

T U G   O F   W A R

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A PLAY IN HALF AN ACT

By W. B. Bland

TUG OF WAR

The scene is the kitchen of a suburban house in London. It is about nine o'clock on a winter Saturday evening.

Kathleen Nuttall, aged about thirty, her hair somewhat untidy, wearing a rather drab dress and a stained apron, is washing dishes at the sink with her back to the audience.

There is a ring at the front door off stage.

Kathleen swears under her breath, dries her hands on a tea-towel which lies by the side of the sink, adjusts her hair with one hand and goes out into the hall. The sound of the front door opening is heard.

Kathleen: Yes?

June (nervously): I'm . . . I'm June Anderson.

Kathleen (puzzled): Do I . . . ? Oh, yes; you work with Jim. He's not in, but I'm expecting him back any time. You're welcome to wait.

June: It was you I wanted to see.

Kathleen (surprised): Me? Well, do you mind coming into the kitchen?

The two women come into the room. June Anderson is a good-looking young woman of about twenty-five, her hair well-groomed and her face carefully made up. She wears smart, well-tailored slacks and a sweater. She is clearly uncomfortable.

Kathleen: Sit down, please. (She gestures towards a kitchen chair, and June sits uneasily on the edge of its seat). Coffee?

June: Er, no, thanks.

Kathleen: Do you mind if I finish this washing-up before the water gets cold.

June: Please.

Kathleen resumes the washing-up, with her back to the audience.

Kathleen: Jim's at football; he always goes on Saturdays. They're playing away today; that's why he's late. What can I do for you?

June (hesitating): I don't know how to say this.

Kathleen pauses for a moment in her task, and then goes on.

Kathleen: Say what?

June: It's about Jim.

Kathleen turns, concerned.

Kathleen: Why, what's happened? (Then, quickly:) There's been an accident?

June (quickly): No, no; nothing like that. (She hesitates and swallows nervously) Jim isn't at football. He's outside in the car.

Kathleen (puzzled): In the car?

June: He's . . . he's not coming back.

Kathleen turns away so that her back is towards June. She stands quite motionless for a few seconds.

June (quickly): I'm sorry. We didn't want to hurt you. But we love each other.

Kathleen slowly washes a large tea-pot, and places it carefully on the drying-board.

June: I really am sorry.

Kathleen (with a trace of bitterness): But it was bigger than both of you.

June (quietly): Yes.

Kathleen (after a pause): May I ask how long it's been going on?

June: Three months. He's been coming round on Saturdays.

Kathleen turns and faces the other woman. She has now completely regained her composure.

Kathleen: You're right, of course.

June (not understanding): Right?

Kathleen: If he's been missing Arsenal to be with you, it must be love! (pause) And he sent you to tell me?

June: It was just that he thought you'd be upset, and that coming from a stranger . . .

Kathleen (smiling coldly): If I made a scene, he'd be well out of the way. Yes, that's Jim! Anyway, it was brave of you. After all, for all you knew I might have gone for you with a meat-chopper.

June: You don't seem even surprised?

Kathleen: Surprised? Jim has always looked on people as things, as consumer goods. So if he trades in his old Cortina for a new model, why should I be surprised?

June (with a touch of defensive indignation): He doesn't think of you like that?

Kathleen: No? Perhaps you're right. (pause) Or perhaps I just know him better than you do! Don't forget we've been married for nearly ten years. (then, with forced briskness:) But that's neither here nor there. We must be practical. You'd better take his "Guinness Book of Records". And he'll need his dental fixative powder. And if you can wait a moment I'll give you his dirty underwear.

June (coldly): I've no intention of washing his dirty underwear!

Kathleen (enthusiastically): Good for you! I wish I'd said that ten years ago! Oh, well; I'm sure he'll learn how to do these things for himself, given time. He did once put a shelf up. Now -- the children! They're in bed asleep. I don't want to wake them at

this time of night. Perhaps Jim could pick them in the morning, Sunday?

June (shocked and astounded): We wouldn't take your children from you.

Kathleen (matter-of-factly): Oh, they're just as much Jim's children as mine, I assure you. In fact, he's quite fond of them -- especially Alan. Girls aren't allowed to play football, it seems.

June (firmly): There's no question of Jim taking the children from you. Children need their mother.

Kathleen: Oh, rubbish! They're both weaned. "Children need their mother"! You've been brainwashed by propaganda designed to keep mothers rotting away at home. No; I'm sure you're just as capable of looking after them as I am.

June (indignantly): I'm not going to stay at home looking after somebody else's children. I've got a good job. I'm the head of Jim's department. I earn more than he does.

Kathleen: Then obviously the sensible thing is for you to be the breadwinner. It'll be a nice change for Jim from slaving away at the office. He always used to say he envied my easy life at home.

June: That's not possible. We're buying a house. And there's the mortgage on this house; Jim says it's got another . . .

Kathleen: Ten years to run.

June: And, of course, Jim will want to make an allowance to you and the children. We'll need both our incomes to make ends meet.

Kathleen (drily): As it says in the Bible: the wages of sin is a double mortgage!

June (firmly): No, your children must stay with you. I'm sure Jim will be generous. And he can take them out from time to time.

Kathleen (equally firmly): Sorry, but no!

June: What do you mean -- no?

Kathleen: I mean that if I look after the children, Jim contracts out.

June (shocked): You mean -- not see them?

Kathleen: Exactly.

June (indignantly): That's cruel! It's vindictive! Why make the children suffer just because you've been hurt. What's happened is no fault of theirs!

Kathleen: On the contrary, it's just because I care very much for the children that I make this ruling. My parents separated when I was nine years' old, and I spent the rest of my childhood being shunted between Daddy and "auntie" and Mummy and "uncle". I was just an unpleasant reminder of a past they all wanted to forget.

Mummy was continually warning me what a pig Daddy was, and Daddy what a bitch Mummy was. If I wanted an extra helping of trifle, I had to please Mummy by saying how old and fat Daddy had got, and how he was always rowing with "auntie". It was sheer murder! I got to hate both of them -- in fact, I used to pray that they would both die so that I could have a real home in an orphanage! No -- if Jim wishes to look after the children, I will waive any right of access. If he doesn't, then I shall be happy to keep them -- but Jim will not be permitted to see them!

June (doubtfully): I understand how you feel. It's not my business, really. But I'm sure Jim wouldn't agree not to see them. Surely he could get a court order for access?

Kathleen: Probably.

June: Well, then?

Kathleen: A court can't force you to do something if you absolutely refuse to do it. It can only put you in gaol for contempt.

June: But that would mean . . . ?

Kathleen: That would mean that the children would be taken into care.

June: I don't know.

Kathleen: It's a simple, clear-cut decision. Do you wish to take care of the children, or not?

June: It's not up to me. You must talk it over with Jim.

Kathleen: Jim has appointed you to represent him.

June: Not to decide something like that.

Kathleen: But if you love Jim, you must know instinctively what he would want.

June: I know he's very fond of the children. He would never agree not to see them.

Kathleen: Then that's settled. I'll have them all packed and ready at ten in the morning. I suggest that Jim comes for them, so that they can be with someone they know.

June (desperately): That's not possible. Our house won't be ready for months. Jim is moving in with me, and it's just a small flat.

Kathleen: Then obviously you and Jim must move in here. In fact, that might be better, anyway; the children will be in familiar surroundings. (She crosses to the kitchen table, where her handbag lies, takes out a key and lays it on the table) Here's the door key; Jim has his own. Of course, I shall need somewhere to live myself; perhaps I could take over your flat? (June starts to speak, but remains silent) Good; I'll pick up the key from you when I get back. I'm going away for a week or two.

June rises slowly to her feet, as Kathleen slips off her apron, picks up her handbag and moves quickly to the door.

Kathleen: I'll go out the back way so Jim won't be embarrassed.

She goes out of the door, and then pokes her head back inside.

Kathleen (with apparent sincerity): I hope you'll be very happy!

She disappears.

June moves towards the door.

June: Mrs. . Mrs. Nuttall.

There is no reply. June goes into the hall.

June (calling): MRS. NUTTALL!

The sound of the back door slamming is heard. June, in the hall, turns and opens the front door.

June (shouting, tearfully): JIM! . JIM!

The sound of a car door slamming is heard. A moment later Jim Nuttall appears in the hall. He is a slightly fleshy man of about thirty five, wearing sports clothes and a football scarf with Arsenal colours.

Jim: What's the matter?

He comes into the room, blinking nervously.

Jim: Where's Kathy?

June follows him into the room and begins to sob.

June: She's gone -- gone away.

Jim: Gone away where?

June: How should I know!

Jim: She's taken the children! That's kidnapping! She can't do that?

June: No, she hasn't; they're upstairs asleep!

Jim: Upstairs?

June (irritably): Oh, don't keep repeating everything I say. She's dumped your kids on us.

Jim: Don't talk about my children like that!

June: She says we've got to move in here and look after them, or rather you've got to look after them, give up your job and look after the house. And she wants to move into my flat!

Jim: That's bloody ridiculous!

June: Of course it's bloody ridiculous! But you should have thought of all this. She's your wife! And they're your children!

Jim: I'll see if my sister can come over -- oh, no, they're away in America! Don't worry -- we'll sort something out.

June (angrily): We won't sort anything out. You'll sort things out!

She storms out into the hall, opens the front door and slams it behind her.

Jim follows her, opens the front door and calls out anxiously:

Jim: June!

There is no reply. He looks up the stairs, sighs and comes back into the room, taking off his scarf and putting it on the kitchen table.

Then he looks at his watch, and goes quickly out into another, invisible, room. After a few seconds we hear the strains of the television programme "Match of the Day".

He comes back into the room, goes to the refrigerator and takes out a can of beer. He is about to open it, when a child's voice calls from upstairs.

Little boy's voice: Daddy, can I have a glass of water!

Girl's voice: I'm thirsty, too, Daddy!

He hurls the can savagely into a corner of the room.

Jim (angrily): Bloody women!

CURTAIN