away all this time. I would probably have slapped your face.

They look into each other's eyes across the table. He moves slowly up, above Cliff, until he is beside her.

You've behaved like this ever since I first came.

JIMMY: Helena, have you ever watched somebody die? *She makes a move to rise.* No, don't move away. *She remains seated, and looks up at him,* It doesn't look dignified enough for you.

HELENA: *(like ice)*. If you come any nearer, I will slap your face.

He looks down at her, a grin smouldering round his mouth.

JIMMY: I hope you won't make the mistake of thinking for one moment that I am a gentleman.

HELENA: I'm not very likely to do that.

JIMMY: *(bringing his face close to hers)*. I've no public school scruples about hitting girls. *(gently.)* If you slap my face — by God, I'll lay you out!

HELENA: You probably would. You're the type.

JIMMY: You bet I'm the type. I'm the type that detests physical violence. Which is why, if I find some woman trying to cash in on what she thinks is my defenceless chivalry by lashing out with her frail little fists, I lash back at her.

HELENA: Is that meant to be subtle, or just plain Irish?

His grin widens.

JIMMY: I think you and I understand one another all right. But you haven't answered my question. I said: have you watched somebody die?

HELENA: No, I haven't.

JIMMY: Anyone who's never watched somebody die is suffering from a pretty bad case of virginity. *(His good humour of a moment ago deserts him-j as he begins to remember.)* For twelve months, I watched my father dying — when I was ten years old. He'd come back from the war in Spain, you see. And certain god-fearing gentlemen there had made such a mess of him, he didn't have long left to live. Everyone knew it — even I knew it. *(He moves R.)* But, you see, I was the only one who cared. *(Turns to the window.)* His family were embarrassed by the whole business. Embarrassed and irritated. *(Looking out.)* As for my mother, all she could think about was the fact that

she had allied herself to a man who seemed to be on the wrong side in all things. My mother was all for being associated with minorities, provided they were the smart, fashionable ones. (*He moves up C. again.*) We all of us waited for him to die. The family sent him a cheque every month, and hoped he'd get on with it quietly, without too much vulgar fuss. My mother looked after him without complaining, and that was about all. Perhaps she pitied him. I suppose she was capable of that. (*With a kind of appeal in his voice.*) But J was the only one who cared! *He moves L., behind the armchair.* Every time I sat on the edge of his bed, to listen to him talking or reading to me, I had to fight back my tears. At the end of twelve months, I was a veteran. (*He leans forward on the back of the armchair.*) All that that feverish failure of a man had to listen to him was a small, frightened boy. I spent hour upon hour in that tiny bedroom. He would talk to me for hours, pouring out all that was left of his life to one, lonely, bewildered little boy, who could barely understand half of what he said. All he could feel was the despair and the bitterness, the sweet, sickly smell of a dying man. *He moves around the chair.* You see, I learnt at an early age what it was to be angry — angry and helpless. And I can never forget it. (*Sits.*) I knew more about — love ... betrayal... and death, when I was ten years old than you will probably ever know all your life.

They all sit silently. Presently, Helena rises.

HELENA: Time we went. *Alison nods.*

I'll just get my things together. (*Crosses to door.*) I'll see you downstairs. (*She exits.*)

A slight pause.

JIMMY: (*not looking at her, almost whispering.*) Doesn't it matter to you — what people do to me? What are you trying to do to me? I've given you just everything. Doesn't it mean *anything* to you?

Her back stiffens. His axe-swinging bravado has vanished, and his voice crumples in disabled rage.

You Judas! You phlegm! She's taking you with her, and you're so bloody feeble, you'll let her do it!

Alison suddenly takes hold of her cup, and hurls it on the floor. He's drawn blood at last. She looks down at the pieces on the floor, and then at him. Then she crosses, R., takes out a dress on a hanger, and slips it on. As she is zipping up the side, she feels giddy, and she has to lean against the wardrobe for support. She closes her eyes.

ALISON: (*softly*). All I want is a little peace.

JIMMY: Peace! God! She wants peace! (*Hardly able to get his words out.*) My heart is so full, I feel ill — and she wants peace! *She crosses to the bed to put on her shoes. Cliff get up from the table, and sits in the armchair R. He picks up a paper, and looks at that. Jimmy has recovered slightly, and manages to sound almost detached.*

I rage, and shout my head off, and everyone thinks "poor chap!" or "what an objectionable young man!" But that girl there can twist your arm off with

her silence. I've sat in this chair in the dark for hours. And, although she knows I'm feeling as I feel now, she's turned over, and gone to sleep.

He gets up and faces Cliff, who doesn't look up from his paper.

One of us is crazy. One of us is mean and stupid and crazy. Which is it? Is it me? Is it me, standing here like an hysterical girl, hardly able to get my words out? Or is it her? Sitting there, putting on her shoes to go out with that — *(But inspiration has deserted him by now.)* Which is it?

Cliff is still looking down at his paper.

I wish to heaven you'd try loving her, that's all.

He moves up C, watching her look for her gloves.

Perhaps, one day, you may want to come back. I shall wait for that day. I want to stand up in your tears, and splash about in them, and sing. I want to be there when you grovel. I want to be there, I want to watch it, I want the front seat.

Helena enters, carrying two prayer books.

I want to see your face rubbed in the mud — that's all I can hope for. There's nothing else I want any longer.

HELENA: *(after a moment)*. There's a 'phone call for you.

JIMMY: *(turning)*. Well, it can't be anything good, can it?

He goes out.

HELENA: All ready?

ALISON: Yes — I think so.

HELENA: You feel all right, don't you? *(She nods.)* What's he been raving about now? Oh, what does it matter? He makes me want to claw his hair out by the roots. When I think of what you will be going through in a few months' time — and all for him! It's as if you'd done *him* wrong! These men! *(Turning on Cliff.)* And all the time you just sit there, and do nothing!

CLIFF: *(looking up slowly)*. That's right — I just sit here.

HELENA: What's the matter with you? What sort of a man are you?

CLIFF: I'm not the District Commissioner, you know. Listen, Helena — I don't feel like Jimmy does about you, but I'm not exactly on your side either. And since you've been here, everything's certainly been worse than it's ever been. This has always been a battlefield, but I'm pretty certain that if I hadn't been here, everything would have been over between these two long ago. I've been a — a no-man's land between them. Sometimes, it's been still and peaceful, no incidents, and we've all been reasonably happy. But most of the time, it's simply a very narrow strip of plain hell. But where I come from, we're used to brawling and excitement. Perhaps I even enjoy being in the thick of it. I love these two people very much. *(He looks at her steadily, and adds simply)* And I pity all of us.

HELENA: Are you including me in that? *(But she goes on quickly to avoid his reply.)* I don't understand him, you or any of it. All I know is that none of you seems

to know how to behave in a decent, civilised way. (*In command now.*) Listen, Alison — I've sent your father a wire.

ALISON: (*numbed and vague by now*). Oh?

Helena looks at her, and realizes quickly that everything now will have to depend on her own authority. She tries to explain patiently.

HELENA: Look, dear — he'll get it first thing in the morning. I thought it would be better than trying to explain the situation over the 'phone. I asked him to come up, and fetch you home tomorrow.

ALISON: What did you say?

HELENA: Simply that you wanted to come home, and would he come up for you.

ALISON: I see

HELENA: I knew that would be quite enough. I told him there was nothing to worry about, so they won't worry and think there's been an accident or anything. I had to do something, dear. (*Very gently.*) You didn't mind, did you?

ALISON: No, I don't mind. Thank you.

HELENA: And you will go when he comes for you?

ALISON: (*pause.*) Yes. I'll go.

HELENA: (*relieved*). I expect he'll drive up. He should be here about tea-time. It'll give you plenty of time to get your things together. And, perhaps, after you've gone—Jimmy (*saying the word almost with difficulty*) will come to his senses, and face up to things.

ALISON: Who was on the 'phone?

HELENA: I didn't catch it properly. It rang after I'd sent the wire off — just as soon as I put the receiver down almost. I had to go back down the stairs again. Sister somebody, I think.

ALISON: Must have been a hospital or something. Unless he knows someone in a convent — *that* doesn't seem very likely, does it? Well, we'll be late, if we don't hurry.

She puts down one of the prayer books on the table. Enter Jimmy. He comes down C, between the two women.

CLIFF: All right, boyo?

JIMMY: (*to Alison*). It's Hugh's mum. She's — had a stroke.

Slight pause.

ALISON: I'm sorry.

Jimmy sits on the bed.

CLIFF: How bad is it?

JIMMY: They didn't say much. But I think she's dying.

CLIFF: Oh dear ...

JIMMY: (*rubbing his fist over his face*). It doesn't make any sense at all. Do you think it does?

ALISON: I'm sorry — I really am.

CLIFF: Anything I can do?

JIMMY: The London train goes in half an hour. You'd better order me a taxi.

CLIFF: Right. (*He crosses to the door, and stops.*) Do you want me to come with you, boy?

JIMMY: No thanks. After all, you hardly knew her. It's not for you to go.

Helena looks quickly at Alison.

She may not even remember me, for all I know.

CLIFF: O.K. (*He exits.*)

JIMMY: I remember the first time I showed her your photograph — just after we were married. She looked at it, and the tears just welled up in her eyes, and she said: "But she's so beautiful! She's so beautiful!" She kept repeating it as if she couldn't believe it. Sounds a bit simple and sentimental when you repeat it. But it was pure gold the way she said it.

He looks at her. She is standing by the dressing table, her back to him.

She got a kick out of you, like she did out of everything else. Hand me my shoes, will you?

She kneels down, and hands them to him.

(*looking down at his feet.*) You're coming with me, aren't you? She (*he shrugs*) hasn't got anyone else now. I... need you ... to come with me.

He looks into her eyes, but she turns away, and stands up. Outside, the church bells start ringing. Helena moves up to the door, and waits watching them closely. Alison stands quite still, Jimmy's eyes burning into her. Then, she crosses in front of him to the table where she picks up the prayer book, her back to him. She wavers, and seems about to say something, but turns upstage instead, and walks quickly to the door.

ALISON: (*hardly audible*). Let's go.

She goes out, Helena following. Jimmy gets up, looks about him unbelievably, and leans against the chest of drawers. The teddy bear is close to his face, and he picks it up gently, looks at it quickly, and throws it downstage. It hits the floor with a thud, and it makes a rattling, groaning sound — as guaranteed in the advertisement. Jimmy falls forward on to the bed, his face buried in the covers.

QUICK CURTAIN

END OF SCENE ONE

SCENE TWO

The following evening. When the curtain rises, ALISON is discovered R., going from her dressing table to the bed, and packing her things into a suitcase. Sitting down L. is her father, COLONEL REDFERN, a large handsome man, about sixty. Forty years of being a soldier sometimes conceals the essentially gentle, kindly man underneath. Brought up to command respect, he is often slightly withdrawn and uneasy now that he finds himself in a world where his authority has lately become less and less unquestionable. His wife would relish the present situation, but he is only disturbed and bewildered by it. He looks around him, discreetly scrutinising everything.

COLONEL: *(partly to himself)*. I'm afraid it's all beyond me. I suppose it always will be. As for Jimmy — he just speaks a different language from any of us. Where did you say he'd gone?

ALISON: He's gone to see Mrs. Tanner.

COLONEL: Who?

ALISON: Hugh Tanner's mother.

COLONEL: Oh, I see.

ALISON: She's been taken ill — a stroke. Hugh's abroad, as you know, so Jimmy's gone to London to see her.

He nods.

He wanted me to go with him.

COLONEL: Didn't she start him off in this sweet-stall

ALISON: Yes.

COLONEL: What is she like? Nothing like her son, I trust?

ALISON: Not remotely. Oh — how can you describe her? Rather — ordinary. What Jimmy insists on calling working class. A Charwoman who married an actor, worked hard all her life, and spent most of it struggling to support her husband and her son, Jimmy and she are very fond of each other.

COLONEL: So you didn't go with him?

ALISON: No.

COLONEL: Who's looking after the sweet-stall?

ALISON: Cliff. He should be in soon.

COLONEL: Oh yes, of course — Cliff. Does he live here too?

ALISON: Yes. His room is just across the landing.

COLONEL: Sweet-stall. It does seem an extraordinary thing for an educated young man to be occupying himself with. Why should he want to do that, of all things. I've always thought he must be quite clever in his way.

ALISON: (*no longer interested in this problem*), Oh, he tried so many things — journalism, advertising, even vacuum cleaners for a few weeks. He seems to have been as happy doing this as anything else.

COLONEL: I've often wondered what it was like — where you were living, I mean. You didn't tell us very much in your letters.

ALISON: There wasn't a great deal to tell you. There's not much social life here.

COLONEL: Oh, I know what you mean. You were afraid of being disloyal to your husband.

ALISON: Disloyal I (*She laughs.*) He thought it was high treason of me to write to you at all I used to have to dodge downstairs for the post, so that he wouldn't see I was getting letters from home. Even then I had to hide them.

COLONEL: He really does hate us doesn't he?

ALISON: Oh yes — don't have any doubts about that. He hates all of us.

COLONEL: (*sighs*). It seems a great pity. It was all so unfortunate — unfortunate and unnecessary. I'm afraid I can't help feeling that he must have had a certain amount of right on his side.

ALISON: (*puzzled by this admission*). Right on his side?

COLONEL: It's a little late to admit it, I know, but your mother and I weren't entirely free from blame. I have never said anything — there was no point afterwards — but I have always believed that she went too far over Jimmy. Of course, she was extremely upset at the time — we both were — and that explains a good deal of what happened. I did my best to stop her, but she was in such a state of mind, there was simply nothing I could do. She seemed to have made up her mind that if he was going to marry you, he must be a criminal, at the very least. All those inquiries, the private detectives — the accusations. I hated every moment of it.

ALISON: I suppose she was trying to protect me — in a rather heavy-handed way, admittedly.

COLONEL: I must confess I find that kind of thing rather horrifying. Anyway, I try to think now that it never happened. I didn't approve of Jimmy at all, and I don't suppose I ever should, but, looking back on it, I think it would have been better, for all concerned, if we had never attempted to interfere. At least, it would have been a little more dignified.

ALISON: It wasn't your fault.

COLONEL: I don't know. We were all to blame, in our different ways. No doubt Jimmy acted in good faith. He's honest enough, whatever else he may be. And your mother — in her heavy-handed way, as you put it — acted in good faith as well. Perhaps you and I were the ones most to blame.

ALISON: You and I

COLONEL: I think you may take after me a little, my dear. you like to sit on the fence because it's comfortable and more peaceful.

ALISON: Sitting on the fence I married him, didn't I.

COLONEL: Oh yes, you did.

ALISON: In spite of all the humiliating scenes and the threats I What did you say to me at the time? Wasn't I letting you down, turning against you, how could I do this to you etcetera?

COLONEL: Perhaps it might have been better if you hadn't written letters to us — knowing how we felt about your husband, and after everything that had happened. (*He looks at her uncomfortably.*) Forgive me, I'm a little confused, what with everything — the telegram, driving up here suddenly.

He trails off rather helplessly. He looks tired. He glances at her nervously, a hint of accusation in his eyes, as if he expected her to defend herself further. She senses this, and is more confused than ever.

ALISON: Do you know what he said about Mummy? He said she was an overfed, overprivileged old bitch. "A good blow-out for the worms" was his expression, I think.

COLONEL: I see. And what does he say about me?

ALISON: Oh, he doesn't seem to mind you so much. In fact, I think he rather likes you. He likes you because he can feel sorry for you. (*Conscious that what she says is going to hurt him.*) "Poor old Daddy — just one of those sturdy old plants left over from the Edwardian Wilderness that can't understand why the sun isn't shining any more." (*Rather lamely.*) Something lilt* that, anyway.

COLONEL: He has quite a turn of phrase, hasn't he? (*Simply, and without malice.*) Why did you ever have to meet this young man?

ALISON: Oh, Daddy, pleas* don't put me on trial now. I've been on trial every day and night of my life for nearly four years.

COLONEL: But why should he have married you, feeling as he did about everything?

ALISON: That is the famous American question — you know, the sixty-four dollar one! Perhaps it was revenge.

He looks up uncomprehendingly.

Oh yes. Some people do actually marry for revenge. Peoph like Jimmy, anyway. Or perhaps he should have been another Shelley, and can't understand now why I'm not another Mary, and you're not William Godwin. He thinks he's got a sort of genius for love and friendship — on his own terms. Well, for twenty years, I'd lived a happy, uncomplicated life, and suddenly, this — this spiritual barbarian — throws down the gauntlet at me. Perhaps only another woman could understand what a challenge like that means — although I think Helena was as mystified as you are.

COLONEL: I am mystified. (*He rises, and crosses to the window R.*) Your husband has obviously taught you a great deal, whether you realise it i or not. What any of it means, I don't know. I always believed that people married each other because they were in love. That always seemed a good enough reason to me. But apparently, that's too simple for young people nowadays. They have to talk about challenges and revenge. I just can't believe that love between men and women is really like that.

ALISON: Only some men and women.

COLONEL: But why you? My daughter ... No. Perhaps Jimmy is right. Perhaps I am a — what was it? an old plant left over from the Edwardian Wilderness. And I can't understand why the sun isn't shining any more. You can see what he means, can't you? It was March, 1914, when I left England, and, apart from leaves every ten years or so, I didn't see much of my own country until we all came back in '47. Oh, I knew things had changed, of course. People told you all the time the way it was going-going to the dogs, as the Blimps are supposed to say. But it seemed very unreal to me, out there. The England I remembered was the one I left in 1914, and I was happy to go on remembering it that way. Beside, I had the Maharajah's army to command — that was my world, and I loved it, all of it. At the time, it looked like going on forever. When I think of it now, it seems like a dream. If only it could have gone on forever. Those long, cool evenings up in the hills, everything purple and golden. Your mother and I were so happy then. It seemed as though we had everything we could ever want. I think the last day the sun shone was when that dirty little train steamed out of that crowded, suffocating Indian station, and the battalion band playing for all it was worth. I knew in my heart it was all over then. Everything.

ALISON: You're hurt because everything is changed. Jimmy is hurt because everything is the same. And neither of you can face it. Something's gone wrong somewhere, hasn't it?

COLONEL: It looks like it, my dear.

She picks up the squirrel from the chest of drawers, is about to put it in her suitcase, hesitates, and then puts it back. The Colonel turns and looks at her. She moves down towards him, her head turned away. For a few moments, she seems to be standing on the edge of choice. The choice made, her body wheels round suddenly, and she is leaning against him, weeping softly.

(presently). This is a big step you're taking. You've made up your mind to come back with me? Is that really what you want?

Enter Helena.

HELENA: I'm sorry. I came in to see if I could help you pack, Alison. Oh, you look as though you've finished.

Alison leaves her father, and moves to the bed, pushing down the lid of her suitcase.

ALISON: All ready.

HELENA: Have you got everything?

ALISON: Well, no. But Cliff can send the rest on sometime, I expect. He should have been back by now. Oh, of course, he's had to put the stall away on his own today.

COLONEL: *(crossing and picking up the suitcase).* Well, I'd better put this in the car then. We may as well get along. Your mother will be worried, I know. I promised her I'd ring her when I got here. She's not very well.

HELENA: I hope my telegram didn't upset her too much, Perhaps I shouldn't have —

COLONEL: Not at all. We were very grateful that you did. It was very kind of you, indeed. She tried to insist on coming with me, but I finally managed to talk her out of it. I thought it would be best for everyone. What about your case, Helena? If you care to tell me where it is, I'll take it down with this one.

HELENA: I'm afraid I shan't be coming tonight.

ALISON: (*very surprised*). Aren't you coming with us?

Enter Cliff.

HELENA: I'd like to, but the fact is I've ah appointment tomorrow in Birmingham — about a job. They've just sent me a script. It's rather important, and I don't want to miss it. So it looks as though I shall have to stay here tonight.

ALISON: Oh, I see. Hullo, Cliff.

CLIFF: Hullo there.

ALISON: Daddy — this is Cliff.

COLONEL: How do you do, Cliff.

CLIFF: How do you do, sir.

Slight pause.

COLONEL: Well, I'd better put this in the car, hadn't I? Don't be long, Alison. Good-bye, Helena. I expect we shall be seeing you again soon, if you're not busy.

HELENA: Oh, yes, I shall be back in a day or two.

Cliff takes off his jacket.

COLONEL: Well, then — good-bye. Cliff.

CLIFF: Good-bye, sir.

The Colonel goes out. Cliff comes down L. Helena moves C.

You're really going then?

ALISON: Really going.

CLIFF: I should think Jimmy would be back pretty soon. You won't wait?

ALISON: No, Cliff.

CLIFF: Who's going to tell him?

HELENA: I can tell him. That is, if I'm here when he comes back.

CLIFF: (*quietly*). You'll be here. (*To Alison.*) Don't you think you ought to tell him yourself?

She hands him an envelope from her handbag. He takes it.

Bit conventional, isn't it?

ALISON: I'm a conventional girl.

He crosses to her, and puts his arms round her.

CLIFF: (*back over his shoulder, to Helena*). I hope you're right, that's all.

HELENA: What do you mean? You hope *I'm* right?

CLIFF: *(to Alison)*. The place is going to be really cockeyed now. You know that, don't you?

ALISON: Please, Cliff —

He nods. She kisses him.

I'll write to you later.

CLIFF: Good-bye, lovely.

ALISON: Look after him.

CLIFF: We'll keep the old nut-house going somehow.

She crosses C, in between the two of them, glances quickly at the two armchairs, the papers still left around them from yesterday. Helena kisses her on the cheek, and squeezes her hand.

HELENA: See you soon.

Alison nods, and goes out quickly. Cliff and Helena are left looking at each other.

Would you like me to make you some tea?

CLIFF: No, thanks.

HELENA: Think I might have some myself, if you don't mind.

CLIFF: So you're staying?

HELENA: Just for tonight. Do you object?

CLIFF: Nothing to do with me. *(Against the table C.)* Of course he may not be back until later on.

She crosses L. to the window, and lights a cigarette.

HELENA: What do you think he'll do? Perhaps he'll look out one of his old girl friends. What about this Madeline?

CLIFF: What about her?

HELENA: Isn't she supposed to have done a lot for him? Couldn't he go back to her?

CLIFF: I shouldn't think so.

HELENA: What happened?

CLIFF: She was nearly old enough to be his mother. I expect that's something to do with it! Why the hell should I know!

For the first time in the play, his good humour has completely deserted him. She looks surprised.

HELENA: You're his friend, aren't you? Anyway, he's not what you'd call reticent about himself, is he? I've never seen so many souls stripped to the waist since I've been here.

He turns to go.

Aren't you staying?

CLIFF: No, I'm not. There was a train in from London about five minutes ago. And, just in case he may have been on it, I'm going out.

HELENA: Don't you think you ought to be here when he comes?

CLIFF: I've had a hard day, and I don't think I want to see anyone hurt until I've had something to eat first, and perhaps a few drinks as well. I think I might pick up some nice, pleasant little tart in a milk bar, and sneak her in past old mother Drury. Here! (*Tossing the letter at her.*) You give it to him! (*Crossing to door.*) He's all yours. (*At door.*) And I hope he rams it up your nostrils! (He exits.)

She crosses to the table, and stubs out her cigarette. The front door downstairs is heard to slam. She moves to the wardrobe, opens it idly. It is empty, except for one dress, swinging on a hanger. She goes over to the dressing table, now cleared but for a framed photograph of Jimmy. Idly, she slams the empty drawers open and shut. She turns upstage to the chest of drawers, picks up the toy bear, and sit on the bed, looking at it. She lays her head back on the pillow, still holding the bear. She looks up quickly as the door crashes open, and Jimmy enters. He stands looking at her, then moves down C, taking off his raincoat, and throwing it over the table. He is almost giddy with anger, and has to steady himself on the chair. He looks up.

JIMMY: That old bastard nearly ran me down in his car! Now, if he'd killed me, that really would have been ironical. And how right and fitting that my wife should have been a passenger. A passenger! What's the matter with everybody? (*Crossing up to her.*) Cliff practically walked into me, coming out of the house. He belted up the other way, and pretended not to see me. Are you the only one who's not afraid to stay?

She hands him Alison's note. He takes it.

Oh, it's one of these, is it? (*He rips it open. He reads a few lines, and almost snorts with disbelief.*) Did you write this for her! Well, listen to this then! (*Reading.*) "My dear — I must get away. I don't suppose you will understand, but please try. I need peace so desperately, and, at the moment, I am willing to sacrifice everything just for that. I don't know what's going to happen to us. I know you will be feeling wretched and bitter, but try to be a little patient with me. I shall always have a deep, loving need of you — Alison." Oh, how could she be so bloody wet! Deep loving need! That makes me puket (*Crossing to R.*) She couldn't say "You rotten bastard! I hate your guts, I'm clearing out, and I hope you rot!" No, she has to make a polite, emotional mess out of it! (*Seeing the dress in the wardrobe, he rips it out, and throws it in the corner up L.*) Deep, loving need! I never thought she was capable of being as phoney as that! What is that — a line from one of those plays you've been in? What are you doing here anyway? You'd better keep out of my way, if you don't want your head kicked in.

HELENA: (*calmly*). If you'll stop thinking about yourself for one moment, I'll tell you something I think you ought to know. Your wife is going to have a baby.

He just looks at her.

Well? Doesn't that mean anything? Even to you?

He is taken aback, but not so much by the news, as by her.

JIMMY: All right — yes. I am surprised. I give you that. But, tell me. Did you honestly expect me to go soggy at the knees, and collapse with remorse?

(Leaning nearer.) Listen, if you'll stop breathing your female wisdom all over me, I'll tell you something: I don't care. *(Beginning quietly.)* I don't care if she's going to have a baby. I don't care if it has two heads! *(He knows her fingers are itching.)* Do I disgust you? Well, go on — slap my face. But remember what I told you before, will you? For eleven hours, I have been watching someone I love very much going through the sordid process of dying. She was alone, and I was the only one with her. And when I have to walk behind that coffin on Thursday, I'll be on my own again. Because that bitch won't even send her a bunch of flowers — I know! She made the great mistake of all her kind. She thought that because Hugh's mother was a deprived and ignorant old woman, who said all the wrong things in all the wrong places, she couldn't be taken seriously. And you think I should be overcome with awe because that cruel, stupid girl is going to have a babyt *(Anguish in his voice.)* I can't believe it! I can't. *(Grabbing her shoulders.)* Well, the performance is over. Now leave me alone, and *get out*, you evil-minded little virgin.

She slaps his face savagely. An expression of horror and disbelief floods his face. But it drains away, and all that is left is pain. His hand goes up to his head, and a muffled cry of despair escapes him. Helena tears his hand away, and kisses him passionately, drawing him down beside her.

CURTAIN END OF ACT II