

ACT III
SCENE ONE

Several months later. A Sunday evening. ALISON's personal belongings, such as her make-up things on the dressing table, for example, have been replaced by HELENA's.

At rise of curtain, we find JIMMY and CLIFF sprawled in their respective armchairs, immersed in the Sunday newspapers. HELENA is standing down L. leaning over the ironing board, a small pile of clothes beside her. She looks more attractive than before, for the setting of her face is more relaxed. She still looks quite smart, but in an unpremeditated, careless way; she wears an old shirt of JIMMY's,

CLIFF: That stinking old pipe!

Pause.

JIMMY: Shut up.

CLIFF: Why don't you do something with it?

JIMMY: Why do I spend half of Sunday reading the papers?

CLIFF: *(kicks him without lowering his paper)*. It stinks!

JIMMY: So do you, but I'm not singing an aria about it. *(Turns to the next page.)* The dirty ones get more and more wet round the mouth, and the posh ones are more pompous than ever. *(Lowering paper, and waving pipe at Helena.)* Does this bother you?

HELENA: No. I quite like it.

JIMMY: *(to Cliff)*. There you are — she likes it!

He returns to his paper. Cliff grunts.

Have you read about the grotesque and evil practices going on in the Midlands?

CLIFF: Read about the what?

JIMMY: Grotesque and evil practices going on in the Midlands.

CLIFF: No, what about 'em?

JIMMY: Seems we don't know the old place. It's all in here. Startling Revelations this week! Pictures too. Reconstructions of midnight invocations to the Coptic Goddess of fertility.

HELENA: Sounds madly depraved.

JIMMY: Yes, it's rather us, isn't it? My gosh, look at 'em! Snarling themselves silly. Next week a well-known debutante relates how, during an evil orgy in Market Harborough, she killed and drank the blood of a white cockerel. Well — I'll bet Fortnums must be doing a roaring line in sacrificial cocks! *(Thoughtful.)* Perhaps that's what Miss Drury does on Sunday evenings. She puts in a stint as evil high priestess down at the

YW — probably having a workout at this very moment. *(To Helena.)*
You never dabbled in this kind of thing did you?

HELENA: *(laughs)*. Not lately!

JIMMY: Sounds rather your cup of tea — cup of blood, I should say, *(In an imitation of a midlands accent.)* Well, I mean, it gives you something to do, doesn't it? After all, it wouldn't do if we was all alike, would it? It'd be a funny world if we was all the same, that's what / always say! *(Resuming in his normal voice.)* All I know is that somebody's been sticking pins into *my* wax image for years. *(Suddenly,)* Of course: Alison's mother! Every Friday, the wax arrives from Harrods, and all through the week-end, she's stabbing away at it with a hatpin I Ruined her bridge game, I dare say.

HELENA: Why don't *you* try it?

JIMMY: Yes, it's an idea. *(Pointing to Cliff.)* Just for a start, we could roast him over the gas stove. Have we got enough shillings for the meter? It seems to be just the thing for these Autumn evenings. After all the whole point of a sacrifice is that you give up something you never really wanted in the first place. You know what J mean? People are doing it around you all the time. They give up their careers, say — or their beliefs — or sex. And everyone thinks to themselves: how wonderful to be able to do that. If only I were capable of doing that! But the truth of it is that they've been kidding themselves, and they've been kidding you. It's not awfully difficult-giving up something you were incapable of ever really wanting. We shouldn't be admiring them. We should feel rather sorry for them. *(Coming back from this sudden, brooding excursion, and turning to Cliff.)* You'll make an admirable sacrifice.

CLIFF: *(mumbling)*. Dry up! I'm trying to read.

JIMMY: Afterwards, we can make a loving cup from his blood. Can't say I fancy that so much. I've seen it — it looks like cochineal, ever so common. *(To Helena.)* Yours would be much better — pale Cambridge blue, I imagine. No? And afterwards, we could make invocations to the Coptic Goddess of fertility. Got any idea how you do that? *(To Cliff.)* Do you know?

CUFF: Shouldn't have thought *you* needed to make invocations to the Coptic whatever-she-is!

JIMMY: Yes, I see what you mean. *(To Helena.)* Well, we don't want to *ask* for trouble, do we? Perhaps it might appeal to the lady here — she's written a long letter all about artificial insemination. It's headed: Haven't we tried God's patience enough! *(Throws the paper down.)* Let's see the other posh one.

CLIFF: Haven't finished yet.

JIMMY: Well, hurry up. I'll have to write and ask them to put hypens in between the syllables for you. There's a particularly savage correspondence going on in there about whether Milton wore braces or not. I just want to see who get shot down this week.

CLIFF: Just read that. Don't know what it was about, but a Fellow of All Souls seems to have bitten the dust, and the Athenaeum's going up in flames, so> the Editor declares that this correspondence is now closed.

JIMMY: I think you're actually acquiring yourself a curiosity, my boy. Oh yes, and then there's an American professor from Yale or somewhere, who believes that when Shakespeare was writing *The Tempest*, he changed his sex, Yes, he was obliged to go back to Stratford because the other actors couldn't take him seriously any longer. This professor chap is coming over here to search for certain documents which will prove that poor old W.S. ended up in someone else's second best bed — a certain Warwickshire farmer's, whom he married after having three children by him.

Helena laughs. Jimmy looks up quizzically.

Is anything the matter?

HELENA: No, nothing. I'm only beginning to get used to him. I never (*this is to Cliff*) used to be sure when he was being serious, or when he wasn't.

CLIFF: Don't think he knows himself half the time. When in doubt, just mark it down as an insult.

JIMMY: Hurry up with that paper, and shut up! What are we going to do tonight? There's isn't even a decent concert on. (*To Helena.*) Are you going to Church?

HELENA: (*rather taken aback*). No. I don't think so. Unless you want to.

JIMMY: Do I detect a growing, satanic glint in her eyes lately? Do you think it's living in sin with me that does it? (*To Helena.*) Do you feel very sinful my dear? Well? Do you?

She can hardly believe that this is an attack, and she can only look at him, uncertain of herself.

Do you feel sin crawling out of your ears, like stored up wax or something? Are you wondering whether I'm joking or not? Perhaps I ought to wear a red nose and funny hat. I'm just curious, that's all.

She is shaken by the sudden coldness in his eyes, but before she has time to fully realise how hurt she is, he is smiling at her, and shouting cheerfully at Cliff.

Let's have that paper, stupid!

CLIFF: Why don't you drop dead!

JIMMY: (*to Helena*). Will you be much longer doing that?

HELENA: Nearly finished.

JIMMY: Talking of sin, wasn't that Miss Drury's Reverend friend I saw you chatting with yesterday. Helena darling, I said wasn't that ...

HELENA: Yes it was.

JIMMY: My dear, you don't have to be on the defensive you know.

HELENA: I'm not on the defensive.

JIMMY: After all, there's no reason why we shouldn't have the parson to tea up here. Why don't we? Did you find that you had much in common?

HELENA: No I don't think so.

JIMMY: Do you think that some of this spiritual beefcake would make a man of me? Should I go in for this moral weight lifting and get myself some over-developed muscle? I was a liberal skinny weakling. I too was afraid to strip down to my soul, but now everyone looks at my superb physique in envy. I can perform any kind of press there is without betraying the least sign of passion or kindness.

HELENA: All right Jimmy.

JIMMY: Two years ago I couldn't even lift up my head — now I have more uplift than a film starlet.

HELENA: Jimmy, can we have one day, just one day, without tumbling over religion or politics?

CLIFF: Yes, change the record old boy, or pipe down.

JIMMY: (*rising*). Thought of the title for a new song today. It's called "My mother's in the madhouse — that's why I'm in love with you." The lyrics are catchy too. I was thinking we might work it into the act.

HELENA: Good idea.

JIMMY: I was thinking we'd scrub Jock and Day, and call ourselves something else. "And jocund day stands tiptoed on the misty mountain tops." It's too intellectual! Anyway, I shouldn't think people will want to be reminded of that peculiar man's plays after Harvard and Yale have finished with him. How about something bright and snappy? I know — What about — T. S. Eliot and Pam!

CLIFF: (*casually falling in with this familiar routine*). Mirth, mellerdy and madness!

JIMMY: (*sitting at the table R. and "strumming" it*). Bringing quips and strips for you!

They sing together.

"For we may be guilty, darling ... But we're both insane as well!" *Jimmy stands up, and rattles his lines off at almost unintelligible speed.* Ladies and gentlemen, as I was coming to the theatre tonight, I was passing through the stage door, and a man comes up to me, and 'e says:

CLIFF: 'Ere! Have you seen nobody?

JIMMY: Have I seen who?

CLIFF: Have you seen nobody?

JIMMY: Of course, I haven't seen nobody! Kindly don't waste my time! Ladies and gentlemen, a little recitation entitled "She said she was called a little Gidding, but she was more like a gelding iron!" Thank you "She said she was called little Gidding —"

CLIFF: Are you quite sure you haven't seen nobody?

JIMMY: Are you still here?

CLIFF: I'm looking for nobody!

JIMMY: *Will* you kindly go away! "She said she was called little Gidding —"

CLIFF: Well, I can't find nobody anywhere, and I'm supposed to give him this case!

JIMMY: Will you kindly stop interrupting *perlease!* Can't you see I'm trying to entertain these ladies and gentlemen? Who is this nobody you're talking about?

CLIFF: I was told to come here and gives this case to nobody.

JIMMY: You were told to come here and give this case to nobody.

CLIFF: That's right. And when I gave it to him, nobody would give me a shilling.

JIMMY: And when you gave it to him, nobody would give you a shilling.

CLIFF: That's right.

JIMMY: Well, what about it?

CLIFF: Nobody's not here!

JIMMY: Now, let me get this straight: when you say nobody's here, you don't mean nobody's here?

CLIFF: No.

JIMMY: No. You mean — nobody's here.

CLIFF: That's right.

JIMMY: Well, why didn't you say so before?

HELENA: (*not quite sure if this is really her cue*). Hey I You down there!

JIMMY: Oh, it goes on for hours yet, but never mind. What is it, sir?

HELENA: (*shouting*). I think your sketch stinks! I say — I think your sketch stinks!

JIMMY: He thinks it stinks. And, who, pray, might you be?

HELENA: Me? Oh — (*with mock modesty*) I'm nobody.

JIMMY: Then here's your bloody case!

He hurls a cushion at her, which hits the ironing board.

HELENA: My ironing board!

The two men do a Flanagan and Allen, moving slowly in step, as they sing.

Now there's a certain little lady, and you all know who I mean,
She may have been to Roedean, but to me she's still a queen.
Someday I'm goin' to marry her,
When times are not so bad,
Her mother doesn't care for me
So I'll "ave to ask 'er dad.
We'll build a little home for two,
And have some quite menage,
We'll send our kids to public school
And live on bread and marge.
Don't be afraid to sleep with your sweetheart,
Just because she's better than you.
Those forgotten middle-classes may have fallen on their noses,
But a girl who's true blue,
Will still have something left for you,
The angels up above, will know that you're in love
So don't be afraid to sleep with your sweetheart,
Just because she's better than you....
They call me Sydney,
Just because she's better than you.

But Jimmy has had enough of this gag by now, and he pushes Cliff away.

JIMMY: Your damned great feet! That's the second time you've kicked my ankle!
It's no good-Helena will have to do it. Go on, go and make some tea, and
we'll decide what we're going to do.

CLIFF: Make some yourself!

He pushes him back violently, Jimmy loses his balance, and falls over.

JIMMY: You rough bastard!

*He leaps up, and they grapple, falling on to the floor with a crash. They
roll about, grunting and gasping. Cliff manages to kneel on Jimmy's
chest.*

CLIFF: *{breathing heavily}*. I want to read the papers!

JIMMY: You're a savage, a hooligan! You really are! Do you know that! You
don't deserve to live in the same house with decent, sensitive people!

CLIFF: Are you going to dry up, or do I read the papers down here?

Jimmy makes a supreme effort, and Cliff topples to the floor.

JIMMY: You've made me wrench my guts!

He pushes the struggling Cliff down.

CLIFF: Look what you're doing! You're ripping my shirt. Get off!

JIMMY: Well, what do you want to wear a shirt for? *(Rising.)* A tough character
like you! Now go and make me some tea.

CLIFF: It's the only clean one I've got. Oh, you big oaf!

(Getting up from the floor, and appealing to Helena.)

Look! It's filthy!

HELENA: Yes, it is. He's stronger than he looks. If you like to take it off now, I'll wash it through for you. It'll be dry by the time we want to go out.

Cliff hesitates.

What's the matter, Cliff?

CLIFF: Oh, it'll be all right.

JIMMY: Give it to her, and quit moaning!

CLIFF: Oh, all right.

He takes it off, and gives it to her.

Thanks, Helena.

HELENA: *(taking it)*. Right. I won't be a minute with it.

She goes out. Jimmy flops into his armchair. R.

JIMMY: *(amused)*. You look like Marlon Brando or something. *(Slight pause.)* You don't care for Helena, do you?

CLIFF: You didn't seem very keen yourself once. *(Hesitating, then quickly.)* It's not the same, is it?

JIMMY: *(irritably)*. No, of course it's not the same, you idiot! It never is! Today's meal is always different from yesterday's and the last woman isn't the same as the one before. If you can't accept that, you're going to be pretty unhappy, my boy.

CLIFF: *(sits on the arm of his chair, and rubs his feet)*. Jimmy — I don't think I shall stay here much longer.

JIMMY: *(rather casually)*. Oh, why not?

CLIFF: *(picking up his tone)*. Oh, I don't know. I've just thought of trying somewhere different. The sweet-stall's all right, but I think I'd like to try something else. You're highly educated, and it suits you, but I need something a bit better.

JIMMY: Just as you like, my dear boy. It's your business, not mine.

CLIFF: And another thing — I think Helena finds it rather a lot of work to do with two chaps about the place. It won't be so much for her if there's just the two of you. Anyway, I think I ought to find some girl who'll just look after me.

JIMMY: Sounds like a good idea. Can't think who'd be stupid enough to team themselves up with you though. Perhaps Helena can think of somebody for you — one of her posh girl friends with lots of money, and no brains. That's what you want.

CLIFF: Something like that

JIMMY: Any idea what you're going to do?

CLIFF: Not much.

JIMMY: That sounds like you all right! Shouldn't think you'll last five minutes without me to explain the score to you.

CLIFF: (*grinning*). Don't suppose so.

JIMMY: You're such a scruffy little beast — I'll bet some respectable little madam from Pinner or Guildford gobbles you up in six months. She'll marry you, send you out to work, and you'll end up as clean as a new pin.

CLIFF: (*chuckling*). Yes, I'm stupid enough for that too!

JIMMY: (*to himself*) . I seem to spend my life saying good-bye.
Slight pause.

CLIFF: My feet hurt.

JIMMY: Try washing your socks. (*Slowly.*) It's a funny thing. You've been loyal, generous and a good friend. But I'm quite prepared to see you wander off, find a new home, and make out on your own. And all because of something I want from that girl downstairs, something I know in my heart she's incapable of giving. You're worth a half a dozen Helenas to me or to anyone. And, if you were in my place, you'd do the same thing. Right?

CLIFF: Right.

JIMMY: Why, why, why, why do we let these women bleed us to death? Have you ever had a letter, and on it is franked "Please Give Your Blood Generously"? Well, the Postmaster-General does that, on behalf of all the women of the world. I suppose people of our generation aren't able to die for good causes any longer. We had all that done for us, in the thirties and the forties, when we were still kids. (*In his familiar, semi-serious mood.*) There aren't any good, brave causes left. If the big bang does come, and we all get killed off, it won't be in aid of the old-fashioned, grand design. It'll just be for the Brave New-nothing-very-much-thank-you. About as pointless and inglorious as stepping in front of a bus. No, there's nothing left for it, me boy, but to let yourself be butchered by the women.
Enter Helena.

HELENA: Here you are, Cliff. (*Handing him the shirt.*)

CLIFF: Oh, thanks, Helena, very much. That's decent of you.

HELENA: Not at all. I should dry it over the gas — the fire in your room would be better. There won't be much room for it over that stove.

CLIFF: Right, I will. (*Crosses to door.*)

JIMMY: And hurry up about it, stupid. We'll all go out, and have a drink soon. (*To Helena.*) O.K.?

HELENA: O.K.

JIMMY: (*shouting to Cliff on his way out*). But make me some tea first, you madcap little Charlie.

She crosses down L.

JIMMY: Darling, I'm sick of seeing you behind that damned ironing board!

HELENA: (*wryly*). Sorry.

JIMMY: Get yourself glammed up, and we'll hit the town. See you've put a shroud over Mummy, I think you should have laid a Union Jack over it.

HELENA: Is anything wrong?

JIMMY: Oh, don't frown like that — you look like the presiding magistrate!

HELENA: How should I look?

JIMMY: As if you heart stirred a little when you looked at me.

HELENA: Oh, it does that all right.

JIMMY: Cliff tells me he's leaving us.

HELENA: I know. He told me last night.

JIMMY: Did he? I always seem to be at the end of the queue when they're passing information out.

HELENA: I'm sorry he's going.

JIMMY: Yes, so am I. He's a sloppy, irritating bastard, but he's got a big heart. You can forgive somebody almost anything for that. He's had to learn how to take it, and he knows how to hand it out. Come here.

He is sitting on the arm of his chair. She crosses to him, and they look at each other. Then she puts out her hand, and runs it over his head, fondling his ear and neck.

Right from that first night, you have always put out your hand to me first. As if you expected nothing, or worse than nothing, and didn't care. You made a good enemy, didn't you? What they call a worthy opponent. But then, when people put down their weapons, it doesn't mean they've necessarily stopped fighting.

HELENA: (*steadily*). I love you.

JIMMY: I think perhaps you do. Yes, I think perhaps you do. Perhaps it means something to lie with your victorious general in your arms. Especially, when he's heartily sick of the whole campaign, tired out, hungry and dry.

His tips find her fingers, and he kisses them. She presses his head against her.

You stood up, and came out to meet me. Oh, Helena —

His face comes up to hers, and they embrace fiercely.

Don't let anything go wrong!

HELENA: (*softly*). Oh, my darling —

JIMMY: Either you're with me or against me.

HELENA: I've always wanted you — always!

They kiss again.

JIMMY: T. S. Eliot and Pam, we'll make a good double. If you'll help me. I'll close that damned sweet-stall, and we'll start everything from scratch. What do you say? We'll get away from this place.

HELENA: (*nodding happily*). I say that's wonderful.

JIMMY: (*kissing her quickly*). Put all that junk away, and we'll get out. We'll get pleasantly, joyfully tiddly, we'll gaze at each other tenderly and lecherously in "The Builder's Arms", and then we'll come back here, and I'll make such love to you, you'll not care about anything else at all.

She moves away L., after kissing his hand.

HELENA: I'll just change out of your old shirt. (*Folding ironing board.*)

JIMMY: (*moving U.S. to door*). Right. I'll hurry up the little man.

But before he reaches the door, it opens and Alison enters. She wears a raincoat, her hair is untidy, and she looks rather ill. There is a stunned pause.

ALISON: (*quietly*). Hullo.

JIMMY: (*to Helena, after a moment*). Friend of yours to see you.

He goes out quickly, and the two women are left looking at each other.

QUICK CURTAIN

END OF SCENE ONE

SCENE TWO

It is a few minutes later. From CLIFF's room, across the landing, comes the sound of JIMMY's jazz trumpet. At rise of the Curtain, HELENA is standing L. of the table, pouring out a cup of tea. ALISON is sitting on the armchair R. She bends down and picks up JIMMY's pipe. Then she scoops up a little pile of ash from the floor, and drops it in the ashtray on the arm of the chair.

ALISON: He still smokes this foul old stuff. I used to hate it at first, but you get used to it.

HELENA: Yes.

ALISON: I went to the pictures last week, and some old man was smoking it in front, a few rows away. I actually got up, and sat right behind him.

HELENA: *(coming down with cup of tea)*. Here, have this. It usually seems to help.

ALISON: *(taking it)*. Thanks.

HELENA: Are you sure you feel all right now?

ALISON: *(nods)*. It was just — oh, everything. It's my own fault-entirely. I must be mad, coming here like this. I'm sorry, Helena.

HELENA: Why should you be sorry — you of all people?

ALISON: Because it was unfair and cruel of me to come back. I'm afraid a sense of timing is one of the things I seem to have learnt from Jimmy. But it's something that can be in very bad taste. *(Sips her tea.)* So many times, I've just managed to stop myself coming here — right at the last moment. Even today, when I went to the booking office at St. Pancras, it was like a charade, and I never believed that I'd let myself walk on to that train. And when I was on it, I got into a panic. I felt like a criminal. I told myself I'd turn round at the other end, and come straight back. I couldn't even believe that this place existed any more. But once I got here, there was nothing I could do. I had to convince myself that everything I remembered about this place had really happened to me once. *She lowers her cup, and her foot plays with the newspapers on the floor.* How many times in these past few months I've thought of the evenings we used to spend here in this room. Suspended and rather remote. You make a good cup of tea.

HELENA: *(sitting L. of table)*. Something Jimmy taught me.

ALISON: *(covering her face)*. Oh, why am I here! You must all wish me a thousand miles away!

HELENA: I don't wish anything of the kind. You've more right to be here than I.

ALISON: Oh, Helena, don't bring out the book of rules —

HELENA: You are his wife, aren't you? Whatever I have done, I've never been able to forget that fact. You have all the rights —

ALISON: Helena — even I gave up believing in the divine rights of marriage long ago. Even before I met Jimmy. They've got something different now — constitutional monarchy. You are where you are by consent. And if you start trying any strong arm stuff, you're out. And I'm out.

HELENA: Is that something you learnt from him?

ALISON: Don't make me feel like a blackmailer or something, please) I've done something foolish, and rather vulgar in coining here tonight. I regret it, and I detest myself for doing it. But I did not come here in order to gain anything. Whatever it was — hysteria or just macabre curiosity, I'd certainly no intention of making any kind of breach between you and Jimmy. You must believe that.

HELENA: Oh, I believe it all right. That's why everything seems more wrong and terrible than ever. You didn't even reproach me. You should have been outraged, but you weren't. (*She leans back, as if she wanted to draw back from herself.*) I feel so — *ashamed*,

ALISON: You talk as though he were something you'd swindled me out of —

HELENA: (*fiercely*). And you talk as if he were a book or something you pass around to anyone who happens to want it for five minutes. What's the matter with you? You sound as though you were quoting *him* all the time. I thought you told me once you couldn't bring yourself to believe in him.

ALISON: I don't think I ever believed in your way either.

HELENA: At least, I still believe in right and wrong! Not even the months in this madhouse have stopped me doing that. Even though everything I have done is wrong, at least I have known it was wrong.

ALISON: You loved him, didn't you? That's what you wrote, and told me.

HELENA: And it was true.

ALISON: It was pretty difficult to believe at the time. I couldn't understand it.

HELENA: I could hardly believe it myself.

ALISON: Afterwards, it wasn't quite so difficult. You used to say some pretty harsh things about him. Not that I was sorry to hear them — they were rather comforting then. But you even shocked me sometimes.

HELENA: I suppose I was a little over-emphatic. There doesn't seem much point in trying to explain everything, does there?

ALISON: Not really.

HELENA: Do you know — I have discovered what is wrong with Jimmy? It's very simple really. He was born out of his time.

ALISON: Yes. I know.

HELENA: There's no place for people like that any longer — in sex, or politics, or anything. That's why he's so futile. Sometimes, when I listen to him, I feel he thinks he's still in the middle of the French Revolution. And that's

where he ought to be, of course. He doesn't know where he is, or where he's going. He'll never do anything, and he'll never amount to anything.

ALISON: I suppose he's what you'd call an Eminent Victorian. Slightly comic — in a way ... We seem to have had this conversation before.

HELENA: Yes, I remember everything you said about him. It horrified me. I couldn't believe that you could have married someone like that. Alison — it's all over between Jimmy and me. I can see it now. I've got to get out. No — listen to me. When I saw you standing there tonight, I knew that it was all utterly wrong. That I didn't believe in any of this, and not Jimmy or anyone could make me believe otherwise. (*Rising.*) How could I have ever thought I could get away with it! He wants one world and I want another, and lying in that bed won't ever change it! I believe in good and evil, and I don't have to apologise for that. It's quite a modern, scientific belief now, so they tell me. And, by everything I have ever believed in, or wanted, what I have been doing is wrong and evil.

ALISON: Helena — you're not going to leave him?

HELENA: Yes, I am. (*Before Alison can interrupt, she goes on.*) Oh, I'm not stepping aside to let you come back. You can do what you like. Frankly, I think you'd be a fool — but that's your own business. I think I've given you enough advice.

ALISON: But he — he'll have no one.

HELENA: Oh, my dear, hell find somebody. He'll probably hold court here like one of the Renaissance popes. Oh, I know I'm throwing the book of rules at you, as you call it, but, believe me, you're never going to be happy without it. I tried throwing it away all these months, but I know now it just doesn't work. When you came in at that door, ill and tired and hurt, it was all over for me. You see — I didn't know about the baby. It was such a shock. It's like a judgment on us.

ALISON: You saw me, and I had to tell you what had happened. I lost the child. It's a simple fact.

There is no judgment, there's no blame —

HELENA: Maybe not. But I feel it just the same.

ALISON: But don't you see? It isn't logical!

HELENA: No, it isn't. (*Calmly.*) But I know it's right

The trumpet gets louder.

ALISON: Helena, (*going to her*) you mustn't leave him. He needs you, I know he needs you —

HELENA: Do you think so?

ALISON: Maybe you're not the right one for him — we're neither of us right —

HELENA: (*moving upstage*). Oh, why doesn't he stop that damned noise!

ALISON: He wants something quite different from us. What it is exactly I don't know — a kind of cross between a mother and a Greek courtesan, a henchwoman, a mixture of Cleopatra and Boswell. But give him a little longer —

HELENA: (*wrenching the door open*). Please! Will you stop that! I can't think!

There is a slight pause, and the trumpet goes on. She puts her hands to her head.

Jimmy, for God's sake!

It stops.

Jimmy, I want to speak to you.

JIMMY: (*off*), Is your friend still with you?

HELENA: Oh, don't be an idiot, and come in here! *She moves down L.*

ALISON: (*rising*). He doesn't want to see me.

HELENA: Stay where you are, and don't be silly. I'm sorry. It won't be very pleasant, but I've made up my mind to go, and I've got to tell him now.

Enter Jimmy.

JIMMY: Is this another of your dark plots? (*He looks at Alison.*) Hadn't she better sit down? She looks a bit ghastly.

HELENA: I'm so sorry, dear. Would you like some more tea, or an aspirin or something?

Alison shakes her head, and sits. She can't look at either of them.

(*to Jimmy, the old authority returning*). It's not very surprising, is it? She's been very ill, she's —

JIMMY: (*quietly*). You don't have to draw a diagram for me — I can see what's happened to her.

HELENA: And doesn't it mean anything to you?

JIMMY: I don't exactly relish the idea of anyone being ill, or in pain. It was my child too, you know. But (*he shrugs*) it isn't my first loss.

ALISON: (*on her breath*). It was mine.

He glances at her, but turns back to Helena quickly.

JIMMY: What are you looking so solemn about? What's she doing here?

ALISON: I'm sorry, I'm — (*Presses her hand over her mouth.*)

Helena crosses to Jimmy C, and grasps his hand.

HELENA: Don't please. Can't you see the condition she's in? She's done nothing, she's said nothing, none of it's her fault.

He takes his hand away, and moves away a little downstage.

JIMMY: What isn't her fault?

HELENA: Jimmy — I don't want a brawl, so please —

JIMMY: Let's hear it, shall we?

HELENA: Very well. I'm going downstairs to pack my things. If I hurry, I shall just catch the 7.15 to London.

They both look at him, but he simply leans forward against the table, not looking at either of them.

This is not Alison's doing — you must understand that. It's my own decision entirely. In fact, she's just been trying to talk me out of it. It's just that suddenly, tonight, I see what I have really known all along. That you can't be happy when what you're doing is wrong, or is hurting someone else. I suppose it could never have worked, anyway, but I do love you, Jimmy. I shall never love anyone as I have loved you. *(Turns away L.)* But I can't go on. *(Passionately and sincerely.)* I can't take part — in all this suffering. I can't!

She appeals to him for some reaction, but he only looks down at the table, and nods. Helena recovers, and makes an effort to regain authority.

(to Alison). You probably won't feel up to making that journey again tonight, but we can fix you up at an hotel before I go. There's about half an hour. I'll just make it.

She turns up to the door, but Jimmy's voice stops her.

JIMMY: *(in a low, resigned voice).* They all want to escape from the pain of being alive. And, most of all, from love. *(Crosses to the dressing table.)* I always knew something like this would turn up — some problem, like an ill wife — and it would be too much for those delicate, hot-house feelings of yours.

He sweeps up Helena's things from the dressing table, and crosses over to the wardrobe. Outside, the church bells start ringing.

It's no good trying to fool yourself about love. You can't fall into it like a soft job, without dirtying up your hands. *(Hands her the make-up things, which she takes. He opens the wardrobe.)* It takes muscle and guts. And if you can't bear the thought *(takes out a dress on a hanger)* of messing up your nice, clean soul, *(crossing back to her)* you'd better give up the whole idea of life, and become a saint. *(Puts the dress in her arms.)* Because you'll never make it as a human being. It's either this world or the next.

She looks at him for a moment, and then goes out quickly. He is shaken, and he avoids Alison's eyes, crossing to the window. He rests against it, then bangs his fist against the frame.

Oh, those bells!

The shadows are growing around them. Jimmy stands, his head against the window pane. Alison is huddled forward in the armchair R. Presently, she breaks the stillness, and rises to above the table.

ALISON: I'm ... sorry. I'll go now.

She starts to move upstage. But his voice pulls her up.

JIMMY: You never even sent any flowers to the funeral. Not — a little bunch of flowers. You had to deny me that too, didn't you?

She starts to move, but again he speaks.

The injustice of it is almost perfect! The wrong people going hungry, the wrong people being loved, the wrong people dying!

She moves to the gas stove. He turns to face her.

Was I really wrong to believe that there's a — a kind of — burning virility of mind and spirit that looks for something as powerful as itself? The heaviest, strongest creatures in this world seem to be the loneliest. Like the old bear, following his own breath in the dark forest. There's no warm pack, no herd to comfort him. That voice that cries out doesn't *have* to be a weakling's, does it? *He moves in a little.* Do you remember that first night I saw you at that grisly party? You didn't really notice me, but I was watching you all the evening. You seemed to have a wonderful relaxation of spirit. I knew that was what I wanted. You've got to be really brawny to have that kind of strength — the strength to relax. It was only after we were married that I discovered that it wasn't relaxation at all. In order to relax, you've first got to sweat your guts out. And, as far as you were concerned, you'd never had a hair out of place, or a bead of sweat anywhere.

A cry escapes from her, and her fist flies to her mouth. She moves down to below the table, leaning on it.

I may be a lost cause, but I thought if you loved me, it needn't matter.

She is crying silently. He moves down to face her.

ALISON: It doesn't matter! I was wrong, I was wrong! I don't want to be neutral, I don't want to be a saint. I want to be a lost cause. I want to be corrupt and futile!

All he can do is watch her helplessly. Her voice takes on a little strength, and rises.

Don't you understand? It's gone! It's gone! That — that helpless human being inside my body. I thought it was so safe, and secure in there. Nothing could take it from me. It was mine, my responsibility. But it's lost. *She slides down against the leg of the table to the floor.* All I wanted was to die. I never knew what it was like. I didn't know it could be like that! I was in pain, and all I could think of was you, and what I'd lost. *(Scarcely able to speak.)* I thought: if only — if only he could see me now, so stupid, and ugly and ridiculous. That is what he's been longing for me to feel. This is what he wants to splash about in! I'm in the fire, and I'm burning, and all I want is to die! It's cost him his child, and any others I might have had! But what does it matter — this is what he wanted from me!

She raises her face to him.

Don't you see I'm in the mud at last! I'm grovelling! I'm crawling! Oh, God —

She collapses at his feet. He stands, frozen for a moment, then he bends down and takes her shaking body in his arms. He shakes his head, and whispers:

JIMMY: Don't. Please don't. ... I can't —

She gasps for her breath against him.

You're all right. You're all right now. Please, I — I ... Not any more ...

She relaxes suddenly. He looks down at her, full of fatigue, and says with a kind of mocking, tender irony:

We'll be together in our bear's cave, and our squirrel's drey, and we'll live on honey, and nuts — lots and lots of nuts. And we'll sing songs about ourselves — about warm trees and snug caves, and lying in the sun. And you'll keep those big eyes on my fur, and help me keep my claws in order, because I'm a bit of a sappy, scruffy sort of a bear. And I'll see that you keep that sleek, bushy tail glistening as it should, because you're a very beautiful squirrel, but you're none too bright either, so we've got to be careful. There are cruel steel traps lying about everywhere, just waiting for rather mad, slightly satanic, and very timid little animals. Right?

Alison nods.

(pathetically). Poor squirrels!

ALISON: *(with the same comic emphasis).* Poor bears! *She laughs a little. Then looks at him very tenderly, and adds very, very softly.)* Oh, poor, poor bears!

Slides her arms around him.

CURTAIN