

Without Apologies

A Comedy in Two Acts

by Thom Thomas

A SAMUEL FRENCH ACTING EDITION



New York Hollywood London Toronto

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World Premiere April 16, 1983 at the Pittsburgh (PA) Playhouse, Produced by Mark Lewis by arrangement with David Stites and Lynne B. Halpert. Directed by Allen R. Belknap. Starring Geoff Garland, Carrie Nye, Peter Pagan and Marge Redmond, with Don Wadsworth and Cheryl Walton. Scenery by Michael Hotopp and Paul DePass, lighting by Jennifer L. Ford, costumes by Joan Markert. Stage manager: John Amplas.

Revised version opened July 2, 1987 at the Dorset (VT) Theatre Festival—Jill Charles, Artistic Director and John Nassivera, Producing Director. Directed by Edgar Lansbury. Featuring Amanda Carlin, Pauline Flanagan, Jim Fyfe, Richard Lupino, Ron Randell and Elizabeth Shepherd. Set by Wm. John Aupperlee, lighting by Jeffrey A. Bernstein, costumes by Mary Marsicano and music composed and performed by Tamara Kline. Stage Manager: Mark S. Ramont.

Without Apologies opened February 12, 1989 at the Hudson Guild Theatre, 441 West 26th St., New York, NY. Geoffrey Sherman, Producing Director and Steven Ramey, Associate Director in cooperation with American Theatre Works, John Nassivera and Sandra C. Mintz. Directed by Edgar Lansbury. Set design by John Wulp, light design by Paul Wonsek, costume design by Karen Hummel, incidental music composed by Tamara Kline. Stage manager: Fredrick Hahn.

ALGY	-----	Kurt Knudson
GWEN	-----	Pauline Flanagan
ERNIE	-----	Peter Pagan
CECILY	-----	Carrie Nye
BRENDA	-----	Laura Brutsman
WILLIE JUKES	-----	Edmund Lewis

CHARACTERS

GWEN

ALGY, her husband

CECILY

ERNIE, her husband

BRENDA, their daughter

WILLIE JUKES

TIME & PLACE

The action takes place in the front parlour of the Moncrieff residence on Camden Road in London, England.

ACT I

Scene 1: May, 1933

Scene 2: December, 1933

ACT II

Scene 1: Coronation Day, 1937

Scene 2: September, 1940

WITHOUT APOLOGIES

ACT I

Scene 1

TIME: May, 1933

PLACE: London, England

SETTING: The front parlour of Algy and Gwen's residence on Camden Road. The room is furnished with remnants of a past Victorian era—furniture rescued from the attics of long gone relatives or bought at sales of hard put friends. We see glimmers here and there of the Empire at its zenith: a framed display of military medals that had once adorned the chest of the late Lord Moncrieff at Khartoum, his pith helmet from the Sudan campaign, a native spear and shield from Zululand. Other touches include a tinted photograph of Victoria herself on the mantel, framed needlework, the thick, carved legs of heavily draped mahogany side tables, gas wall sconces now converted to electricity, and an upright piano. And dominating all ... Lord Moncrieff's favourite chair: a monstrous, over-stuffed, shabby memorial to the days of yore. In front of it is a delicate footstool ... proud, natty, and somewhat, but not quite, lost. A bell hangs prominently over the stairway landing, with a cord attached to it that winds up the stairway.

AT RISE: ALGY, a rather portly man in his mid 50's, is seated at the upright piano. HE is pounding out a melody on the keyboard in a frustrated and frantic manner. His necktie is carelessly knotted, his cardigan sweater buttoned improperly so one side is longer than the other, and HE wears only one shoe. GWEN, his wife, stands in the center of the room with an opened letter in her hand SHE is an extremely neat and attractive woman in her early 50's, with carefully waved hair, wearing a becoming but inexpensive dress, and has a lorgnette on a ribbon hanging around her neck. SHE is quite agitated by the letter she has just opened

GWEN. I shall scream in a moment. (*ALGY continues to pound a tune on the upright.*) Algy! Algy, would you please be quiet. (*ALGY continues.*) Algy!

ALGY. What? (*HE stops turns on the piano stool to face her. The piano continues playing It is a player piano.*)

GWEN. Turn OFF the piano. (*HE does. SHE waves the letter.*) Can you believe it?

ALGY. NO. (*HE rises and begins to cross towards his chair.*)

GWEN. After all this time. I've barely given them a thought in years ... and now this.

ALGY. (*Sinks into his chair.*) It's rather happy stationery, isn't it?

GWEN. Canary yellow and fuchsia coloured ink. Typically tasteless and unconventional. Wait till you see this other surprise.

ALGY. What?

GWEN. The crest.

ALGY. (*Snatches up The Times.*) What's wrong with it?

GWEN. It's the Moncrieff crest. Our family crest on canary yellow. Two vultures and a fleur-de-lys.

ALGY. Two eagles.

GWEN. Eagles, vultures, who cares? They're on canary yellow.

ALGY. What does the rest of the letter say?

GWEN. I can barely decipher her handwriting. See how she dots her "i's." With little circles. The whole page is filled with little circles like an antimacassar design. (*Scans the letter with her lorgnette.*) Let's see ... where was I? (*Finds place.*) "Let me proceed directly to the reason for this hastily written communique." Five circles. (*Astounded by what she reads next.*) Algy!

ALGY. What? Bad news?

GWEN. (*Reads.*) "Our VISIT ..." Two little circles. "Our VISIT gives me premonitions ..." Circle, circle, circle. "Of great happiness."

ALGY. Visit?! They're coming here?

GWEN. With an extra large circle over the "i" in happiness.

ALGY. When is this "visit" to occur?

GWEN. (*Examines letter.*) This month. The thirteenth of May.

ALGY. That's today.

GWEN. Don't be absurd. The letter only arrived five minutes ago. It can't be.

ALGY. (*Checks newspaper.*) It is.

GWEN. (*Reads from letter.*) "See you on the thirteenth of May."

ALGY. What time?

GWEN. (*Back at letter.*) "Arriving approximately three o'clock in the afternoon."

(*The mantel CLOCK strikes three.*)

GWEN. I shall scream in a moment.

ALGY. Nothing surprises me about that brother of mine.

GWEN. What's the postmark? Hove. They're coming from Hove.

ALGY. He put her up to it. I can see him now ... standing over ... dictating in his affected, sonorous tone.

GWEN. Algy, what are we to do?

ALGY. Do?

GWEN. When they arrive.

ALGY. We won't answer the door.

GWEN. And lower the blinds and pull the curtains, no doubt!

ALGY. We could put on a disguise and tell them we've just purchased the house.

GWEN. You've gone completely out of your mind.

ALGY. I was rather good at playing Lady Teazle in The Camden Dramatic Society last year.

GWEN. Algy, be serious. (*ALGY rises.*) Where are you going?

ALGY. The powdered wig is in the tall boy in the sewing room.

GWEN. I shall scream if you continue this idiotic suggestion.

ALGY. Well, you come up with a solution then.

GWEN. (*Drawing herself up heroically.*) We shall act in a civilized manner. We shall offer them bread and butter and tea.

ALGY. (*Crossing back to chair.*) You do as you like, but I shan't lift one finger or utter one word. (*HE sits.*)

GWEN. You will!

ALGY. I won't.

GWEN. Algy!

ALGY. I won't.

GWEN. Don't you dare get stubborn with me.

ALGY. I had planned to read *The Times* from cover to cover. I won't have him ruin it for me.

GWEN. Would you please pull in your lower lip?

ALGY. No.

GWEN. It's hanging down over your chins.

ALGY. Let it. Let it hang down onto the carpet, hop into the hall, and roll down the cellar steps. I don't care. (*With that HE places his foot on the footstool.*)

GWEN. Algy, don't put your foot on the footstool.

ALGY. But it's always in front of my chair.

GWEN. It looks nice in front of the chair. It's the only fine piece of furniture left in the whole house. The rest looks tatty. Tatty ... tatty ... tatty. What will Cecily think? Your chair is totally tatty.

ALGY. It's not tatty, it's an antique. My father bought it when he returned from the Crimea.

GWEN. It's more than antique. It's a fossil.

ALGY. My old dad said it was more dependable than the Bank of England.

GWEN. He was always halfway around the bend. Look at this room! Nothing belongs with anything else. It's a room of mismatches. (*Suddenly makes a decision.*) I must dust.

ALGY. You dusted this morning.

GWEN. I mean properly. Under things and behind things and in places she'd be contemptible enough to look. Suppose they stay until dinner? I'll have to ask them to join us. Thank Heavens I had the foresight to raise chickens. Perhaps they don't like chicken. They could have become vegetarians. Or worse, they could have become Catholics. Do Catholics eat chicken on Saturday? No, that's Friday, isn't it? The Pope wants them to eat chicken on Friday. And now I'm having it on Saturday, too. They'll have chicken two days in a row. (*Pause.*) Oh, Algy, I knew one day this moment would come. Now it's

here. How will they be? What will they look like? Will Cecily still have that hourglass figure?

ALGY. Ernest will be the same. Only more repellent, more dissipated.

GWEN. When did we see them last?

ALGY. Thirty-four years ago.

GWEN. Algy, do you think it's possible that there could be more than two? That there could be three ... or four ...

ALGY. If they worked like clock work, there could be thirty-three.

GWEN. Now is not the time to joke. This is an extremely serious situation. How many bread and butter sandwiches should I make? I must think calmly like General Gordon at Khartoum. ALGY! I don't think I have enough tea.

ALGY. Don't worry, I'll pass out tin cups to the troops and we'll queue up while you ration it out.

GWEN. I do have a tin of Ovaltine. Family will hold back on the tea. We'll drink Ovaltine.

ALGY. I don't like Ovaltine.

GWEN. It's very good for you.

ALGY. I hate Ovaltine.

GWEN. Your eye is twitching.

ALGY. It's all this fuss. I've never seen you in such a state.

GWEN. I hate things being unexpected. If I had more time to think about it ... to plan, to organize, I would be fine. It's this abrupt revelation with no time to worry that has me upset.

ALGY. It's because of Ernest, isn't it?

GWEN. Don't be absurd.

ALGY. You've never got over him.

GWEN. Rubbish!

ALGY. You were madly in love with him once.

GWEN. Now your ears are jumping.

ALGY. My face must be a gymnastic delight for you.

GWEN. And what about her?

ALGY. Her? Herr Hitler? Her? What "her" are you referring to?

GWEN. Her. Canary yellow and fuchsia ink HER. You loved HER once. You would have married HER.

ALGY. And you would have married HIM. Both of us left in the lurch while they happily skipped off together. Not a pretty picture, is it?

(There is a moment's pause as THEY reflect on their past, then.)

GWEN. Put on your other shoe.

ALGY. No.

GWEN. They could arrive any minute.

ALGY. Then they shall see me in my stockinged feet.

GWEN. I'm going out to the kitchen to start the bread and butter. Do you think they should be square or round?

ALGY. Octagonal.

GWEN. Or triangular with a small garnish of parsley at the apex? Well, what do you think?

ALGY. Octagonal.

GWEN. Perhaps even a mixture.

ALGY. Octagonal.

GWEN. Yes. A mixture. *(SHE starts to go.)*

(SOUND of a CAR coming to a stop outside.)

ALGY. I heard a car.

GWEN. It can't be! *(SHE runs to the door, looks through the glass.)* It is! At least I think it is. They look like an old Ernest and a VERY old Cecily.

ALGY. Then that must be they.

GWEN. And there's someone with them. A younger woman. *(To Algy.)* Put on your shoe!

ALGY. No.

GWEN. Algy, please! I shall scream in a second.

ALGY. Do. That might drive them off. I could tell them you've gone dotty and live on the top floor like Grace Poole.

GWEN. Where is your other shoe?

ALGY. Perhaps Bunny took it.

GWEN. Why would the dog take it?

ALGY. Because he has a fetish. My shoes spice up his life. *(ALGY crosses to the hallway and whistles.)* Here, boy. Come on, Bunny.

GWEN. Don't call that horrible beast. He'll jump all over them and try to lick their faces.

ALGY. BUNNY!

(The DOORBELL rings.)

GWEN. They're on the steps. *(GWEN rushes to ALGY, snatches his handkerchief out of his pocket and begins to dust frantically around the room.)* Sorry, but this is an emergency.

(The DOORBELL rings again.)

GWEN. Answer the door.

ALGY. I've only got on one shoe.

GWEN. One shoe is better than none. Algy, they can see us. Please answer the door.

ALGY. I'll say I sprained my foot and can't bear to put a shoe on it.

GWEN. Fine.

ALGY. How did I sprain it?

GWEN. Don't say anything.

ALGY. But he'll be curious. It will be the first thing he'll mention. "What happened to your foot? Why are you wearing only one shoe?"

GWEN. Algy!

ALGY. "Are you aware you have a shoe missing?"

GWEN. Algy, I shall scream in a moment.

(ALGY crosses and opens the door. We see ERNIE, CECILY, and BRENDA. ERNIE is a very dignified, dapper man in his late 50's. HE carries a cane. CECILY is a small, pretty woman in her early 50's. BRENDA is 30 years old, and about fifty pounds overweight.)

ERNIE. How are you, Algy?

ALGY. *(HE holds up his foot.)* I've sprained my foot.

ERNIE. Sorry.

GWEN. Well, don't let them stand in the doorway, Algy.

ALGY. Come in.

(CECILY steps in, smiles at him.)

ALGY. Cecily.

CECILY. Hello, Algy. Hello, Gwen.

GWEN. Cecily! How nice.

ERNIE. Hello, Gwendolen.

GWEN. Hello.

CECILY. This is our daughter, Brenda. Brenda, this is your Aunt Gwen and Uncle Algy.

BRENDA. So happy to meet you.

GWEN. My, you're such a "grown up" girl.

BRENDA. I'm thirty.

GWEN. Thirty is such a lovely age. Say, "Hello" to Brenda, Algy.

ALGY. How do you do?

BRENDA. Fine, thank you. In fact, my adrenaline is pumping at a fever pitch.

CECILY. Brenda is learning to drive. Ernest has been instructing her. She drove part of the way here. Didn't you, Brenda?

BRENDA. Yes. I'm a-tingle.

GWEN. How exciting.

BRENDA. I won't be satisfied though until I'm able to change gear without thinking about it.

ERNIE. Comes with experience, Brenda. Mustn't be impatient.

BRENDA. I want to drive a lorry some day.

CECILY. Ladies don't drive lorries. Do they, Gwen?

BRENDA. I think it would be fun.

CECILY. Men don't marry girls who drive lorries. Do they, Gwen? It won't be fun then ... an old maid driving a lorry.

BRENDA. Lorry drivers would marry girls who drive lorries.

CECILY. Of course, if you want to marry a lorry driver ... that's up to you. Just don't invite me or your Aunt Gwen to the wedding.

GWEN. Won't you all sit down? Algy, take Ernest's charming cap. (*ERNIE hands him his cap, which ALGY roughly seizes and quickly puts away.*) What a lovely day for a drive through the country.

CECILY. (*Crossing to front of the sofa.*) The trees are wonderful. So verdant.

GWEN. Verdant was always my favourite colour.

CECILY. (*Sits.*) I remember that charming old lamp shade. It must be over thirty years old.

GWEN. Only there temporarily, of course. (*Seeing BRENDA beginning to sit on stool.*) Don't sit on the footstool, Brenda, dear. It's much too low and uncomfortable.

BRENDA. (*Sits.*) Oh, it's fine. Strengthens the pelvis.

GWEN. Are you positive, dear? I mean, I'm sure you're right about your pelvis, but are you positive you're comfortable? There are other chairs.

BRENDA. Certain, Aunt Gwen.

ERNIE. (*Crosses to Algy's chair and eases himself into it as ALGY bristles.*) Ah! Dad's old chair. Wondered what had happened to it. He was perversely fond of this old relic. Couldn't get him out of it.

ALGY. It's my favourite chair.

ERNIE. Mind my sitting here? I think it would be best for my game leg.

GWEN. Of course not. Sit wherever you like.

ERNIE. Have to keep it stretched out. Gets a bit stiff if I don't.

CECILY. Both our men seem to have an injured limb.

ERNIE. Mine is an old war wound.

GWEN. Oh, my.

ERNIE. Acquired it leading my men in a charge across "No Man's Land." A Hun leapt out of a trench and plunged his bayonet deep into my calf. I killed him, of course.

GWEN. Oh, my.

ERNIE. Small price to pay for my country's freedom. Nelson gave an eye and a leg, you know.

ALGY. Arm.

ERNIE. What?

ALGY. Nelson lost his right arm ... not a leg.

ERNIE. It doesn't alter the importance of his sacrifice, does it? An arm ... a leg ... it's all the same.

GWEN. Of course it is. Anyway, he's dead, isn't he? (*SHE sits beside CECILY.*)

ALGY. I lost a finger in Armentières.

CECILY. How dreadful.

ALGY. Blown off by a bomb.

ERNIE. Really?

(EVERYONE looks at his hands. Both seem quite normal.)

ALGY. They sewed it back on. Magnificent team of field surgeons. British, of course. Good as new.

ERNIE. Which one was it?

ALGY. This one. *(HE displays the middle finger of his right hand... first to ERNIE ... then to CECILY and BRENDA.)*

CECILY. My!

BRENDA. *(Fascinated.)* Look at it!

ERNIE. Remarkable.

BRENDA. It's bigger than the others, ain't it?

CECILY. I've asked you, Brenda, not to use that loathsome word.

BRENDA. My friend, Patsy Quinn uses it all the time.

CECILY. Patsy Quinn makes a habit of being unconventional, but that doesn't mean you have to follow her bad example.

GWEN. How nice this is. And so unexpected.

CECILY. Did you get my note?

GWEN. Oh, yes.

ALGY. About five minutes ago, in fact.

CECILY. Good Heavens! It was posted a week ago last Thursday. Ernest, you did post it Thursday, didn't you?

ERNIE. I think so. Yes. Or was it Friday?

GWEN. No harm done. I love surprises.

CECILY. If our coming is inconvenient ...

GWEN. No, of course not.

ALGY. It WAS a shock.

GWEN. It's been so long.

CECILY. Yes, it has, hasn't it? *(To GWEN.)* How is your mother ... dear Aunt Augusta?

ALGY. She's octogenarian, you know.

ERNIE. Oh, I'm so sorry.

ALGY. Eighty. She's over eighty years old.

GWEN. She's very robust. She comes down on weekends.

CECILY. Auntie lives out of London then?

GWEN. Down STAIRS.

(THEY all look upward.)

CECILY. I see.

GWEN. Announces her arrival by ringing her bell.

ALGY. Comes down early Saturday evening and returns after "God Save the King" on the wireless.

ERNIE. A short weekend then.

ALGY. Today is Saturday.

ERNIE. So it is. Perhaps we'll get a glimpse of her.

CECILY. *(To GWEN.)* And your brother, Gerald. Does he still live with you?

GWEN. No. He married an American girl and lives somewhere in the state of Chicago.

CECILY. What is Gerald's wife's name?

GWEN. Trudy. It is Trudy, isn't it, Algy? Or is that their dog's name?

ALGY. Judy.

GWEN. Yes. Judy. His wife's name is Judy. Short for Judith, I suppose. And the dog is Trudy. They have a daughter called Cindy. She's married now and has two lovely little girls called Lindy and Sandy.

ALGY. Mandy.

GWEN. What, dear?

ALGY. Lindy and Mandy.

GWEN. But I've been writing to them and telling them that we send our love to Lindy and Sandy.

ALGY. Her full name is Amanda.

GWEN. I believe you're right. How embarrassing. It is Mandy. But regardless of what their names are ... they're

both absolutely lovely. Four and five. Mandy looks exactly like Gerald when he was her age. Doesn't she, Algy?

ALGY. Yes.

ERNIE. (To ALGY.) Well, old boy, and what have you been up to?

ALGY. We have no children.

ERNIE. I don't mean that. I mean, what work do you do?

ALGY. I'm writing now, a published writer.

CECILY. How thrilling!

ERNIE. What have you written?

CECILY. Novels? Romances, I'm sure.

ALGY. Not quite.

ERNIE. What, then?

ALGY. I write for a periodical. *The Camden Illustrated Intelligentsia*.

CECILY. A correspondent! Do you have a regular contribution?

ALGY. Regular, yes. Very regular.

ERNIE. Must keep you hopping. What section of the *Intelligentsia* should we turn to?

GWEN. You all WILL stay on for dinner, won't you?

BRENDA. Oh, GOODIE! I'm starving.

CECILY. Love to, if it's no trouble.

GWEN. Not at all.

ERNIE. (To ALGY, pointedly.) Well? What section?

ALGY. I write obituaries. Uncle Alf snuffed it. That sort of thing.

CECILY. Well ... it must be quite difficult to keep it lively.

GWEN. Did you have chicken yesterday?

CECILY. Why no.

GWEN. Still Protestant then?

CECILY. (Puzzled.) Yes.

GWEN. I'm so happy. Nothing worse than chicken two days in a row.

BRENDA. Excuse me, Aunt Gwen, but nature is calling.

GWEN. Is it, dear?

BRENDA. Drove the last thirty miles with my throttle wide open. Which way do I go?

GWEN. Oh, yes, of course. (*Rises.*) Up the stairs and first door on your left.

ALGY. Right.

GWEN. It's on the left.

ALGY. Not when you're going up the stairs. It's on the right.

GWEN. You walk up the stairs and turn this way.

ALGY. That's your right.

GWEN. So it is. (*Crossing to BRENDA.*) It's on your right. On your right at the top of the stairs. Don't go into the door on your left. That's the linen cupboard.

ALGY. That's the door to our room.

GWEN. Regardless, dear, don't go in that door.

BRENDA. Righto! (*SHE bounds off.*)

ALGY. The linen cupboard door is the second door on the left.

CECILY. Brenda was so anxious to meet you both. She's heard so much about you.

GWEN. Has she?

CECILY. Of course. We often speak of you both with deep affection. Don't we, Ernest?

ERNIE. Oh, yes. Very deep affection.

(*Silence.*)

GWEN. Isn't the linen door next to the lav?

ALGY. It's across the hall at an angle.

CECILY. You look very well, Gwen.

GWEN. Thank you. You do too, Cecily. Doesn't she, Algy?

ERNIE. I think we've held up pretty well for being thirty years older. I hope we're wiser after all that time. What about it Algy, old chap? Are you older and wiser?

ALGY. What a damn silly question!

GWEN. Algy!

ALGY. I haven't been shut up in a monastery, you know.

ERNIE. I didn't suggest you were.

GWEN. You must all be tired after the trip up from Hove. How about something hot to perk you up? How would you all like an invigorating cup of Ovaltine?

CECILY. I could do with a cup of tea.

ERNIE. Yes, tea.

GWEN. Of course. Ovaltine as usual, Algy, dear?

ALGY. (*Vexed.*) Yes ... please. (*GWEN starts to go.*)

CECILY. I'll join you. The boys must have a lot of catching up to do. Right, Ernest?

ERNIE. Yes. Quite.

GWEN. Lovely. (*To the MEN.*) Everything all right here, then?

ERNIE. Everything is absolutely marvelous, Gwen.

GWEN. Good.

(*The WOMEN exit.*)

ERNIE. Amazing.

ALGY. What is?

ERNIE. Gwendolen's legs.

ALGY. What about her legs?

ERNIE. It suddenly occurred to me that she never had legs before this afternoon. I had never seen them before. Thirty-four years ago, we were fortunate to get a glimpse of a woman's ankle encased in a leather boot. Times have

changed, haven't they? (*ALGY doesn't answer. ERNIE removes the newspaper sticking between the arm and the cushion of Algy's chair. HE glances at it.*) I'm a NEWS man myself. So how have you been, Algy?

ALGY. All right.

ERNIE. How did you sprain your foot?

ALGY. It's been driving you mad with curiosity, hasn't it?

ERNIE. No.

ALGY. It isn't really sprained. I just couldn't find my other shoe.

ERNIE. Then why did you say it was sprained?

ALGY. Gwen insisted I say something.

ERNIE. Oh.

ALGY. Perhaps Bunny ran off with it.

ERNIE. Bunny?

ALGY. An Irish setter. You'll see him around somewhere.

ERNIE. And he took your shoe?

ALGY. No, probably I took off one shoe somewhere ... forgot to take off the other and came in here. My mistake. Whenever I spill something or have lost something ... I put the blame on Bunny.

ERNIE. Deception was always your main forte. (*HE looks about the room.*) Very nice house, Algy. Roomy.

ALGY. There are chickens in the back.

ERNIE. In the back?

ALGY. Gwen keeps chickens.

ERNIE. How very practical.

ALGY. They're fine until the wind changes.

ERNIE. (*Crosses to the French doors and looks out.*) I see that you have some early roses.

ALGY. They're Gwen's. She's got a green thumb.

ERNIE. It's nice to be keen about something, don't you think?

ALGY. Yes.

ERNIE. You were always keen about food. (*Looks at Algy.*) Still keen, I see. Is Auntie Augusta still as formidable as she used to be?

ALGY. Undaunted by time.

ERNIE. A bit like the Great Wall of China, then.

ALGY. If the Great Wall looked like Wallace Beery ... yes.

ERNIE. Auntie still have the house on Grosvenor Square?

ALGY. Sold it to the Ambassador from Luxembourg.

ERNIE. Too bad. It was a very comfortable residence. Marvelous address ... a certain *agacerie*.

ALGY. What the hell is that?

ERNIE. Glamour. I take it that while fighting for "God, King, and Country" you didn't cultivate your inky-pinky parley-voo? Twiggy-voo?

ALGY. No, I didn't cultivate. But you did, I gather. And did you also sow and harvest?

ERNIE. My dear chap, a good soldier must always turn adversity into perversity. It's the only way to keep from losing one's mind. Come, now! In our salad days you were never one to turn your back on "good times." Surely now in your prime of life you haven't become a stuffed shirt. Remember the time we were invited to go to Bosie Douglas' and Reggie Letchworth's masquerade party and decided to go as the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel?

ALGY. Nude with index fingers touching.

(*THEY touch index fingers.*)

ERNIE. But we didn't have the nerve and went instead as Queen Victoria and her Albert. You were smashing as the old girl. (*ERNIE removes his cigarette case from his pocket.*) Care for a Players?

ALGY. No, thank you. I'm partial to my pipe and Three Nuns.

ERNIE. They're cork-tipped.

ALGY. Nothing better than a pipe.

ERNIE. You don't mind if I smoke, do you?

ALGY. I don't mind if you burst into flames.

ERNIE. (*Takes out a lighter and just before lighting the cigarette says:*) Another nail in my coffin. (*HE lights the cigarette and takes a long drag on it.*)

ALGY. What brings you to London, Ernest?

ERNIE. Well, Cess and I thought it was about time. We were all good friends once. The two of us were as close together as the paper on the wall. We don't want to go out of this world never having made the effort ... do we?

ALGY. You should have telephoned.

ERNIE. Quite frankly, dear Algy, I was afraid you'd say not to come. And that's why I also posted Cecily's letter to you four days after she gave it to me. I wasn't quite sure what reaction it would get.

ALGY. Had I received your letter earlier than five minutes before your arrival ... I would have strongly suggested that this meeting not take place.

ERNIE. Oh, come on, Algy. Let bygones be bygones. You've nothing to complain about. Auntie's frugality has obviously sustained you nicely. Gwen is as charming as ever.

ALGY. You have entered a happy home, Ernest.

ERNIE. I could see it immediately. I'm ecstatic that everything has turned out so well for you.

ALGY. In spite of your erosive interference.

ERNIE. Don't get your knickers in a twist.

ALGY. Ernest, if you were to possess the persuasive skill of Demosthenes, you could not erase the memory of what you did to Gwen and myself.

ERNIE. That's all over.

ALGY. It is not over.

ERNIE. But of course it is.

ALGY. It isn't.

ERNIE. Then it isn't.

ALGY. Don't try to argue with me.

ERNIE. You're trying to provoke an argument. You always were an obstinate fellow.

ALGY. Don't you dare call me obstinate ... you ... degenerate.

ERNIE. I beg your pardon?

ALGY. Degenerate!

ERNIE. Did you call me a degenerate?

ALGY. When a groom abandons his bride at the church and runs off with his brother's fiancée ... what else do you call him?

ERNIE. Your grief over the loss of a fiancée seems to have been diminished by marrying my bride.

ALGY. Your bride wouldn't have become my bride if my fiancée hadn't become your bride. You despicable degenerate.

ERNIE. It's lucky for you my leg was incapacitated in the War. Otherwise, I would give you a severe thrashing.

ALGY. Were you intending on kicking me into unconsciousness, you lily-livered degenerate?

ERNIE. Stop calling me that!

ALGY. Degenerate. Degenerate!

ERNIE. (*Hobbling away in an exaggerated manner.*) Do you enjoy badgering helpless cripples?

ALGY. Coward!

ERNIE. I knew it was a mistake coming here ... offering a fig branch.

ALGY. A fig branch?!

ERNIE. Well, whatever they offer. I was ready to offer it.

ALGY. Olive. Olive! It's an olive branch you silly twit.

ERNIE. Don't provoke me or you'll be sorry.

ALGY. (*Raising his fists.*) Put them up!

ERNIE. I'll scream if you come any closer.

ALGY. Scream!

(*Just as ERNIE opens his mouth to give a yell ...
BRENDA bounds down the stairs. SHE carries a short
piece of chain.*)

BRENDA. Sorry! Afraid I snapped the chain when I flushed.

ALGY. You did what?

BRENDA. (*Pantomime.*) The chain.

ALGY. Oh.

BRENDA. I thought you'd like the chain. (*Hands the chain to ALGY*) It's kaput. The cistern won't fill up.

ALGY. Won't fill up?

BRENDA. It's kaput.

ALGY. I'd better do something before someone else has to "spend a penny."

BRENDA. If I had the proper tools I could repair it myself.

ERNIE. Brenda is splendid with tools. Blew up a tyre last weekend all by herself.

BRENDA. Fun. (*ALGY is on the stairs.*)

ERNIE. Need any assistance, Algy? I could try to manage the stairs.

ALGY. Needn't bother. (*ALGY exits.*)

BRENDA. (*Calling after him.*) Sorry, Uncle Algy! (*Then to her father.*) I thought the whole cistern was going to tumble down. Made me jump. Where's Mum and Aunt Gwen?

ERNIE. Making tea.

BRENDA. Goodie! (*Disappointed.*) Chicken for dinner. I was hoping for a roast. What were you hoping for?

ERNIE. I don't know, now.

BRENDA. (*SHE crosses to the window.*) Busy street. And there's a bus stop halfway down the road. Very convenient. What did Uncle Algy and Aunt Gwen say?

ERNIE. (*Lost in thought.*) What?

BRENDA. About our moving in.

ERNIE. We haven't broached the subject yet. It's very delicate ... you must leave it to your mother and myself.

BRENDA. I hope they say yes. I'd like living here. My friend, Patsy Quinn says that there are lots of opportunities in London. The air smells good here, doesn't it? Must be all the fumes from the motor cars. Did I drive good today? It was probably the most exciting event in my entire life. My friend, Patsy Quinn says ...

ERNIE. Perhaps your mother and Aunt Gwen need another pair of hands in the kitchen.

BRENDA. I'd burn something or spill something, I know I would.

ERNIE. Nonsense. You're very good in the kitchen.

BRENDA. Mum doesn't think so.

ERNIE. Brenda, that is not true.

BRENDA. I heard her tell the Vicar that I couldn't boil water.

ERNIE. Perhaps she was telling him about someone else.

BRENDA. I don't know another "Brenda" living in our house. She said "Brenda" when she was talking to the Vicar. And he kept saying she should pray about it. They were both on their knees in front of the oven praying someday I'd be able to fry a sausage.

(*GWEN and CECILY enter with the tea and a plate of bread and butter sandwiches.*)

GWEN. Here we are! Sorry we took so long, but I had to kill a chicken.

CECILY. Gwen has chickens in her garden.

GWEN. (*Setting the tea tray on the table in front of the sofa.*) Come what may ... we won't starve.

CECILY. (*Pointedly, to ERNIE.*) Did you and Algy have a pleasant catching up?

ERNIE. (*Shaking head, negatively.*) Quite pleasant.

GWEN. Where is Algy?

BRENDA. I'm afraid I broke the chain.

ERNIE. The W.C. chain.

BRENDA. It broke when I pulled it. Made me jump.

GWEN. Algy will fix it.

BRENDA. What if he can't fix it?

ERNIE. Then I suggest we limit ourselves to only one cup of tea.

(*The front door opens and an intense young man enters. His name is WILLIE JUKES. HE starts for the stairs, but GWEN stops him.*)

GWEN. This is our Mr. Jukes. Mr. Jukes lets the top floor room.

CECILY. (*A look to ERNIE.*) Does he?

GWEN. Mr. Jukes, may I introduce Mr. and Mrs. Mon ...

ERNIE. Pardon me, Gwendolen, but it's Major.

GWEN. Major? Oh, so sorry. This is Major and ... that doesn't change your title, does it, Cecily?

CECILY. No.

GWEN. No. (*SHE continues the introduction.*) Mrs. Moncrieff and their daughter, Brenda.

BRENDA. So happy to meet you.

GWEN. The Major is my husband's brother. From Hove.

(WILLIE shakes ERNIE's hand)

ERNIE. How are you, Mr. Jukes?

(WILLIE nods, "all right.")

GWEN. Mr. Jukes is a musician. (*Silence.*) The drums.

BRENDA. Play something. (WILLIE looks bewildered.)

GWEN. I'm sure Mr. Jukes would, Brenda, but he doesn't have his instrument with him at the moment. Do you? (WILLIE looks around just to be sure.) Mr. Jukes has been with us for almost a year now.

ERNIE. How's the drum business, Mr. Jukes?

CECILY. He's a musician, darling. He's not in business.

ERNIE. He makes a living, doesn't he? Someone pays him. Then it's a business.

CECILY. A musician is an artist, Ernest. Art is not supposed to be called a business.

ERNIE. Art is business if you're paid for it. I'm sure Mr. Jukes thinks of his drum playing as a business, don't you, Mr. Jukes? (*No answer.*)

CECILY. (*Defiantly.*) How can he answer a question like that?

ERNIE. I believe it was a clearly stated question.

CECILY. Chopin wasn't conducting a business. He was a musician. He was a composer. He was creating. That's what Mr. Jukes does, I'm sure. He creates. Tell us where you create, Mr. Jukes. Is the "ambiance" there to your satisfaction? (*No answer.*) Where do you play your drums, Mr. Jukes?