

SIDE 1

POLLY. You're probably right, dear. I never claimed to be the logical one in the family. *(She fluffs up the pillows on the sofa.)*

HENRY. *(With a sigh.)* It mystifies me, even after all these years. You grew up in such a sheltered environment — garden parties, finishing schools — how could you have such a low opinion of human nature?

POLLY. *(Affectionately.)* You grew up in such an unsheltered environment — tenements, street fights — how could you have such a *high* opinion of human nature? *(Doorbell rings. Henry jumps up, Polly goes to him, soothingly.)* Whatever she says, don't let it get to you. Socrates never let it get to him. *(Henry disappears out the hallway, opens the door, ushers in Edith Wilshire. She is forty-two, coldly attractive. She wears a Phi Beta Kappa key on a chain, which she swings from time to time.)*

HENRY. It's nice to see you, Edith. Come in.

EDITH. I'm positively dying for a cup of coffee. I can only stay a few minutes though. I'm on my way up to my cabin for the weekend, and I hate driving these mountain roads in the dark.

HENRY. It'll *be* dark in an hour or so.

EDITH. Oh my little MG can make it. By the way, I took the liberty of parking it in your garage out in back. There have been so many car thefts lately — they pick them right up off the street.

POLLY. We've never had one in our neighborhood.

EDITH. Well, my little MG is a bigger temptation than people around here usually see.

POLLY. I'll get the coffee. Oh Edith, your chain's come out of your pocket. You don't want to lose the key to your little MG. *(Polly goes to the pantry. Edith glares, but puts the key away.)*

EDITH. She *is* wonderful. You're a lucky man, Henry — a devoted wife to wait on you hand and foot all these years.

HENRY. Polly's always kept busy with outside activities.

EDITH. Her volunteer work? Oh yes, of course. The symphony, Planned Parenthood—

HENRY. She worked for ten years as a nurse's aide at the mental hospital, until her arthritis acted up. If you think that's easy work— *(Polly comes in with the coffee pot and accessories on a tray.)*

POLLY. Coffee's on.

EDITH. Marvelous. (*She pours for herself, greedily.*) I was just telling Henry how much I admire you, Polly. All those boards and committees you've served on through the years. And without a cent of pay. So many women, if they've never been trained for anything, just sit around and vegetate.

POLLY. Some people like to vegetate, and other people prefer to throw their weight around.

HENRY. (*Quickly.*) Don't you ever feel lonely, Edith, on these weekends in that cabin of yours? All by yourself, nobody to talk to?

EDITH. If I needed people around me all the time, I'd be married. (*Laughs.*) Besides, when I do crave society, the cabin's big enough.

POLLY. So I've heard.

EDITH. You aren't shocked, Polly dear? A woman nowadays doesn't have to feel ashamed of her perfectly normal instincts. The sexual hangups of an earlier generation are relics of the past, thank God. (*Before Polly can answer.*) It is getting late. I'd better get down to the purpose of this visit.

POLLY. (*Rising.*) It's time for me to smell something burning in the kitchen.

EDITH. Don't leave on *my* account. I'm sure you two talk everything over together anyway.

POLLY. Well then— (*She sits again. A pause. Edith clears her throat.*)

EDITH. First of all, Henry, I want you to know how hard it is for me to say this—

HENRY. Say it — please.

EDITH. Well — it's about your retirement.

HENRY. (*Surprised.*) But — I'm not *going* to—

EDITH. You'll be sixty-five years old next February. Faculty members at Mesa Grande are required to retire with a pension at age sixty-five.

HENRY. Edith! You're forgetting the Van Voorhees Chair!

EDITH. The famous Van Voorhees Chair of the Humanities —

so the distinguished professor can go on teaching for as long as he can keep himself upright in front of a class. A perfectly lousy idea, I've always thought.

POLLY. Your opinion doesn't change the terms of the Van Voorhees trust, Edith. The chair's been vacant for two years — everyone knows they've been holding it open for Henry.

EDITH. Maybe so, Polly dear. But the appointment has to be approved by the chairperson of the candidate's department. (*Smiling sweetly and nastily.*)

HENRY. (*Turning pale.*) Are you implying—?

EDITH. Sorry, Henry. I'm not going to recommend you.

HENRY. (*Shocked, bewildered.*) But on what grounds? My courses are as popular as they ever were!

EDITH. Oh yes, you're still packing them in.

HENRY. I've got as much stamina as ever!

EDITH. More than plenty of men half your age.

HENRY. Then why? We've had our disagreements, but I can't believe—

EDITH. (*Facing him squarely.*) This won't be pleasant, Henry. But didn't you always tell us in that old Ethics class that one has a moral obligation to face the truth — no matter how painful it might be?

HENRY. I'm still telling them the same thing.

EDITH. Well then — as John Stuart Mill said, the lesser good must give way to the greater good.

HENRY. How will getting rid of me do *any* good?

EDITH. I've been explaining this to you for two years. I've got ambitions for my department. I want it to be known and respected. That can't happen as long as I'm saddled with back numbers. (*Henry goes white at this insult. Polly, furious, stamps up to her.*)

POLLY. Back numbers! Plenty of people think highly of him. You should see the letters he has — from colleagues, from former students—

EDITH. I'm sure he does. The world is full of softheaded people. But I can see that you're hopelessly out of date — an absolutist in a relativistic age!

HENRY. Because I believe there are eternal moral principles?

EDITH. Out of date! Nowadays we know about the unconscious mind, environment, heredity. The world has changed — and the survivors will have to learn to change with it!

HENRY. Situational Ethics! The new revelation — philosophy as cutthroat competition! Go to your friendly neighborhood philosopher, and learn how to justify anything you want to do!

EDITH. That's typical of you, Henry — dismissing the most fruitful new approach to ethical thinking with a cheap sarcasm!

HENRY. It's *not* a new approach. There are three ethical relativists arguing with Socrates in *The Republic*, and he makes them look like idiots.

EDITH. Yes, Henry, we're all idiots — except you and Socrates. He's always been your convenient excuse whenever you wanted to protect yourself from change.

HENRY. (*Flushing.*) I'm not against change. But your way of looking at things — it's so dangerous for impressionable young people. They need to develop commitments. You teach them that nothing counts except their desires.

EDITH. I teach them to face the world realistically, with their eyes wide open.

HENRY. You know what that kind of realism leads to. When people don't have ideas to admire, they admire raw power. That's how the Hitlers of this world—

EDITH. Dear God, if it isn't Hitler again! Whenever you idealists want to prove what a good-vs-evil universe it is, you drag in Hitler. Well, I'm not intimidated.

HENRY. Meaning you approve of him?

EDITH. I recognize that he was a human being, a product of certain historical and environmental forces. When the emotional climate finally cools down and people are willing to see him objectively—

HENRY. (*Angrier, less in control.*) Objectively! He'll turn out to be the warm, loving fatherly type, is that it?

EDITH. At least he knew what he wanted, admitted it openly, and set out to get it. (*She looks out the window.*) It's getting late, how

annoying! I *have* to be going, (*Heads towards the archway.*)

POLLY. (*Following her.*) You won't get away with this, Edith. The terms of the Van Voorhees trust say that the president can make the appointment on his own.

EDITH. In this case he won't.

POLLY. He's one of Henry's oldest admirers.

EDITH. That's just *why* he won't ignore my recommendation. He's the type who bends over backwards to keep from being influenced by personal feelings.

HENRY. (*Getting a little pale.*) He's agreed already? To go along with your recommendation?

EDITH. Oh, he doesn't have an inkling of it yet. Neither does anyone else. I wanted you to be the first to know. (*And she can't keep from giving a sharp little laugh.*)

HENRY. (*Staring at her, as if seeing her for the first time.*) Why do you hate me, Edith?

EDITH. There's nothing personal about this at all—

HENRY. That's for publication. We're all by ourselves here. So why do you hate me?

EDITH. (*After a moment, speaks quietly.*) I don't hate you. Hate is a useless, counterproductive emotion. There was a time, however, when I was younger—

HENRY. What happened when you were younger?

EDITH. You don't remember? You pushed me out. I was a graduate student here, working for my PhD, and you were chairperson then. You worked me like a dog, made me do your research, correct your papers, type up your lecture notes—

HENRY. It was part of your apprenticeship—

EDITH. More like slavery!

HENRY. Yes, I did demand more from you — and the challenge was good for your career.

EDITH. No thanks to *you!* You were supposed to pay me back! We had a contract.

HENRY. What contract?

EDITH. There was an understanding between us. Once I got that degree, I was supposed to have the next position that came

along. One *did* come along, here at Mesa Grande, and you told me to look elsewhere.

HENRY. It was for your own good. You needed to go east to get experience, or you'd never grow. And you can't deny it did wonders for you—

EDITH. Hypocrite! You got rid of me out of jealousy!

HENRY. Why on earth would I be jealous of you?

EDITH. I scared you to death. I was the best student you ever had—

HENRY. I always gave you credit—

EDITH. It's one thing to have your best student grubbing for you — something else to have her competing with you, showing you up!

HENRY. Can you really *believe* all this? If I *had* been jealous of you in those days, why, for God's sake, when another opening came along five years later, did I *hire* you?

EDITH. Nothing you could do about it by then. I had published books. (*With malevolent intensity.*) But I wanted that first job — I wanted it badly!

HENRY. At the age of twenty-four you didn't get what you wanted, so you've held it against me for all these years?

EDITH. I'm grateful to you. You taught me a lesson in power. You used it to serve your ends, I'm using it to serve mine. (*She moves into the hallway, Henry following her, and stops at the bust of Socrates.*) Well, look who's here — dear old Socrates, in bronze. I remember him from my student days. Every time I came to this house, I used to stare at him and say to myself, (*Picking up the bust.*) "I understand exactly why they gave you the hemlock!" (*She shoves the bust into Henry's hands with a laugh and turns towards the door, disappearing from sight.*)

HENRY. Edith, I can't believe you're doing this! You were one of my best students — you *must've* learned *something* from me— (*Still carrying the bust, he follows her out the hallway. We hear them arguing but don't see them.*)

EDITH. I'm not only doing it, I'm enjoying it! And after I get rid of you, I'll start clearing out your deadwood. Everybody around

here who takes your side against me!

HENRY. Please — come back inside — let's sit down and talk about this like two reasonable people—

EDITH. Those brown-nosing undergraduates you've turned into softheaded idiots!

HENRY. Come back inside and listen to me, will you? If you'll just listen to me, I know we can work this out—

EDITH. Your smarmy little graduate students — no jobs for *them* once they get their degrees!

HENRY. All I'm asking you to do is *listen!*

EDITH. Those bootlicking young professors who worship at your shrine — wait till they come up for tenure!

HENRY. (*Mad with the frustration of trying to get through to her.*)

Listen to me, for God's sake! Just shut up and listen!

EDITH. And your doddering old buddies who are just as senile as you are—

HENRY. My God, she won't even listen! (*From the hallway we hear a loud thud, followed by a grunt.*)

POLLY. My God! (*Henry, still holding the bust, backs into the archway. He is dazedly staring offstage.*)

HENRY. Edith — I'm sorry — I didn't mean— (*Edith appears at the corner of the archway.*) Sit down, Edith — I'll get some water, a towel— (*Edith gasps horribly, blood comes out of her mouth, then she sinks to the floor, a dead weight.*) For God's sake— (*He breaks off, blinking. Polly hurries up to Edith, gets on her knees, takes hold of her wrist. After a few moments, Polly looks up.*)

POLLY. She's dead.

HENRY. No. It couldn't be. Are you sure?

POLLY. I know how to take a pulse—

HENRY. Socrates — hit her— (*He sinks into a chair, putting the bust on the floor next to it.*) She kept talking — she wouldn't listen—

POLLY. (*Still shocked, but already starting to think hard.*) Yes — she goaded you horribly—

HENRY. I didn't mean to *kill* her. It's just that I felt like *killing* her!

POLLY. (*Going up to him.*) I've read about this sort of thing. A brainstorm — everything went black—

HENRY. (*Shakes his head.*) I'll call the police. (*He crosses the room and picks up the phone. Polly dashes up to him and pulls the phone away from him.*)

POLLY. Wait! Don't be in such a hurry!

HENRY. I'd like to get it over with.

POLLY. Sit down, will you — listen to me, please! (*She seats him on the sofa and sits next to him. She puts her hands on his shoulders and speaks to him with great earnestness.*) Henry darling, let's be logical about this. Logic is the cornerstone of philosophy — isn't that what you always say?

HENRY. I don't understand.

POLLY. You did it. All right. But if you call the police and turn yourself in, what *good* will it do? Will it bring her back to life?

HENRY. No — I suppose not—

POLLY. Of course it won't. And you had a *right* to do it, darling. She was trying to destroy you — you fought back in the only way that was left to you. Don't you see — it was self-defense!

HENRY. Was it?

POLLY. Of course it was. That's logic.

HENRY. (*Shaking his head.*) No! (*Gets to his feet again.*) I've waited to long! I have to call the—

POLLY. (*Pulling on him, desperate.*) For God's sake, you're not thinking this through! What *happens* if you call the police?

HENRY. They arrest me, I stand trial—

POLLY. And what happens *then*? Prison! Scandal!

HENRY. That can't be helped—

POLLY. And your students? All those generations of people who believe in you, whose lives have been changed by you—

HENRY. I don't see what—

POLLY. You'll be destroying their faith in you — in your principles!

HENRY. They won't stop believing in what's right—

~~POLLY. You can't be sure of that! You've said it often enough, what a precarious world we're living in — the temptations all~~