

IF I WERE YOU

(A Play)



J Gerrard lives alone in a lonely cottage. An intruder, who is a criminal, enters his cottage. He intends to murder Gerrard and take on his identity. Does he succeed?

SCENE: A small cottage interior. There is an entrance back right (which may be curtained). Another door to the left must be a practical door. The furniture is simple, consisting of a small table towards the left, a chair or two, and a divan rather upstage on the right. On the table is a telephone.

(When the curtain rises Gerrard is standing by the table making a phone call. He is of medium height, and wearing horn-rimmed glasses.... He is dressed in a lounge suit and a great coat. His voice is cultured.)

GERRARD : WELL, tell him to phone up directly. I must know... Yes, I expect I'll still be here, but you mustn't count on that... In about ten minutes' time. Right-ho. Goodbye.

(He puts down the phone and goes to the divan on the left, where there is a travelling bag, and starts packing. Whilst he is thus engaged, another man, similar in build to Gerrard enters from the right silently — revolver in hand. He is flashily dressed in an overcoat and a soft hat. He bumps accidentally against the table, and at the sound Gerrard turns quickly.)

GERRARD : *(pleasantly)* Why, this is a surprise, Mr— er—

INTRUDER : I'm glad you're pleased to see me. I don't think you'll be pleased for long. Put those paws up!

GERRARD : This is all very melodramatic, not very original, perhaps, but...

INTRUDER : Trying to be calm and —er—

GERRARD : 'Nonchalant' is your word, I think.

INTRUDER : Thanks a lot. You'll soon stop being smart. I'll make you crawl. I want to know a few things, see.

GERRARD : A n y t h i n g
you like.
I know all
the answers.
But before
we begin I
should like
to change
my position;
you may be
comfortable,
but I am not.



INTRUDER : Sit down
there, and no funny business. (*Motions to a chair, and seats himself
on the divan by the bag.*) Now then, we'll have a nice little talk about
yourself!

GERRARD : At last a sympathetic audience! I'll tell you the story of my life. How as a
child I was stolen by the gypsies, and why at the age of thirty-two, I find
myself in my lonely Essex cottage, how....

INTRUDER : Keep it to yourself, and just answer my questions. You live here alone?
Well, do you?

GERRARD : I'm sorry. I thought you were telling me, not asking me. A question of
inflection; your voice is unfamiliar.

INTRUDER : (*with emphasis*) Do you live here alone?

GERRARD : And if I don't answer?

INTRUDER : You've got enough sense not to want to get hurt.

GERRARD : I think good sense is shown more in the ability to avoid pain than in the
mere desire to do so. What do you think, Mr— er—

INTRUDER : Never mind my name. I like yours better, Mr Gerrard. What are your
Christian names?

GERRARD : Vincent Charles.

INTRUDER : Do you run a car?

GERRARD : No.

INTRUDER : That's a lie. You're not dealing with a fool. I'm as smart as you and

- smarter, and I know you run a car. Better be careful, wise guy!
- GERRARD : Are you American, or is that merely a clever imitation?
- INTRUDER : Listen, this gun's no toy. I can hurt you without killing you, and still get my answers.
- GERRARD : Of course, if you put it like that, I'll be glad to assist you. I do possess a car, and it's in the garage round the corner.
- INTRUDER : That's better. Do people often come out here?
- GERRARD : Very rarely. Surprisingly few people take the trouble to visit me. There's the baker and the greengrocer, of course; and then there's the milkman — quite charming, but no one so interesting as yourself.
- INTRUDER : I happen to know that you never see tradespeople.
- GERRARD : You seem to have taken a considerable amount of trouble. Since you know so much about me, won't you say something about yourself? You have been so modest.
- INTRUDER : I could tell you plenty. You think you're smart, but I'm the top of the class round here. I've got brains and I use them. That's how I've got where I have.
- GERRARD : And where precisely have you got? It didn't require a great brain to break into my little cottage.
- INTRUDER : When you know why I've broken into your little cottage, you'll be surprised, and it won't be a pleasant surprise.
- GERRARD : With you figuring so largely in it, that is understandable. By the way, what particular line of crime do you embrace, or aren't you a specialist?
- INTRUDER : My speciality's jewel robbery. Your car will do me a treat. It's certainly a dandy bus.
- GERRARD : I'm afraid jewels are few and far between in the wilds of Essex.
- INTRUDER : So are the cops. I can retire here nicely for a little while.
- GERRARD : You mean to live with me? A trifle sudden isn't it; you've not been invited.
- INTRUDER : You won't be here long; so I didn't trouble to ask.
- GERRARD : What do you mean?
- INTRUDER : This is your big surprise. I'm going to kill you.

- GERRARD : A little harsh, isn't it?
- INTRUDER : (*with heavy sarcasm*) Yeah, I'll be sorry to do it. I've taken a fancy to you, but it's just got to be done.
- GERRARD : Why add murder to your other crimes? It's a grave step you're taking.
- INTRUDER : I'm not taking it for fun. I've been hunted long enough. I'm wanted for murder already, and they can't hang me twice.
- GERRARD : You're planning a gratuitous double, so to speak. Admitted you've nothing to lose, but what have you to gain?
- INTRUDER : I've got freedom to gain. As for myself, I'm a poor hunted rat. As Vincent Charles Gerrard I'm free to go places and do nothing. I can eat well and sleep and without having to be ready to beat it at the sight of a cop.
- GERRARD : In most melodramas the villain is foolish enough to delay his killing long enough to be frustrated. You are much luckier.
- INTRUDER : I'm O.K. I've got a reason for everything. I'm going to be Vincent Charles Gerrard, see. I've got to know what he talks like. Now I know. That posh stuff comes easy. This is Mr V.C. Gerrard speaking. (*Pantomime of phoning, in imitation cultured voice.*) And that's not all. (*He stands up.*) Get up a minute (*Gerrard stands.*) Now take a look at me.
- GERRARD : You're not particularly decorative.
- INTRUDER : No! Well, that goes for you, too. I've only got to wear specs and I'll be enough like you to get away with it.
- GERRARD : What about your clothes? They'll let you down if you're not careful.
- INTRUDER : That'll be all right. Yours will fit me fine.
- GERRARD : That is extremely interesting, but you seem to miss the point of my remark. I said, you were luckier than most melodramatic villains. It was not a tribute to your intelligence. You won't kill me for a very good reason.
- INTRUDER : So that's what you think.
- GERRARD : You'll let me go, and thank God you didn't shoot sooner.
- INTRUDER : Come on. What's on your mind! Better be quick. This conversation bores me.
- GERRARD : Your idea is to elude the police by killing me and taking on my identity?

- INTRUDER : Yes, I like the idea.
- GERRARD : But are you sure it's going to help you?
- INTRUDER : Now listen here. I've got this all planned. I did a job in town. Things went wrong and I killed a cop. Since then I've done nothing but dodge.
- GERRARD : And this is where dodging has brought you?
- INTRUDER : It brought me to Aylesbury. That's where I saw you in the car. Two other people saw you and started to talk. I listened. It looks like you're a bit queer — kind of a mystery man.
- GERRARD : A mystery which I propose to explain.
- INTRUDER : (*disregarding him*) You phone your orders and sometimes you go away suddenly and come back just the same. Those are just the things I want to do. Hearing about you was one of my luckiest breaks.
- GERRARD : Apparently you haven't the intelligence to ask why I am invested in this cloak of mystery.
- INTRUDER : (*preparing to shoot*) As I said before, this conversation bores me.
- GERRARD : Don't be a fool. If you shoot, you'll hang for sure. If not as yourself, then as Vincent Charles Gerrard.
- INTRUDER : What is this?
- GERRARD : This is your big surprise. I said you wouldn't kill me and I was right. Why do you think I am here today and gone tomorrow, never see tradespeople? You say my habits would suit you. You are a crook. Do you think I am a Sunday-school teacher?

The game's up as far as I'm concerned. Things went wrong with me. I said it with bullets and got away. Unfortunately they got one of my men, and found things the fool should have burnt. Tonight I'm expecting trouble. My bag's packed ready to clear off. There it is.

- INTRUDER : It's a bag all right and this is a gun all right. What's all this?
- GERRARD : That's a disguise outfit; false moustaches and what not. Now do you believe me?
- INTRUDER : (*musingly*) I don't know.



- GERRARD : For God's sake clear that muddled head of yours and let's go. Come with me in the car. I can use you. If you find it's a frame, you've got me in the car, and you've still got your gun.
- INTRUDER : May be you're right.
- GERRARD : Then don't waste time. *(Goes and picks up hat and bag.)*
- INTRUDER : Careful, boss, I'm watching you.
- GERRARD : I have got a man posted on the main road. He'll ring up if he sees the police, but I don't want to leave... *(telephone bell rings)* Come on! They're after us. Through here straight to the garage.
- INTRUDER : How do I know that you are telling the truth?
- GERRARD : Oh, don't be a fool. Look for yourself.
- (Gerrard opens door and steps away. Intruder leans forward to inspect it, with his side towards Gerrard, but with the revolver ready. As he turns his head, Gerrard gives him a push into the cupboard, knocking the revolver out of his hand. He slams the door and locks it, picks up the revolver and goes to the phone, where he stands with the gun pointed at the cupboard door.)*
- INTRUDER : *(rattles door and shouts)* Let me out of here!
- GERRARD : Hello. Yes, speaking. Sorry I can't let you have the props in time for rehearsal, I've had a spot of bother — quite amusing. I think I'll put it in my next play. Listen, can you tell our friend the Sergeant to come up here at once? You'll probably find him in the Public Bar.

DOUGLAS JAMES

Glossary:

melodrama	'melə,drɑ:mə	dramatic, shocking, or highly emotional than the situation demands.
gypsies	'dʒɪp.sɪz	somebody with nomadic life.
inflection	ɪn'flekʃən	the way in which the sound of your voice changes during speech.
dandy	'dændi	very good, excellent, or first-rate.
trifle	'traɪfl	something that has little or no importance, significance, or value.
gratuitous	grə'tʃjuɪtəs	not necessary.
dodge	dɒdʒ	to avoid something unpleasant.



Thinking about the Text

Answer these questions:

1. “At last a sympathetic audience.”
 - i. Who says this?
 - ii. Why does he say it?
 - iii. Is he sarcastic or serious?
2. Why does the intruder choose Gerrard as the man whose identity he wants to take on?
3. “I said it with bullets.”
 - i. Who says this?
 - ii. What does it mean?
 - iii. Is it the truth? What is the speaker’s reason for saying this?
4. What is Gerrard’s profession? Quote the parts of the play that support your answer.
5. “You’ll soon stop being smart.”
 - i. Who says this?
 - ii. Why does the speaker say it?
 - iii. What according to the speaker will stop Gerrard from being smart?
6. “They can’t hang me twice.”
 - i. Who says this?
 - ii. Why does the speaker say it?
7. “A mystery I propose to explain.” What is the mystery the speaker proposes to explain?
8. “This is your big surprise.”
 - i. Where has this been said in the play?
 - ii. What is the surprise?



Language work

I Choose the correct word from the pairs given in brackets.

1. The (site, cite) of the accident was (ghastly/ghostly).
2. Our college (principle/principal) is very strict.
3. I studied (continuously/continually) for eight hours.

4. The fog had an adverse (affect/effect) on the traffic.
5. Cezanne, the famous French painter, was a brilliant (artist/artiste).
6. The book that you gave me yesterday is an extraordinary (collage/college) of science fiction and mystery.
7. Our school will (host/hoist) an exhibition on cruelty to animals and wildlife conservation.
8. Screw the lid tightly onto the top of the bottle and (shake/shape) well before using the contents.

II. Irony is when we say one thing but mean another, usually the opposite of what we say. When someone makes a mistake and you say, “Oh! that was clever!”, that is irony. You’re saying ‘clever’ to mean ‘not clever’.

Expressions we often use in an ironic fashion are:

- Oh, wasn’t that clever!/Oh that was clever!
- You have been a great help, I must say!
- You’ve got yourself into a lovely mess, haven’t you?
- Oh, very funny! How funny!

We use a slightly different tone of voice when we use these words ironically.

Read the play carefully and find the words and expressions Gerrard uses in an ironic way. Then say what these expressions really mean. Two examples have been given below. Write down three more such expressions along with what they really mean.

What the author says

Why, this is a surprise, Mr—er—

At last a sympathetic audience!

What he means

He pretends that the intruder is a social visitor whom he is welcoming. In this way he hides his fear.

He pretends that the intruder wants to listen to him, whereas actually the intruder wants to find out information for his own use.

Using a word differently

A word can mean different things in different contexts. Look at these three sentences:

- The students are taught to respect different cultures.
- The school is organising a cultural show.
- His voice is cultured.

In the first sentence, ‘culture’ (noun) means way of life; in the second, ‘cultural’ (adjective) means connected with art, literature and music; and in the third, ‘cultured’ (verb) means sophisticated, well mannered. Usually a dictionary helps you identify the right meaning by giving you signposts.

Look at the dictionary entry on ‘culture’ from **Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary** (Noun, verb, adjective, adverb, synonyms, etc. are signposts which help you locate the right meaning and usage, and give information about the part of speech that the word is.)

Look up the dictionary entries for the words sympathy, familiarity, comfort, care, and surprise. Use the information given in the dictionary and complete the table.

Noun	Adjective	Adverb	Verb	Meaning
sympathy				
familiarity				
comfort				
care				
surprise				
love				
beauty				
thought				
hope				
fear				

Writing work

I. Which of the words below describe Gerrard and which describe the Intruder?

smart	humorous	clever
beautiful	cool	confident
flashy	witty	nonchalant

Write a paragraph each about Gerrard and the Intruder to show what qualities they have.

II Convert the play into a story (150–200 words). Your story should be as exciting and as witty as the play. Provide a suitable title to it.

Discussion

1. Imagine you are Gerrard. Tell your friend what happened when the Intruder broke into your house.
[Clues: Describe (i) the intruder—his appearance, the way he spoke, his plan, his movements, etc., (ii) how you outwitted him.]
2. Enact the play in the class. Pay special attention towards given in italics before dialogue. These words will tell you whether the dialogue has to be said in a happy, sarcastic or ironic tone and how the characters move and what they do as they speak. Read these carefully before you enact the play.

Suggested Reading

The Bet by Miles Malleeson.

The Miracle Merchant by Saki.

Tongue Twister

Mr. See owned a saw.
And Mr. Soar owned a seesaw.
Now See's saw sawed Soar's seesaw
Before Soar saw See,
Which made Soar sore.
Had Soar seen See's saw
Before See sawed Soar's seesaw,
See's saw would not have sawed
Soar's seesaw.
So See's saw sawed Soar's seesaw.
But it was sad to see Soar so sore
Just because See's saw sawed
Soar's seesaw!

