

Look Back in Anger Main Text

Writer: John Osborne | Generated: Jan 26, 2026

ACT I The Porters' one-room flat in a large Midland town. Early evening. April. The scene is a fairly large attic room, at the top of a large Victorian house. The ceiling slopes down quite sharply from L. to R. Down R. are two small low windows. In front of these is a dark oak dressing table. Most of the furniture is simple, and rather old. Up R. is a double bed, running the length of most of the back wall, the rest of which is taken up with a shelf of books. Down R. below the bed is a heavy chest of drawers, covered with books, neckties and odds and ends, including a large, tattered toy teddy bear and soft, woolly squirrel. Up L. is a door. Below this a small wardrobe. Most of the wall L. is taken up with a high, oblong window. This looks out on to the landing, but light comes through it from a skylight beyond. Below the wardrobe is a gas stove, and, beside this, a wooden food cupboard, on which is a small, portable radio. Down C. is a sturdy dining table and three chairs, and, below this, L. and R., two deep, shabby leather armchairs. AT RISE OF CURTAIN, JIMMY and CLIFF are seated in the two armchairs R. and L., respectively. All that we can see of either of them is two pairs of legs, sprawled way out beyond the newspapers which hide the rest of them from sight. They are both reading. Beside them, and between them, is a jungle of newspapers and weeklies. 2 When we do eventually see them, we find that JIMMY is a tall, thin young man about twenty-five, wearing a very worn tweed jacket and flannels. Clouds of smoke fill the room from the pipe he is smoking. He is a disconcerting mixture of sincerity and cheerful malice, of tenderness and freebooting cruelty; restless, importunate, full of: pride, a combination which alienates the sensitive and insensitive alike. Blistering honesty, or apparent honesty, like his, makes few friends. To many he may seem sensitive to the point of vulgarity. To others, he is simply a loudmouth. To be as vehement as he is is to be almost non-committal. CLIFF is the same age, short, dark, big boned, wearing a pullover and grey, new, but very creased trousers. He is easy and relaxed, almost to lethargy, with the rather sad, natural intelligence of the self-taught, If JIMMY alienates love, CLIFF seems to exact it—demonstrations of it, at least, even from the cautious. He is a soothing, natural counterpoint to JIMMY. Standing L., below the food cupboard, is ALISON. She is leaning over an ironing board. Beside her is a pile of clothes. Hers is the most elusive personality to catch in the uneasy polyphony of these three people. She is turned in a different key, a key of well-bred malaise that is often drowned in the robust orchestration of the other two. Hanging over the grubby, but expensive, skirt she is wearing is a cherry red shirt of JIMMY'S, but she manages somehow to look quite elegant in it. She is roughly the same age as

the men. Somehow, their combined physical oddity makes her beauty more striking than it really is. She is tall, slim, dark. The bones of her face are long and delicate. There is a surprising reservation about her eyes, which are so large and deep they should make equivocation impossible. The room is still, smoke filled. The only sound is the occasional thud of ALISON'S iron on the board. It is one of those chilly Spring evenings, all cloud and shadows. Presently, JIMMY throws his paper down. JIMMY: Why do I do this every Sunday? Even the book reviews seem to be the same as last week's. Different books—same reviews. Have you finished that one yet? CLIFF: Not yet. JIMMY: I've just read three whole columns on the English Novel. Half of it's in French. Do the Sunday papers make you feel ignorant? CLIFF: Not 'arf. JIMMY: Well, you are ignorant. You're just a peasant. (To Alison.) What about you? You're not a peasant are you? ALISON: (absently). What's that? JIMMY: I said do the papers make you feel you're not so brilliant after all? ALISON: Oh—I haven't read them yet. JIMMY: I didn't ask you that. I said—CLIFF: Leave the poor girlie alone. She's busy. JIMMY: Well, she can talk, can't she? You can talk, can't you? You can express an opinion. Or does the White Woman's Burden make it impossible to think? ALISON: I'm sorry. I wasn't listening properly. JIMMY: You bet you weren't listening. Old Porter talks, and everyone turns over and goes to sleep. And Mrs. Porter gets 'em all going with the first yawn. CLIFF: Leave her alone, I said. JIMMY: (shouting). All right, dear. Go back to sleep. It was only me talking. You know? Talking? Remember? I'm sorry. CLIFF: Stop yelling. I'm trying to read. JIMMY: Why do you bother? You can't understand a word of it. CLIFF: Uh huh. JIMMY: You're too ignorant. CLIFF: Yes, and uneducated. Now shut up, will you? 3 JIMMY: Why don't you get my wife to explain it to you? She's educated. (To her.) That's right, isn't it? CLIFF: (kicking out at him from behind his paper). Leave her alone, I said. JIMMY: DO that again, you Welsh ruffian, and I'll pull your ears off. He bangs Cliff's paper out of his hands. CLIFF: (leaning forward). Listen—I'm trying to better myself. Let me get on with it, you big, horrible man. Give it me. (Puts his hand out for paper.) ALISON: Oh, give it to him, Jimmy, for heaven's sake! I can't think! CLIFF: Yes, come on, give me the paper. She can't think. JIMMY: Can't think! (Throws the paper back at him.) She hasn't had a thought for years! Have you? ALISON: No. JIMMY: (Picks up a weekly.) I'm getting hungry. ALISON: Oh no, not already! CLIFF: He's a bloody pig. JIMMY: I'm not a pig. I just like food—that's all. CLIFF: Like it! You're like a sexual maniac—only with you it's food. You'll end up in the News of the World, boyo, you wait. James Porter, aged twenty-five, was bound over last week after pleading guilty to interfering with a small cabbage and two tins of beans on his way home from the Builder's Arms. The accused said he hadn't been feeling well for some time, and had been having black-outs. He asked for his good record as an air-raid warden, second class, to be taken into account. JIMMY: (Grins.) Oh, yes, yes, yes. I like to eat I'd like to live too. Do you mind? CLIFF: Don't see any use in your eating at all. You never get any fatter. JIMMY: People like me don't get fat. I've tried to tell you before. We just burn everything up. Now shut up while I read. You can make me some

more tea. CLIFF: Good God, you've just had a great potful! I only had one cup. JIMMY: Like hell! Make some more. CLIFF: (to Alison). Isn't that right? Didn't I only have one cup? ALISON: (without looking up). That's right. CLIFF: There you are. And she only had one cup too. I saw her. You guzzled the lot. JIMMY: (reading his weekly). Put the kettle on. CLIFF: Put it on yourself. You've creased up my paper. JIMMY: I'm the only one who knows how to treat a paper, or anything else, in this house. (Picks up another paper.) Girl here wants to know whether her boy friend will lose all respect for her if she gives him what he asks for. Stupid bitch. CLIFF: Just let me get at her, that's all. JIMMY: Who buys this damned thing? (Throws it down.) Haven't you read the other posh paper yet? CLIFF: Which? JIMMY: Well, there are only two posh papers on a Sunday—the one you're reading, and this one. Come on, let me have that one, and you take this. CLIFF: Oh, all right. They exchange. I was only reading the Bishop of Bromley. {Puts out his hand to Alison.) How are you, dullin'? ALISON: All right thank you, dear. CLIFF: (grasping her hand). Why don't you leave all that, and sit down for a bit? You look tired. ALISON: (smiling). I haven't much more to do. CLIFF: (kisses her hand, and puts her fingers in his mouth). She's a beautiful girl, isn't she? JIMMY: That's what they all tell me. His eyes met hers. CLIFF: It's a lovely, delicious paw you've got Ummmmm. I'm going to bite it off. ALISON: Don't! I'll burn his shirt. 4 JIMMY: Give her her finger back, and don't be so sickening. What's the Bishop of Bromley say? CLIFF: (letting go of Alison). Oh, it says here that he makes a very moving appeal to all Christians to do all they can to assist in the manufacture of the H-Bomb. JIMMY: Yes, well, that's quite moving, I suppose. (To Alison.) Are you moved, my darling? ALISON: Well, naturally. JIMMY: There you are: even my wife is moved. I ought to send the Bishop a subscription. Let's see. What else does he say. Dumdidumdidum-didum. Ah yes. He's upset because someone has suggested that he supports the rich against the poor. He says he denies the difference of class distinctions. "This idea has been persistently and wickedly fostered by—the working classes!" Well! He looks up at both of them for reaction, but Cliff is reading, and Alison is intent on her ironing. JIMMY: (to Cliff). Did you read that bit? CLIFF: Um? He has lost them, and he knows it, but he won't leave it. JIMMY: (to Alison). You don't suppose your father could have written it, do you? ALISON: Written what? JIMMY: What I just read out, of course. ALISON: Why should my father have written it? JIMMY: Sounds rather like Daddy, don't you think? ALISON: Does it? JIMMY: IS the Bishop of Bromley his nom de plume, do you think? CLIFF: Don't take any notice of him. He's being offensive. And it's so easy for him. JIMMY: (quickly). Did you read about the woman who went to the mass meeting of a certain American evangelist at Earls Court? She went forward, to declare herself for love or whatever it is, and, in the rush of converts to get to the front, she broke four ribs and got kicked in the head. She was yelling her head off in agony, but with 50,000 people putting all they'd got into "Onward Christian Soldiers", nobody even knew she was there. He looks up sharply for a response, but there isn't any. Sometimes, I wonder if there isn't something wrong with me. What about that tea? CLIFF: (still behind

paper). What tea? JIMMY: Put the kettle on. Alison looks up at him. ALISON: Do you want some more tea? JIMMY: I don't know. No, I don't think so. ALISON: Do you want some, Cliff? JIMMY: NO, he doesn't. How much longer will you be doing that? ALISON: Won't be long. JIMMY: God, how I hate Sundays! It's always so depressing, always the same. We never seem to get any further, do we? Always the same ritual. Reading the papers, drinking tea, ironing, A few more hours, and another week gone. Our youth is slipping away. Do you know that? CLIFF: (throws down paper). What's that? JIMMY: (casually). Oh, nothing, nothing. Damn you, damn both of you, damn them all. CLIFF: Let's go to the pictures. (To Alison.) What do you say, lovely? ALISON: I don't think I'll be able to. Perhaps Jimmy would like to go. (To Jimmy.) Would you like to? JIMMY: And have my enjoyment ruined by the Sunday night jobs in the front row? No, thank you. (Pause.) Did you read Priestley's piece this week? Why on earth I ask, I don't know. I know damned well you haven't. Why do I spend ninepence 5 on that damned paper every week? Nobody reads it except me. Nobody can be bothered. No one can raise themselves out of their delicious sloth. You two will drive me round the bend soon—I know it, as sure as I'm sitting here. I know you're going to drive me mad. Oh heavens, how I long for a little ordinary human enthusiasm. Just enthusiasm —that's all. I want to hear a warm, thrilling voice cry out Hallelujah! (He bangs his breast theatrically.) Hallelujah! I'm alive! I've an idea. Why don't we have a little game? Let's pretend that we're human beings, and that we're actually alive. Just for a while. What do you say? Let's pretend we're human. (He looks from one to the other.) Oh, brother, it's such a long time since I was with anyone who got enthusiastic about anything. CLIFF: What did he say? JIMMY: (resentful of being dragged away from his pursuit of Alison). What did who say? CLIFF: Mr. Priestley. JIMMY: What he always says, I suppose. He's like Daddy—still casting well-fed glances back to the Edwardian twilight from his comfortable, disenfranchised wilderness. What the devil have you done to those trousers? CLIFF: Done? JIMMY: Are they the ones you bought last week-end? Look at them. Do you see what he's done to those new trousers? ALISON: You are naughty, Cliff. They look dreadful. JIMMY: YOU spend good money on a new pair of trousers, and then sprawl about in them like a savage. What do you think you're going to do when I'm not around to look after you? Well, what are you going to do? Tell me? CLIFF: (grinning). I don't know. (To Alison.) What am I going to do, lovely? ALISON: You'd better take them off. JIMMY: Yes, go on. Take 'em off. And I'll kick your behind for you. ALISON: I'll give them a press while I've got the iron on. CLIFF: O.K. (Starts taking them off.) I'll just empty the pockets. (Takes out keys, matches, handkerchief.) JIMMY: Give me those matches, will you? CLIFF: Oh, you're not going to start up that old pipe again, are you? It stinks the place out. (To Alison.) Doesn't it smell awful? Jimmy grabs the matches, and lights up. ALISON: I don't mind it. I've got used to it. JIMMY: She's a great one for getting used to things. If she were to die, and wake up in paradise-after the first five minutes, she'd have got used to it. CLIFF: (hands her the trousers). Thank you, lovely. Give me a cigarette, will you? JIMMY: Don't

give him one. CLIFF: I can't stand the stink of that old pipe any longer. I must have a cigarette. JIMMY: I thought the doctor said no cigarettes? CLIFF: Oh, why doesn't he shut up? JIMMY: All right. They're your ulcers. Go ahead, and have a bellyache, if that's what you want. I give up. I give up. I'm sick of doing things for people. And all for what? Alison gives Cliff a cigarette. They both light up, and she goes on with her ironing. Nobody thinks, nobody cares. No beliefs, no convictions and no enthusiasm. Just another Sunday evening. Cliff sits down again, in his pullover and shorts. Perhaps there's a concert on. (Picks up Radio Times) Ah. (Nudges Cliff with his foot.) Make some more tea. Cliff grunts. He is reading again. Oh, yes. There's a Vaughan Williams. Well, that's something, anyway. Something strong, something simple, something English. I suppose people like me aren't supposed to be very patriotic. Somebody said—what was it— we get our cooking from Paris (that's a laugh), our politics from Moscow, and our morals from Port Said. Something like that, anyway. Who was it? (Pause.) Well, you wouldn't know anyway. I hate to admit it, but I think I can understand how her Daddy must have felt when he came back from India, after all those years away. The old Edwardian 6 brigade do make their brief little world look pretty tempting. All homemade cakes and croquet, bright ideas, bright uniforms. Always the same picture: high summer, the long days in the sun, slim volumes of verse, crisp linen, the smell of starch. What a romantic picture. Phoney too, of course. It must have rained sometimes. Still, even I regret it somehow, phoney or not. If you've no world of your own, it's rather pleasant to regret the passing of someone else's. I must be getting sentimental. But I must say it's pretty dreary living in the American Age—unless you're an American of course. Perhaps all our children will be Americans. That's a thought isn't it? He gives Cliff a kick, and shouts at him. I said that's a thought! CLIFF: You did? JIMMY: You sit there like a lump of dough. I thought you were going to make me some tea. Cliff groans. Jimmy turns to Alison. Is your friend Webster coming tonight? ALISON: He might drop in. You know what he is. JIMMY: Well, I hope he doesn't. I don't think I could take Webster tonight. ALISON: I thought you said he was the only person who spoke your language. JIMMY: SO he is. Different dialect but same language I like him. He's got bite, edge, drive ALISON: Enthusiasm. JIMMY: You've got it. When he comes here, I begin to feel exhilarated. He doesn't like me, but he gives me something, which is more than I get from most people. Not since ALISON: Yes, we know. Not since you were living with Madeline. She folds some of the clothes she has already ironed, crosses to the bed with them. CLIFF: (behind paper again). Who's Madeline? ALISON: Oh, wake up, dear. You've heard about Madeline enough times. She was his mistress. Remember? When he was fourteen. Or was it thirteen? JIMMY: Eighteen. ALISON: He owes just about everything to Madeline. CLIFF: I get mixed up with all your women. Was she the one all those years older than you? JIMMY: Ten years. CLIFF: Proper little Marchbanks, you are! JIMMY: What time's that concert on? (Checks paper) CLIFF: (yawns). Oh, I feel so sleepy. Don't feel like standing behind that blinking sweet-stall again tomorrow. Why don't you do it on your own, and let me sleep in?

JIMMY: I've got to be at the factory first thing, to get some more stock, so you'll have to put it up on your own. Another five minutes. Alison has returned to her ironing board. She stands with her arms folded, smoking, staring thoughtfully. She had more animation in her little finger than you two put together. CLIFF: Who did? ALISON: Madeline. JIMMY: Her curiosity about things, and about people was staggering. It wasn't just a naive nosiness. With her, it was simply the delight of being awake, and watching. Alison starts to press Cliff's trousers. CLIFF: (behind paper). Perhaps I will make some tea, after all. JIMMY: (quietly). Just to be with her was an adventure. Even to sit on the top of a bus with her was like setting out with Ulysses. CLIFF: Wouldn't have said Webster was much like Ulysses. He's an ugly little devil. 7 JIMMY: I'm not talking about Webster, stupid. He's all right though, in his way. A sort of female Emily Bronte. He's the only one of your friends (to Alison) who's worth tuppence, anyway. I'm surprised you get on with him. ALISON: So is he, I think. JIMMY: (rising to window R., and looking out). He's not only got guts, but sensitivity as well. That's about the rarest combination I can think of. None of your other friends have got either. ALISON: (very quietly and earnestly). Jimmy, please— don't go on. He turns and looks at her. The tired appeal in her voice has pulled him up suddenly. But he soon gathers himself for a new assault. He walks C, behind Cliff, and stands, looking down at his head. JIMMY: Your friends—there's a shower for you. CLIFF: (mumbling). Dry up. Let her get on with my trousers. JIMMY: (musingly). Don't think I could provoke her. Nothing I could do would provoke her. Not even if I were to drop dead. CLIFF: Then drop dead. JIMMY: They're either militant like her Mummy and Daddy. Militant, arrogant and full of malice. Or vague. She's somewhere between the two. CLIFF: Why don't you listen to that concert of yours? And don't stand behind me. That blooming droning on behind me gives me a funny feeling down the spine. Jimmy gives his ears a twist and Cliff roars with pain. Jimmy grins back at him. That hurt, you rotten sadist! (To Alison.) I wish you'd kick his head in for him. JIMMY: (moving in between them). Have you ever seen her brother? Brother Nigel? The straight-backed, chinless wonder from Sandhurst? I only met him once myself. He asked me to step outside when I told his mother she was evil minded. CLIFF: And did you? JIMMY: Certainly not. He's a big chap. Well, you've never heard so many well-bred commonplaces come from beneath the same bowler hat. The Platitude from Outer Space—that's brother Nigel. He'll end up in the Cabinet one day, make no mistake. But somewhere at the back of that mind is the vague knowledge that he and his pals have been plundering and fooling everybody for generations. (Going upstage, and turning.) Now Nigel is just about as vague as you can get without being actually invisible. And invisible politicians aren't much use to anyone—not even to his supporters! And nothing is more vague about Nigel than his knowledge. His knowledge of life and ordinary human beings is so hazy, he really deserves some sort of decoration for it— a medal inscribed "For Vaguery in the Field". But it wouldn't do for him to be troubled by any stabs of conscience, however vague. (Moving down again.) Besides, he's a patriot and an

Englishman, and he doesn't like the idea that he may have been selling out his countryman all these years, so what does he do? The only thing he can do—seek sanctuary in his own stupidity. The only way to keep things as much like they always have been as possible, is to make any alternative too much for your poor, tiny brain to grasp. It takes some doing nowadays. It really does. But they knew all about character building at Nigel's school, and he'll make it all right. Don't you worry, he'll make it. And, what's more, he'll do it better than anybody else! There is no sound, only the plod of Alison's iron. Her eyes are fixed on what she is doing. Cliff stares at the floor. His cheerfulness has deserted him for the moment. Jimmy is rather shakily triumphant. He cannot allow himself to look at either of them to catch their response to his rhetoric, so he moves across to the window, to recover himself, and look out. It's started to rain. That's all it needs. This room and the rain. He's been cheated out of his response, but he's got to draw blood somehow, (conversationally). Yes, that's the little woman's family. You know Mummy and Daddy, of course. And don't let the Marquess of Queensberry manner fool you. They'll kick you in the groin while you're handing your hat to the maid. As for Nigel and Alison — (In a reverent, Stuart Hibberd voice.) Nigel and Alison. They're what they sound like: sycophantic, phlegmatic and pusillanimous. CLIFF: I'll bet that concert's started by now. Shall I put it on? 8 JIMMY: I looked up that word the other day. It's one of those words I've never been quite sure of, but always thought I knew. CLIFF: What was that? JIMMY: I told you—pusillanimous. Do you know what it means? Cliff shakes his head. Neither did I really. All this time, I have been married to this woman, this monument to non-attachment, and suddenly I discover that there is actually a word that sums her up. Not just an adjective in the English language to describe her with—it's her name! Pusillanimous! It sounds like some fleshy Roman matron, doesn't it? The Lady Pusillanimous seen here with her husband Sextus, on their way to the Games. Cliff looks troubled, and glances uneasily at Alison. Poor old Sextus! If he were put into a Hollywood film, he's so unimpressive, they'd make some poor British actor play the part. He doesn't know it, but those beefcake Christians will make off with his wife in the wonder of stereophonic sound before the picture's over. Alison leans against the board, and closes her eyes. The Lady Pusillanimous has been promised a brighter easier world than old Sextus can ever offer her. Hi, Pusey! What say we get the hell down to the Arena, and maybe feed ourselves to a couple of lions, huh? ALISON: God help me, if he doesn't stop, I'll go out of my mind in a minute. JIMMY: Why don't you? That would be something, anyway. (Crosses to chest of drawers R.) But I haven't told you what it means yet, have I? (Picks up dictionary.) I don't have to tell her —she knows. In fact, if my pronunciation is at fault, she'll probably wait for a suitably public moment to correct it. Here it is. I quote: Pusillanimous. Adjective. Wanting of firmness of mind, of small courage, having a little mind, mean spirited, cowardly, timid of mind. From the Latin pusillus, very little, and animus, the mind. (Slams the book shut.) That's my wife! That's her isn't it? Behold the Lady Pusillanimous. (Shouting hoarsely.) Hi, Pusey!

When's your next picture? Jimmy watches her, waiting for her to break. For no more than a flash, Alison's face seems to contort, and it looks as though she might throw her head back, and scream. But it passes in a moment. She is used to these carefully rehearsed attacks, and it doesn't look as though he will get his triumph tonight. She carries on with her ironing. Jimmy crosses, and switches on the radio. The Vaughan Williams concert has started. He goes back to his chair, leans back in it, and closes his eyes. ALISON: (handing Cliff his trousers). There you are, dear. They're not very good, but they'll do for now. Cliff gets up and puts them on. CLIFF: Oh, that's lovely. ALISON: NOW try and look after them. I'll give them a real press later on. CLIFF: Thank you, you beautiful, darling girl. He puts his arms round her waist, and kisses her. She smiles, and gives his nose a tug. Jimmy watches from his chair. ALISON: (to Cliff). Let's have a cigarette, shall we? CLIFF: That's a good idea. Where are they? ALISON: On the stove. Do you want one Jimmy? JIMMY: NO thank you, I'm trying to listen. Do you mind? CLIFF: Sorry, your lordship. He puts a cigarette in Alison's mouth, and one in his own, and lights up. Cliff sits down, and picks up his paper. Alison goes back to her board. Cliff throws down paper, picks up another, and thumbs through that. JIMMY: Do you have to make all that racket? CLIFF: Oh, sorry. 9 JIMMY: It's quite a simple thing, you know—turning over a page. Anyway, that's my paper. (Snatches it away.) CLIFF: Oh, don't be so mean! JIMMY: Price ninepence, obtainable from any newsagent's. Now let me hear the music, for God's sake. Pause. (to Alison). Are you going to be much longer doing that? ALISON: Why? JIMMY: Perhaps you haven't noticed it, but it's interfering with the radio. ALISON: I'm sorry. I shan't be much longer. A pause. The iron mingles with the music. Cliff shifts restlessly in his chair, Jimmy watches Alison, his foot beginning to twitch dangerously. Presently, he gets up quickly, crossing below Alison to the radio, and turns it off. What did you do that for? JIMMY: I wanted to listen to the concert, that's all. ALISON: Well, what's stopping you? JIMMY: Everyone's making such a din—that's what's stopping me. ALISON: Well, I'm very sorry, but I can't just stop everything because you want to listen to music. JIMMY: Why not? ALISON: Really, Jimmy, you're like a child. JIMMY: Don't try and patronise me. (Turning to Cliff.) She's so clumsy. I watch for her to do the same things every night. The way she jumps on the bed, as if she were stamping on someone's face, and draws the curtains back with a great clatter, in that casually destructive way of hers. It's like someone launching a battleship. Have you ever noticed how noisy women are? (Crosses below chairs to L.C.) Have you? The way they kick the floor about, simply walking over it? Or have you watched them sitting at their dressing tables, dropping their weapons and banging down their bits of boxes and brushes and lipsticks? He faces her dressing table. I've watched her doing it night after night. When you see a woman in front of her bedroom mirror, you realise what a refined sort of a butcher she is. (Turns in.) Did you ever see some dirty old Arab, sticking his fingers into some mess of lamb fat and gristle? Well, she's just like that. Thank God they don't have many women surgeons! Those primitive hands would have your guts out in no time. Flip! Out it

comes, like the powder out of its box. Flop! Back it goes, like the powder puff on the table. CLIFF: (grimacing cheerfully). Ugh! Stop it! JIMMY: (moving upstage). She'd drop your guts like hair clips and fluff all over the floor. You've got to be fundamentally insensitive to be as noisy and as clumsy as that. He moves C, and leans against the table, I had a flat underneath a couple of girls once. You heard every damned thing those bastards did, all day and night. The most simple, everyday actions were a sort of assault course on your sensibilities. I used to plead with them. I even got to screaming the most ingenious obscenities I could think of, up the stairs at them. But nothing, nothing, would move them. With those two, even a simple visit to the lavatory sounded like a medieval siege. Oh, they beat me in the end—I had to go. I expect they're still at it. Or they're probably married by now, and driving some other poor devils out of their minds. Slamming their doors, stamping their high heels, banging their irons and saucepans—the eternal flaming racket of the female. Church bells start ringing outside. JIMMY: Oh, hell! Now the bloody bells have started! He rushes to the window. Wrap it up, will you? Stop ringing those bells! There's somebody going crazy in here! I don't want to hear them! ALISON: Stop shouting! (Recovering immediately.) You'll have Miss Drury up here. JIMMY: I don't give a damn about Miss Drury—that mild old gentlewoman doesn't fool me, even if she takes in you two. She's an old robber. 10 She gets more than enough out of us for this place every week. Anyway, she's probably in church, (points to the window)swinging on those bloody bells! Cliff goes to the window, and closes it. CLIFF: Come on now, be a good boy. I'll take us all out, and we'll have a drink. JIMMY: They're not open yet. It's Sunday. Remember? Anyway, it's raining. CLIFF: Well, shall we dance? He pushes Jimmy round the floor, who is past the mood for this kind of fooling. Do you come here often? JIMMY: Only in the mating season. All right, all right, very funny. He tries to escape, but Cliff holds him like a vice. Let me go. CLIFF: Not until you've apologised for being so nasty to everyone. Do you think bosoms will be in or out, this year? JIMMY: Your teeth will be out in a minute, if you don't let go! He makes a great effort to wrench himself free, but Cliff hangs on. They collapse to the floor C, below the table, struggling. Alison carries on with her ironing. This is routine, but she is getting close to breaking point, all the same. Cliff manages to break away, and finds himself in front of the ironing board. Jimmy springs up. They grapple. ALISON: Look out, for heaven's sake! Oh, it's more like a zoo every day! Jimmy makes a frantic, deliberate effort, and manages to push Cliff on to the ironing board, and into Alison. The board collapses. Cliff falls against her, and they end up in a heap on the floor. Alison cries out in pain. Jimmy looks down at them, dazed and breathless. CLIFF: (picking himself up). She's hurt. Are you all right? ALISON:Well, does it look like it! CLIFF: She's burnt her arm on the iron. JIMMY: Darling, I'm sorry. ALISON: Get out! JIMMY: I'm sorry, believe me. You think I did it on pur— ALISON: (her head shaking helplessly.) Clear out of my sight! He stares at her uncertainly. Cliff nods to him, and he turns and goes out of the door. CLIFF: Come and sit down. He leads her to the armchair. R. You look a bit white. Are

you all right? ALISON: Yes. I'm all right now. CLIFF: Let's have a look at your arm. (Examines it) Yes, it's quite red. That's going to be painful. What should I do with it? ALISON: Oh, it's nothing much. A bit of soap on it will do. I never can remember what you do with burns. CLIFF: I'll just pop down to the bathroom and get some. Are you sure you're all right? ALISON: Yes. CLIFF: (crossing to door). Won't be a minute. EXIT. She leans back in the chair, and looks up at the ceiling. She breathes in deeply, and brings her hands up to her face. She winces as she feels the pain in her arm, and she lets it fall. She runs her hand through her hair. ALISON: (in a clenched whisper). Oh, God! Cliff re-enters with a bar of soap. CLIFF: It's this scented muck. Do you think it'll be all right? ALISON: That'll do. 11 CLIFF: Here we are then. Let's have your arm. He kneels down beside her, and she holds out her arm. I've put it under the tap. It's quite soft. I'll do it ever so gently. Very carefully, he rubs the soap over the burn. All right? (She nods.) You're a brave girl. ALISON: I don't feel very brave. (Tears harshening her voice) I really don't, Cliff. I don't think I can take much more. (Turns her head away.) I think I feel rather sick. CLIFF: All over now. (Puts the soap down.) Would you like me to get you something? She shakes her head. He sits on the arm of the chair, and puts his arm round her. She leans her head back on to him. Don't upset yourself, lovely. He massages the back of her neck, and she lets her head fall forward. ALISON: Where is he? CLIFF: In my room. ALISON: What's he doing? CLIFF: Lying on the bed. Reading, I think. (Stroking her neck.) That better? She leans back, and closes her eyes again. ALISON: Bless you. He kisses the top of her head. CLIFF: I don't think I'd have the courage to live on my own again—in spite of everything. I'm pretty rough, and pretty ordinary really, and I'd seem worse on my own. And you get fond of people too, worse luck. ALISON: I don't think I want anything more to do with. love. Any more. I can't take it on. CLIFF: You're too young to start giving up. Too young, and too lovely. Perhaps I'd better put a bandage on that—do you think so? ALISON: There's some on my dressing table. Cliff crosses to the dressing table R. I keep looking back, as far as I remember, and I can't think what it was to feel young, really young. Jimmy said the same thing to me the other day. I pretended not to be listening—because I knew that would hurt him, I suppose. And—of course—he got savage, like tonight. But I knew just what he meant. I suppose it would have been so easy to say "Yes, darling, I know just what you mean. I know what you're feeling." (Shrugs.) It's those easy things that seem to be so impossible with us. Cliff stands down R., holding the bandage, his back to her. CLIFF: I'm wondering how much longer I can go on watching you two tearing the insides out of each other. It looks pretty ugly sometimes. ALISON: YOU wouldn't seriously think of leaving us, would you? CLIFF: I suppose not. (Crosses to her.) ALISON: I think I'm frightened. If only I knew what was going to happen. CLIFF: (kneeling on the arm of her chair). Give it here. (She holds out her arm.) Yell out if I hurt you. (He bandages it for her.) ALISON: (staring at her outstretched arm) . Cliff— CLIFF: Um? (Slight pause.) What is it, lovely? ALISON: Nothing. CLIFF: I said: what is it? ALISON: You see— (Hesitates.) I'm pregnant. CLIFF: (after a few moments). I'll

need some scissors. ALISON: They're over there. CLIFF: (crossing to the dressing table). That is something, isn't it? When did you find this out? ALISON: Few days ago. It was a bit of a shock. CLIFF: Yes; I dare say. ALISON: After three years of married life, I have to get caught out now. CLIFF: None of us infallible, I suppose. (Crosses to her.) Must say I'm surprised though. 12 ALISON: It's always been out of the question. What with—this place, and no money, and oh—everything. He's resented it, I know. What can you do? CLIFF: YOU haven't told him yet. ALISON: Not yet. CLIFF: What are you going to do? ALISON: I've no idea. CLIFF: (having cut her bandage, he starts tying it). That too tight? ALISON: Fine, thank you. She rises, goes to the ironing board, folds it up, and leans it against the food cupboard R. CLIFF: Is it... Is it... ? ALISON: Too late to avert the situation? (Places the iron on the rack of the stove.) I'm not certain yet. Maybe not. If not, there won't be any problem, will there? CLIFF: And if it is too late? Her face is turned away from him. She simply shakes her head. Why don't you tell him now? She kneels down to pick up the clothes on the floor, and folds them up. After all, he does love you. You don't need me to tell you that. ALISON: Can't you see? He'll suspect my motives at once. He never stops telling himself that I know how vulnerable he is. Tonight it might be all right—we'd make love. But later, we'd both lie awake, watching for the light to come through that little window, and dreading it. In the morning, he'd feel hoaxed, as if I were trying to kill him in the worst way of all. He'd watch me growing bigger every day, and I wouldn't dare to look at him. CLIFF: YOU may have to face it, lovely. ALISON: Jimmy's got his own private morality, as you know. What my mother calls "loose". It is pretty free, of course, but it's very harsh too. You know, it's funny, but we never slept together before we were married. CLIFF: It certainly is—knowing him! ALISON: We knew each other such a short time, everything moved at such a pace, we didn't have much opportunity. And, afterwards, he actually taunted me with my virginity. He was quite angry about it, as if I had deceived him in some strange way. He seemed to think an untouched woman would defile him. CLIFF: I've never heard you talking like this about him. He'd be quite pleased. ALISON: Yes, he would. She gets up, the clothes folded over her arm. Do you think he's right? CLIFF: What about? ALISON: Oh—everything. CLIFF: Well, I suppose he and I think the same about a lot of things, because we're alike in some ways. We both come from working people, if you like. Oh I know some of his mother's relatives are pretty posh, but he hates them as much as he hates yours. Don't quite know why. Anyway, he gets on with me because I'm common. (Grins.) Common as dirt, that's me. She puts her hand on his head, and strokes it thoughtfully. ALISON: YOU think I should tell him about the baby? He gets up, and puts his arm round her. CLIFF: It'll be all right—you see. Tell him. He kisses her. Enter Jimmy. He looks at them curiously, but without surprise. They are both aware of him, but make no sign of it. He crosses to the armchair L., and sits down next to them. He picks up a paper, and starts looking at it. Cliff glances at him, Alison's head against his cheek. There you are, you old devil, you! Where have you been? JIMMY: YOU know damn well where I've been. (Without

looking at her.) How's your arm? ALISON: Oh, it's all right. It wasn't much. CLIFF: She's beautiful, isn't she? JIMMY: YOU seem to think so. Cliff and Alison still have their arms round one another. CLIFF: Why the hell she married you, I'll never know. 13 JIMMY: YOU think she'd have been better off with you? CLIFF: I'm not her type. Am I, dullin'? ALISON: I'm not sure what my type is. JIMMY: Why don't you both get into bed, and have done with it. ALISON: YOU know, I think he really means that. JIMMY: I do. I can't concentrate with you two standing there like that. CLIFF: He's just an old Puritan at heart. JIMMY: Perhaps I am, at that. Anyway, you both look pretty silly slobbering over each other. CLIFF: I think she's beautiful. And so do you, only you're too much of a pig to say so. JIMMY: You're just a sexy little Welshman, and you know it! Mummy and Daddy turn pale, and face the east every time they remember she's married to me. But if they saw all this going on, they'd collapse. Wonder what they would do, incidentally. Send for the police I expect. (Genuinely friendly.) Have you got a cigarette? ALISON: (disengaging). I'll have a look. She goes to her handbag on the table C. JIMMY: (pointing at Cliff). He gets more like a little mouse every day, doesn't he? He is trying to re-establish himself. He really does look like one. Look at those ears, and that face, and the little short legs. ALISON: (looking through her bag) . That's because he is a mouse. CLIFF: Eek! Eek! I'm a mouse. JIMMY: A randy little mouse. CLIFF: (dancing round the table, and squeaking). I'm a mouse, I'm a mouse, I'm a randy little mouse. That's a mourris dance. JIMMY: A what? CLIFF: A Morris Dance. That's a Morris Dance strictly for mice. JIMMY: YOU stink. You really do. Do you know that? CLIFF: Not as bad as you, you horrible old bear. (Goes over to him, and grabs his foot.) You're a stinking old bear, you hear me? JIMMY: Let go of my foot, you whimsy little half-wit. You're making my stomach heave. I'm resting! If you don't let go, I'll cut off your nasty, great, slimy tail! Cliff gives him a tug, and Jimmy falls to the floor. Alison watches them, relieved and suddenly full of affection. ALISON: I've run out of cigarettes. Cliff is dragging Jimmy along the floor by his feet. JIMMY: (yelling). Go out and get me some cigarettes, and stop playing the fool! CLIFF: O.K. He lets go of Jimmy's legs suddenly, who yells again as his head bangs on the floor. ALISON: Here's half a crown. (Giving it him.) The shop on the corner will be open. CLIFF: Right you are. (Kisses her on the forehead quickly.) Don't forget. (Crosses upstage to door.) JIMMY: NOW get to hell out of here! CLIFF: (at door). Hey, shorty! JIMMY: What do you want? CLIFF: Make a nice pot of tea. JIMMY: (getting up). I'll kill you first. CLIFF: (grinning). That's my boy! EXIT. 14 Jimmy is now beside Alison, who is still looking through her handbag. She becomes aware of his nearness, and, after a few moments, closes it. He takes hold of her bandaged arm. How's it feeling? Fine. It wasn't anything. All this fooling about can get a bit dangerous. He sits on the edge of the table, holding her hand. I'm sorry. ALISON: I know. JIMMY: I mean it. ALISON: There's no need. JIMMY: I did it on purpose. ALISON: Yes. JIMMY: There's hardly a moment when I'm not-watching and wanting you. I've got to hit out somehow. Nearly four years of being in the same room with you, night and day, and I still can't stop my sweat

breaking out when I see you doing—something as ordinary as leaning over an ironing board. She strokes his head, not sure of herself yet. (sighing). Trouble is—Trouble is you get used to people. Even their trivialities become indispensable to you. Indispensable, and a little mysterious. He slides his head forward, against her, trying to catch his thoughts. I think ... I must have a lot of—old stock... Nobody wants it.... He puts his face against her belly. She goes on stroking his head, still on guard a little. Then he lifts his head, and they kiss passionately. What are we going to do tonight? ALISON: What would you like to do? Drink? JIMMY: I know what I want now. She takes his head in her hands and kisses him. ALISON: Well, you'll have to wait till the proper time. JIMMY: There's no such thing. ALISON: Cliff will be back in a minute. JIMMY: What did he mean by "don't forget"? ALISON: Something I've been meaning to tell you. JIMMY: (kissing her again). You're fond of him, aren't you? ALISON: Yes, I am. JIMMY: He's the only friend I seem to have left now. People go away. You never see them again. I can remember lots of names—men and women. When I was at school—Watson, Roberts, Davies. Jenny, Madeline, Hugh... (Pause.) And there's Hugh's mum, of course. I'd almost forgotten her. She's been a good friend to us, if you like. She's even letting me buy the sweet-stall off her in my own time. She only bought it for us, anyway. She's so fond of you. I can never understand why you're so—distant with her. ALISON: (alarmed at this threat of a different mood) . Jimmy—please no! JIMMY: (staring at her anxious face). You're very beautiful. A beautiful, great-eyed squirrel. She nods brightly, relieved. Hoarding, nut-munching squirrel. (She mimes this delightedly.) With highly polished, gleaming fur, and an ostrich feather of a tail. ALISON: Wheeeeeeeeeee! JIMMY: How I envy you. He stands, her arms around his neck. ALISON: Well, you're a jolly super bear, too. A really sooooooooooooooooooper, marvellous bear. JIMMY: Bears and squirrels are marvellous. ALISON: Marvellous and beautiful. She jumps up and down excitedly, making little "paw gestures". Ooooooooooh! Ooooooooooh! JIMMY: What the hell's that? 15 ALISON: That's a dance squirrels do when they're happy. They embrace again. JIMMY: What makes you think you're happy? ALISON: Everything just seems all right suddenly. That's all. Jimmy— JIMMY: Yes? ALISON: YOU know I told you I'd something to tell you? JIMMY: Well? Cliff appears in the doorway. CLIFF: Didn't get any further than the front door. Miss Drury hadn't gone to church after all. I couldn't get away from her. (To Alison.) Someone on the phone for you. ALISON: On the phone? Who on earth is it? CLIFF: Helena something. Jimmy and Alison look at each other quickly. JIMMY: (to Cliff). Helena Charles? CLIFF: That's it. ALISON: Thank you, Cliff. (Moves upstage.) I won't be a minute. CLIFF: YOU will. Old Miss Drury will keep you down there forever. She doesn't think we keep this place clean enough. (Comes and sits in the armchair down R.) Thought you were going to make me some tea, you rotter. Jimmy makes no reply. What's the matter, boyo? JIMMY: (slowly). That bitch. CLIFF: Who? JIMMY: (to himself). Helena Charles. CLIFF: Who is this Helena? JIMMY: One of her old friends. And one of my natural enemies. You're sitting on my chair. CLIFF: Where are we going for a drink? JIMMY: I don't know.

CLIFF: Well, you were all for it earlier on. JIMMY: What does she want? What would make her ring up? It can't be for anything pleasant. Oh well, we shall soon know. (He settles on the table.) Few minutes ago things didn't seem so bad either. I've just about had enough of this "expense of spirit" lark, as far as women are concerned. Honestly, it's enough to make you become a scoutmaster or something isn't it? Sometimes I almost envy old Gide and the Greek Chorus boys. Oh, I'm not saying that it mustn't be hell for them a lot of the time. But, at least, they do seem to have a cause—not a particularly good one, it's true. But plenty of them do seem to have a revolutionary fire about them, which is more than you can say for the rest of us. Like Webster, for instance. He doesn't like me—they hardly ever do. He is talking for the sake of it, only half listening to what he is saying. I dare say he suspects me because I refuse to treat him either as a clown or as a tragic hero. He's like a man with a strawberry mark—he keeps thrusting it in your face because he can't believe it doesn't interest or horrify you particularly. (Picks up Alison's handbag thoughtfully, and starts looking through it.) As if I give a damn which way he likes his meat served up. I've got my own strawberry mark—only it's in a different place. No, as far as the Michaelangelo Brigade's concerned, I must be a sort of right-wing deviationist. If the Revolution ever comes, I'll be the first to be put up against the wall, with all the other poor old liberals. CLIFF: (indicating Alison's handbag). Wouldn't you say that that was her private property? JIMMY: You're quite right. But do you know something? Living night and day with another human being has made me predatory and suspicious. I know that the only way of finding out exactly what's going on is to catch them when they don't know you're looking. When she goes out, I go through everything—trunks, cases, drawers, bookcase, everything. Why? To see if there is something of me somewhere, a reference to me. I want to know if I'm being betrayed. 16 CLIFF: You look for trouble, don't you? JIMMY: Only because I'm pretty certain of finding it. (Brings out a letter from the handbag.) Look at that! Oh, I'm such a fool. This is happening every five minutes of the day. She gets letters. (He holds it up.) Letters from her mother, letters in which I'm not mentioned at all because my name is a dirty word. And what does she do? Enter Alison. He turns to look at her. She writes long letters back to Mummy, and never mentions me at all, because I'm just a dirty word to her too. He throws the letter down at her feet. Well, what did your friend want? ALISON: She's at the station. She's—coming over. JIMMY: I see. She said "Can I come over?" And you said "My husband, Jimmy—if you'll forgive me using such a dirty word, will be delighted to see you. He'll kick your face in!" He stands up, unable to sustain his anger, poised on the table. ALISON: (quietly). She's playing with the company at the Hippodrome this week, and she's got no digs. She can't find anywhere to stay— JIMMY: That I don't believe! ALISON: So I said she could come here until she fixes something else. Miss Drury's got a spare room downstairs. JIMMY: Why not have her in here? Did you tell her to bring her armour? Because she's going to need it! ALISON: (vehemently.) Oh why don't you shut up, please! JIMMY: Oh, my dear wife, you've got so much

to learn. I only hope you learn it one day. If only something—something would happen to you, and wake you out of your beauty sleep! (Coming in close to her.) If you could have a child, and it would die. Let it grow, let a recognisable human face emerge from that little mass of indiarufaber and wrinkles. (She retreats away from him.) Please—if only I could watch you face that. I wonder if you might even become a recognisable human being yourself. But I doubt it. She moves away, stunned, and leans on the gas stove down L. He stands rather helplessly on his own. Do you know I have never known the great pleasure of lovemaking when I didn't desire it myself. Oh, it's not that she hasn't her own kind of passion. She has the passion of a python. She just devours me whole every time, as if I were some overlarge rabbit. That's me. That bulge around her navel—if you're wondering what it is—it's me. Me, buried alive down there, and going mad, smothered in that peaceful looking coil. Not a sound, not a flicker from her—she doesn't even rumble a little. You'd think that this indigestible mess would stir up some kind of tremor in those distended, overfed tripes—but not her! Crosses up to the door. She'll go on sleeping and devouring until there's nothing left of me. EXIT Alison's head goes back as if she were about to make some sound. But her mouth remains open and trembling, as Cliff looks on. CURTAIN END OF ACT I