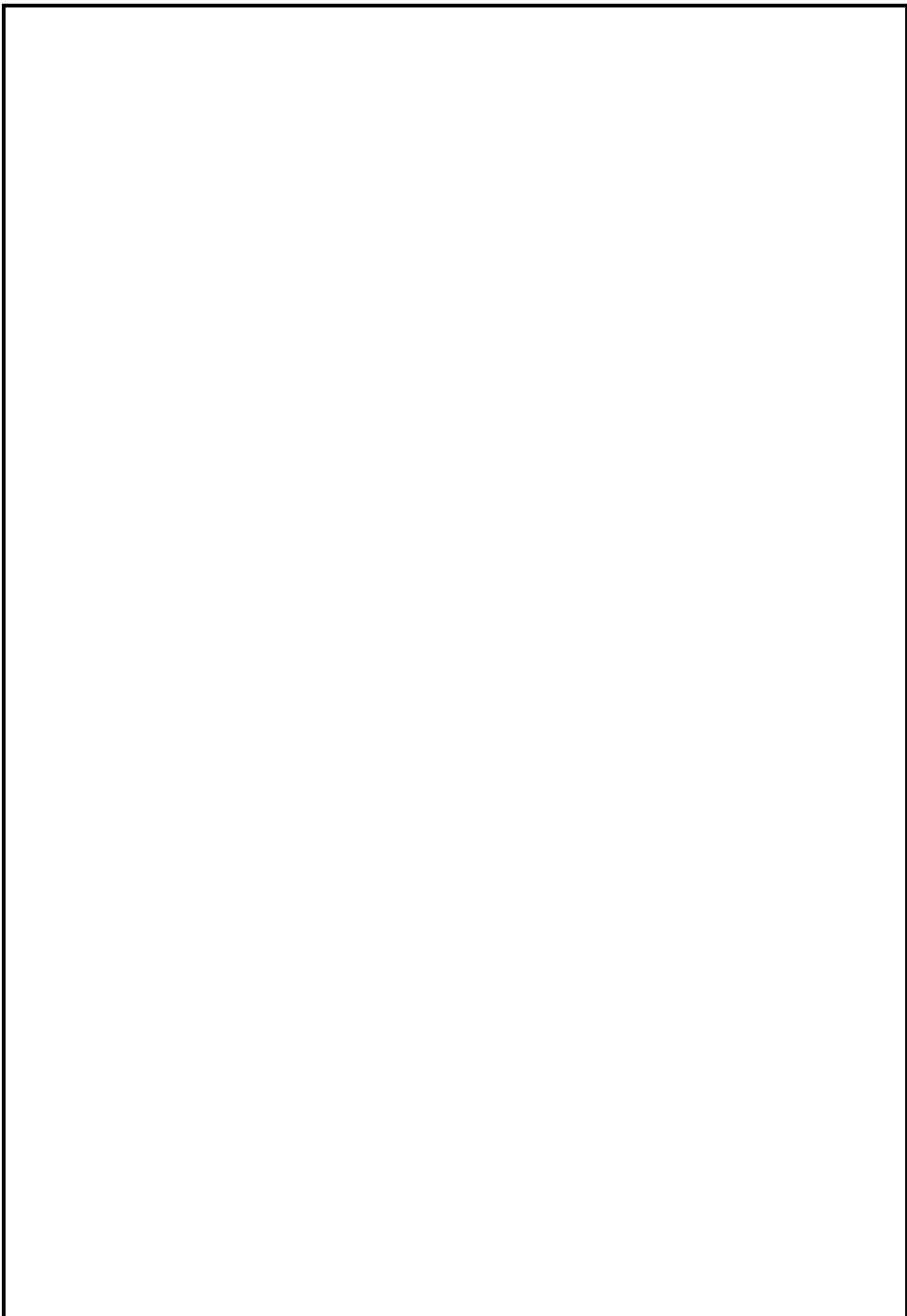


The 20 Minute
An Inspector Calls

JB Priestley



ACT ONE

The dining-room of a fairly large suburban house, belonging to a prosperous manufacturer... not cosy and homelike. The lighting should be pink and intimate until the INSPECTOR arrives, and then it should be brighter and harder.

Four BIRLINGS and GERALD are seated at the table. ARTHUR BIRLING is a heavy-looking, rather portentous man in his middle fifties with fairly easy manners but rather provincial in his speech. His wife is about fifty, a rather cold woman and her husband's social superior. SHEILA is a pretty girl in her early twenties, very pleased with life and rather excited. GERALD CROFT is an attractive chap about thirty, rather too manly to be a dandy but very much the easy well-bred young man-about-town. ERIC is in his early twenties, not quite at ease, half shy, half assertive. They have had a good dinner...and are pleased with themselves.

BIRLING You ought to like this port, Gerald... it's exactly the same port your father gets.
SHEILA I'd hate for you to know all about port – like one of these purple-faced old men.
BIRLING I'm treating Gerald like one of the family. And I'm sure he won't object.
GERALD I insist on being one of the family now. I've been trying long enough, haven't I?
SHEILA Yes – except for all last summer, when you never came near me...
GERALD I was awfully busy at the works all that time.
SHEILA Yes, that's what *you* say.
MRS B When you're married you'll realize that men with important work to do sometimes have to spend nearly all their time and energy on their business. You'll have to get used to that, just as I had.
SHEILA I don't believe I will.
ERIC suddenly guffaws.
SHEILA You're squiffy.
MRS B What an expression, Sheila!
ERIC If you think that's the best she can do –
SHEILA Don't be an ass, Eric.
MRS B Arthur, what about this famous toast of yours?
BIRLING Well, Gerald, I know you agreed to...this quiet little family party. It's a pity Sir George and – er – Lady Croft can't be with us... It's one of the happiest days of my life. Your engagement to Sheila means a tremendous lot to me. You're just the kind of son-in-law I always wanted. Your father and I have been friendly rivals in business for some time now – and now you've brought us together – for lower costs and higher prices.
GERALD Hear, hear!
BIRLING (raising his glass) So here's wishing the pair of you – the very best that life can bring.
ERIC All the best! She's got a nasty temper sometimes – but she's not bad really. Good old Sheila!
SHEILA Chump! I can't drink to this, can I? When do I drink?
GERALD You can drink to me.
SHEILA You be careful – or I'll start weeping.
GERALD Perhaps this will help to stop it.

He produces a ring case.

SHEILA Now I really feel engaged.

MRS B Well, it came just at the right moment. That was clever of you, Gerald.

BIRLING Are you listening, Sheila? After all, I don't often make speeches at you...
(He holds them for a moment before continuing.)

I speak as a hard-headed businessman... You can ignore all this silly pessimistic talk. When you marry, you'll be marrying at a very good time. There's a lot of wild talk about possible labour trouble. Don't worry. We've passed the worst of it. We're in for a time of steadily increasing prosperity.

GERALD I believe you're right, sir.

BIRLING You'll hear some people say that war's inevitable. And to that I say – fiddlesticks! I say there isn't a chance of war. Look at the progress we're making... the *Titanic* – she sails next week – forty-six thousand eight hundred tons – and unsinkable, absolutely unsinkable. Now you three young people, just listen to this. Let's say, in 1940, you may be giving a little party like this. There'll be peace and prosperity everywhere... We hard-headed business men – we've had experience – and we know.

MRS B Yes, of course, dear. Eric, I want you a minute.

She and SHEILA and ERIC go out.

BIRLING There's something I'd like to mention. I have an idea that your mother...feels you might have done better for yourself socially... But there's a fair chance that I might find my way into the next Honours List – so long as we behave ourselves, don't get into a police court or start a scandal – eh? *(Laughs complacently.)*

GERALD *(Laughs)* You seem to be a nice well-behaved family –

ERIC enters.

ERIC What's the joke? Started telling stories?

BIRLING No... I don't want to lecture you two fellows again. But what so many of you don't seem to understand now...is that a man has to make his own way – has to look after himself... But the way some of these cranks talk and write now, you'd think everybody has to look after everybody else, as if we were all mixed up together like bees in a hive – community and all that nonsense.

We hear the sharp ring of the front doorbell. EDNA enters.

EDNA Please, sir, an inspector's called.

BIRLING Show him in here. It may be something about a warrant.

GERALD *(Lightly)* Sure to be. Unless Eric's been up to something. *(Nodding confidentially to Birling.)* And that would be awkward, wouldn't it?

ERIC Here, what do you mean? I don't think it's very funny.

The INSPECTOR enters. He creates at once an impression of massiveness, solidity and purposefulness. He speaks carefully, weightily, and has a disconcerting habit of looking hard at the person he addresses before actually speaking.

INSPECTOR Mr Birling?

BIRLING Have a glass of port – or a little whisky?

INSPECTOR No, thank you, Mr Birling. I'm on duty.

BIRLING You're new aren't you? I was an alderman for years – and Lord Mayor two years ago – so I know the Brumley police officers pretty well...

INSPECTOR Two hours ago a young woman died in the Infirmary. She'd swallowed a lot of

strong disinfectant. Burnt her inside out, of course. She'd left a letter and a sort of diary. Like a lot of these young women who get into various kinds of trouble, she'd used more than one name. But her original name – her real name – was Eva Smith. Do you remember her, Mr Birling? She was employed in your works at one time. I found a photograph of her in her lodgings. Perhaps you'd remember her from that.

INSPECTOR takes a photograph and goes to BIRLING.

GERALD *(Showing annoyance)* Any particular reason why I shouldn't see this girl's photograph, Inspector?

INSPECTOR One person and one line of enquiry at a time.

BIRLING You've had enough of that port, Eric.

INSPECTOR I think you remember Eva Smith now, don't you, Mr Birling?

BIRLING She was one of my employees and then I discharged her. Let me see – it must have been in the early autumn of nineteen-ten. Perhaps I ought to explain first that this is Mr Gerald Croft – the son of Sir George Croft – you know, Crofts Limited? We've been modestly celebrating his engagement to my daughter, Sheila.

INSPECTOR I see. Then I'd prefer you to stay.

BIRLING *(Somewhat impatiently)* Look – there's nothing mysterious – or scandalous – about this business. As it happened...nearly two years ago, obviously it has nothing whatever to do with the wretched girl's suicide. Eh, Inspector?

INSPECTOR What happened to her then may have determined what happened to her afterwards, and what happened to her afterwards may have driven her to suicide. A chain of events.

BIRLING I can't accept any responsibility. If we were all responsible for everything that happened to everybody we'd had anything to do with, it would be very awkward, wouldn't it?

INSPECTOR Very awkward.

BIRLING I remember her quite well now. A good worker. The foreman told me he was ready to promote her. They were averaging about twenty-two and six. They wanted the rates raised. I refused, of course.

INSPECTOR Why?

BIRLING I don't like that tone.

INSPECTOR It's my duty to ask questions.

BIRLING Well, it's my duty to keep labour costs down. Does that satisfy you? We were paying the usual rates and if they didn't like those rates, they could go and work somewhere else. It's a free country, I told them.

ERIC It isn't if you can't go and work somewhere else.

INSPECTOR Quite so.

BIRLING Look – just you keep out of this. You hadn't even started in the works when this happened. So they went on strike. That didn't last long, of course.

GERALD Not if it was just after the holidays. They'd all be broke – if I know them.

BIRLING Right, Gerald. Well, we let them all come back – at the old rates – except the four or five ring-leaders. Eva Smith was one of them. She'd had a lot to say – far too much – so she had to go.

GERALD You couldn't have done anything else.

ERIC He could have kept her on. I call it tough luck.

BIRLING Rubbish! If you don't come down sharply on some of these people, they'd soon be asking for the earth.

INSPECTOR They might. But after all it's better to ask for the earth than to take it.

BIRLING (*Staring at the INSPECTOR*) What did you say your name was?

INSPECTOR Goole. G. double O-L-E.

BIRLING How do you get on with our Chief Constable?

INSPECTOR I don't see much of him.

BIRLING Perhaps I ought to warn you that he's an old friend of mine.

ERIC Why shouldn't they try for higher wages? We try for the highest possible prices.

BIRLING (*Rather angrily*) Unless you brighten your ideas, you'll never be in a position to let anybody stay or tell anybody to go. It's about time you learnt to face a few responsibilities. That's something this public-school-and-Varsity life you've had doesn't seem to teach you. Have you any idea what happened to her after that? Get into trouble? Go on the streets?

INSPECTOR (*Rather slowly*) No, she didn't exactly go on the streets.
SHEILA has now entered.

SHEILA (*Gaily*) What's this about streets? (*Noticing the INSPECTOR.*) Oh – sorry. I didn't know.

BIRLING Just finishing.

INSPECTOR I'm afraid not.

BIRLING (*Angrily*) Look here, Inspector. I consider this uncalled-for and officious. I've half a mind to report you. I've told you all I know – and it doesn't seem to me very important – and now there isn't the slightest reason why my daughter should be dragged into this unpleasant business.

INSPECTOR (*Impressively*) I'm a police inspector, Miss Birling. This afternoon a young woman drank some disinfectant, and died.

SHEILA Oh – how horrible! Was it an accident?

INSPECTOR No. She wanted to end her life. She felt she couldn't go on any longer.

BIRLING Well, don't tell me that's because I discharged her from my employment nearly two years ago. I was quite justified.

GERALD I know we'd have done the same thing. Don't look like that Sheila.

SHEILA (*Rather distressed*) Sorry! It's just that I can't help thinking about this girl - destroying herself so horribly – and I've been so happy tonight. What was she like? Pretty?

INSPECTOR She wasn't very pretty when I saw her today.

BIRLING That's enough of that.

GERALD And I don't really see that this enquiry gets you anywhere, Inspector. It's what happened to her since she left Mr Birling's works that is important. And we can't help you there because we don't know.

INSPECTOR (*Slowly*) Are you sure you don't know?
He looks at GERALD, then at ERIC, then at SHEILA.

BIRLING You didn't come here just to see me, then? (*With a marked change of tone.*) Well, of course, if I'd known that earlier, I wouldn't have talked about reporting you. I'm sorry. You sure of your facts?

INSPECTOR Some of them – yes.

BIRLING I can't think they can be of any great consequence.

INSPECTOR The girl's dead though.

SHEILA What do you mean by saying that? You talk as if we were responsible –

BIRLING Do you know what happened to this girl after she left my works?

INSPECTOR Yes. She was out of work for the next two months. Both her parents were dead, so she'd had no home to go back to. With no relatives to help her, few friends, lonely, half-starved, she was feeling desperate. There are a lot of young women living that sort of existence in every city and big town in this country. If there weren't, the factories wouldn't know where to look for cheap labour. Ask your father.

SHEILA But these girls aren't cheap labour – they're people.

INSPECTOR *(Dryly)* I've had that notion myself from time to time. In fact, I've thought that it would do all us a bit of good if sometimes we tried to put ourselves in the place of these young women counting their pennies in their dingy little back bedrooms.

SHEILA What happened to her then?

INSPECTOR She was taken on in a shop – Milwards.

SHEILA Milwards! We go there – in fact, I was there this morning – *(archly to GERALD)* for *your* benefit.

INSPECTOR It seems she liked working there. She felt she was making a fresh start. After about a couple of months, they told her she'd have to go.

BIRLING Not doing her work properly?

INSPECTOR All she knew was – that a customer had complained about her – and so she had to go.

SHEILA *(Staring at him, agitated)* When was this? What – what did this girl look like? *He produces the photograph. She looks at it closely, recognizes it with a little cry, gives a half-stifled sob, and then runs out.*

ERIC She recognized her from the photograph, didn't she?

BIRLING *(Angrily)* Why the devil do you want to go upsetting the child like that?

INSPECTOR She's upsetting herself.

BIRLING We were having a nice little family celebration tonight. And a nasty mess you've made of it now, haven't you?

INSPECTOR *(Steadily)* That's more or less what I was thinking earlier tonight, when I was in the Infirmary looking at what was left of Eva Smith. A nice little promising life there, I thought, and a nasty mess somebody's made of it.

BIRLING looks as if about to make some retort, then thinks better of it, and goes out, closing the door sharply behind him. GERALD and ERIC exchange uneasy glances. The INSPECTOR ignores them.

GERALD I'd like to have a look at that photograph now, Inspector.

INSPECTOR One line of inquiry at a time. Otherwise we'll all be talking at once and won't know where we are.

ERIC *(Suddenly bursting out)* Look here – I've had enough of this.

INSPECTOR *(Dryly)* I dare say.

ERIC I've had a few drinks, including rather a lot of champagne. I think I'd better turn in.

INSPECTOR If you turn in, you might have to turn out again soon.

GERALD Getting a bit heavy-handed, aren't you, Inspector?

INSPECTOR If you're easy with me, I'm easy with you.

GERALD After all, we're respectable citizens and not criminals.

INSPECTOR Sometimes there isn't as much difference as you think.

Enter SHEILA, who looks as if she's been crying.

SHEILA *(Closing door)* You knew it was me all the time, didn't you? Did it make much difference to her?

INSPECTOR I'm afraid it did. It was the last real steady job she had.

SHEILA *(Miserably)* So I'm really responsible?

INSPECTOR No, not entirely. But you're partly to blame. Just as your father is.

ERIC But what did Sheila do?

SHEILA *(Distressed)* I went to the manager at Milwards and told him that if they didn't get rid of that girl, I'd never go near the place again and I'd persuade mother to close our account.

INSPECTOR And why did you do that?

SHEILA Because I was in a furious temper. When I was looking at myself in the mirror I caught sight of her smiling at the assistant, and I was furious with her. It was my own fault. *(Suddenly, to GERALD)* All right, Gerald, you needn't look at me like that. At least I'm trying to tell the truth. I expect you've done things you're ashamed of too. I'd gone in to try something on. It was an idea of my own – mother had been against it, and so had the assistant – but I insisted. As soon as I tried it on, I knew they'd been right. I looked silly in the thing. Well, this girl had brought the dress up from the workroom, and when the assistant – Miss Francis – had asked her something about it, this girl, to show us what she meant, had held the dress up, as if she was wearing it. And it just suited her. Well, when I tried the thing on and looked at myself and knew that it was all wrong, I caught sight of this girl smiling at Miss Francis – as if to say: 'Doesn't she look awful' – and I was absolutely furious. I went to the manager and told him that this girl had been very impertinent – and – and – *(She almost breaks down, but just controls herself.)* How could I know what would happen afterwards? If she'd been some miserably plain little creature, I don't suppose I'd have done it.

INSPECTOR You might be said to have been jealous of her. And so you used the power you had, as a daughter of a good customer, to punish the girl because she made you feel like that?

SHEILA Yes, but it didn't seem to be anything very terrible at the time. And if I could help her now, I would –

INSPECTOR *(Harshly)* Yes, but you can't. It's too late. She's dead.

SHEILA I'll never, never do it again to anybody. I've noticed them giving me a sort of look sometimes at Milwards. I feel now I can never go there again. Oh – why had this to happen?

INSPECTOR *(Sternly)* That's what I asked myself tonight as I was looking at that dead girl. Eva Smith lost her job with Birling and Company because the strike failed and they were determined not to have another one. At last she found another job in a big shop, and had to leave because you were annoyed with yourself and passed the annoyance on to her. Now she had to try something else. So first she changed her name to Daisy Renton –

GERALD *(Startled)* What? D'you mind if I give myself a drink, Sheila?

SHEILA merely nods, still staring at him.

INSPECTOR Where is your father, Miss Birling?

SHEILA He went into the drawing-room, to tell my mother what was happening here. Eric,

take the Inspector.

As ERIC moves, the INSPECTOR looks from SHEILA to GERALD, then goes out with ERIC.

SHEILA Well, Gerald?

GERALD *(Trying to smile)* Well what, Sheila?

SHEILA Oh don't be stupid. We haven't much time. You gave yourself away as soon as he mentioned her other name. You not only knew her but you knew her very well. Otherwise, you wouldn't look so guilty about it. When did you first get to know her? Were you seeing her last spring and summer, when you hardly came near me and said you were so busy? Were you? Yes, of course you were.

GERALD I'm sorry, Sheila. But it was all over and done with last summer. I don't come into this suicide business. For God's sake, don't say anything to the Inspector. We can keep it from him.

SHEILA *(Laughs rather hysterically)* Why – you fool – *he knows*. And I hate to think how much he knows that we don't know yet. You'll see. You'll see.

She looks at him almost in triumph. He looks crushed. The door slowly opens and the INSPECTOR appears, looking steadily and searchingly at them.

INSPECTOR Well?

END OF ACT ONE

ACT TWO

Scene and situation are exactly as they were at the end of Act One. The INSPECTOR remains at the door for a few moments looking at SHEILA and GERALD. Then he comes forward, leaving the door open behind him.

INSPECTOR *(To GERALD)* Well?

SHEILA *(With hysterical laugh, to GERALD)* You see? What did I tell you?

INSPECTOR What did you tell him?

GERALD *(With an effort)* Inspector, I think Miss Birling ought to be excused any more of this questioning. She's had a long, exciting and tiring day – we were celebrating our engagement, you know – and now she's obviously had about as much as she can stand. You heard her.

SHEILA He means that I'm getting hysterical now.

INSPECTOR Well, I've no more questions to ask you.

SHEILA But you haven't finished asking questions – have you? Then I'm staying.

GERALD Why should you? It's bound to be unpleasant and disturbing.

INSPECTOR And you think young women ought to be protected against unpleasant and disturbing things?

GERALD If possible – yes.

INSPECTOR Well, we know one young woman who wasn't, don't we?

GERALD I suppose I asked for that.

SHEILA Be careful you don't ask for any more, Gerald.

GERALD Why stay when you'll hate it?

SHEILA It can't be any worse for me than it has been. And it might be better.

GERALD *(Bitterly)* I see. You've been put through it – and now you want to see somebody else put through it.

SHEILA *(Bitterly)* So that's what you think I'm really like. I'm glad I realized it in time, Gerald. If you'd really loved me, you couldn't have said that. You've made up your mind I must obviously be a selfish, vindictive creature.

INSPECTOR *(Massively taking charge)* Allow me, Miss Birling. I can tell you why Miss Birling wants to stay on. She feels responsible. And if she leaves us now, she'll feel she's entirely to blame.

SHEILA *(Eagerly)* Yes, that's it. And I know I'm to blame – but I can't believe – I won't believe – it's simply my fault that in the end she – she committed suicide.

INSPECTOR *(Sternly to them both)* You see, if there's nothing else, we'll have to share our guilt.

SHEILA *(Staring at him)* Yes. That's true. You know. *(She goes close to him, wonderingly.)* I don't understand about you.

INSPECTOR There's no reason why you should.

He regards her calmly while she stares at him wonderingly and dubiously. Now MRS BIRLING enters, briskly and self-confidently, quite out of key with the little scene that has just passed. SHEILA feels this at once.

MRS B *(Smiling, social)* Good evening, Inspector. I'm Mrs Birling, y'know. While we'll be glad to tell you anything you want to know, I don't think we can help you much.

SHEILA No, Mother – please! I feel you're beginning all wrong. We all started like that – so confident, so pleased with ourselves...

MRS BIRLING looks from SHEILA to the INSPECTOR.

MRS B You seem to have made a great impression on this child, Inspector.

INSPECTOR *(Coolly)* We often do on the young ones. They're more impressionable.

MRS B In any case, I don't suppose for a moment that we can understand why this girl committed suicide. Girls of that class –

SHEILA *(Urgently, cutting in)* Mother, don't – please don't. For your own sake, as well as ours, you mustn't –

MRS B *(Annoyed)* Mustn't – what? Really, Sheila!

SHEILA *(Slowly, carefully now)* You mustn't try to build up a kind of all between us and that girl. The Inspector will just break it down.

MRS B I don't understand you. *(To INSPECTOR)* Do you?

INSPECTOR She's right.

MRS B *(Haughtily)* I beg your pardon! That is a trifle impertinent, Inspector.

SHEILA gives a short hysterical laugh.

Now, what is it, Sheila?

SHEILA Perhaps it's because impertinent is such a silly word. But, Mother, do stop before it's too late.

MRS B If you mean that the Inspector will take offence –

INSPECTOR *(Cutting in, calmly)* No, no. I never take offence.

MRS B It seems to me that we have more reason for taking offence.

INSPECTOR Let's leave *offence* out of it, shall we?

MRS B *(To INSPECTOR, rather grandly)* I realize that you may have to conduct some sort of enquiry, but I must say that so far you seem to be conducting it in a rather peculiar and offensive manner.

INSPECTOR Now what about Mr Birling?

MRS B He's just talking to my son, Eric, who seems to be in an excitable silly mood. I'm afraid he may have had too much to drink tonight.

INSPECTOR *(Cutting in)* Isn't he used to drinking?

MRS B No, of course not. He's only a boy.

INSPECTOR No, he's a young man. And some young men drink far too much.

SHEILA And Eric's one of them. This isn't the time to pretend that Eric isn't used to drink.

MRS B *(Staggered)* It isn't true. You know him, Gerald – and you're a man – you must know it isn't true.

GERALD I'm afraid it is, y'know.

MRS B *(Bitterly)* And this is the time you choose to tell me.

SHEILA That's what I meant when I talked about building up a wall that's sure to be knocked flat. It makes it all the harder to bear.

MRS B But it's you – and not the Inspector here – who's doing it –

SHEILA Yes, but don't you see? *He hasn't started on you yet.*

MRS B *(After pause, recovering herself)* If necessary I shall be glad to answer any questions. Though naturally I don't know anything about this girl.

INSPECTOR *(Gravely)* We'll see, Mrs Birling.

Enter BIRLING, who closes the door behind him.

BIRLING *(Rather hot, bothered)* I've been trying to persuade Eric to go to bed, but he says you told him to stay up.

INSPECTOR Because I shall want to talk to him, Mr Birling. He'll have to wait.

BIRLING (*Angrily*) Inspector, I've told you before, I don't like your tone nor the way you're handling this enquiry. And I don't propose to give you much more rope.

INSPECTOR You needn't give me any rope.

SHEILA (*Rather wildly, with laugh*) No, he's giving us the rope – so that we'll hang ourselves.

BIRLING (*To MRS BIRLING*) What's the matter with that child?

MRS B Over-excited. And she refuses to go. Well, come along – what is it you want to know?

INSPECTOR Mr Croft, when did you first get to know her?
An exclamation of surprise from BIRLING and MRS BIRLING.

GERALD Where did you get the idea that I did know her?

SHEILA It's no use, Gerald. You're wasting time.

INSPECTOR As soon as I mentioned the name Daisy Renton, you gave yourself away at once. When and where did you first meet her?

GERALD All right, if you must have it. I met her first, sometime in March last year, in the stalls bar at the Palace. I mean the Palace music hall here in Brumley –

SHEILA Well, we didn't think you meant Buckingham Palace.

GERALD You're going to be a great help, I can see. You're obviously going to hate this, so why on earth don't you leave us to it?

SHEILA I want to understand exactly what happens when a man says he's so busy at the works that he can hardly ever find time to come and see the girl he's supposed to be in love with. I wouldn't miss it for worlds –

INSPECTOR (*With authority*) Yes, Mr Croft...

GERALD I went down into the bar for a drink. It's a favourite haunt of women of the town. I didn't propose to stay long down there. I hate those hard-eyed dough-faced women. But then I noticed a girl who looked quite different. She was very pretty. My God! (*Distressed*) I've suddenly realized – taken it in properly – that she's dead. And probably between us we killed her.

SHEILA She looked young and fresh and charming and altogether out of place down there. Old Joe Meggarty, half-drunk and goggle-eyed, had wedged her into a corner with that obscene fat carcass of his –

MRS B Surely you don't mean Alderman Meggarty?

GERALD Of course I do. He's a notorious womanizer.

MRS B Well, really! Alderman Meggarty! I must say, we *are* learning something tonight.

GERALD The girl saw me looking at her and then gave me a glance that was nothing less than a cry for help. We went along to the County Hotel, and had a drink or two and talked. All she wanted was to talk – a little friendliness. I asked her questions about herself. She told me that her name was Daisy Renton, that she'd lost both parents. She also told me she'd had a job in one of the works here, and something about the shop too. What she did let slip was that she was desperately hungry.

INSPECTOR And then you decided to keep her – as your mistress?

GERALD I discovered that she was going to be turned out of the miserable back room she had. It happened that a friend of mine let me have the key to a nice set of rooms he had. I insisted on Daisy moving into these rooms and I made her take some money to keep her going there. I want you to understand that I didn't install her there so that I could make love to her. I made her go because I was sorry for her. I

didn't ask for anything in return. I became at once the most important person in her life – you understand?

INSPECTOR Were you in love with her?

SHEILA Just what I was going to ask!

BIRLING (*Angrily*) I really must protest –

INSPECTOR (*Turning on him sharply*) Why should you do any protesting? It was you who had the girl turned out in the first place.

BIRLING (*Rather taken aback*) Well, I only did what any employer might have done. I protest against the way in which my daughter, a young unmarried girl, is being dragged into this –

INSPECTOR (*Sharply*) Your daughter isn't living on the moon. She's here in Brumley too.

SHEILA Were you in love with her, Gerald?

GERALD (*Hesitatingly*) I didn't feel about her as she felt about me.

SHEILA (*With sharp sarcasm*) Of course not. You were the wonderful Fairy Prince. You must have adored it, Gerald.

GERALD All right – I did for a time.

SHEILA That's probably the best thing you've said tonight. At least it's honest.

MRS B I don't think we want any further details of this disgusting affair –

GERALD You know, it wasn't disgusting.

INSPECTOR When did this affair end?

GERALD In the first week of September. She was – very gallant – about it.

SHEILA (*With irony*) That was nice for you.

GERALD No, it wasn't. (*He waits a moment, then in a low, troubled tone*) She told me she'd been happier than she'd ever been before – but that she knew it couldn't last. I insisted on a parting gift of money to see her through to the end of the year. I got the idea that she thought of leaving Brumley. Did she?

INSPECTOR Yes. She kept a rough sort of diary. And she said there that she had to go away and be quiet and remember 'just to make it last longer'.

GERALD I see. In that case – as I'm rather more – upset – by this business than I probably appear to be – I'd be glad if you'd let me go. I'll come back.

SHEILA But just in case you forget – or decide not to come back, Gerald, I think you'd better take this with you. (*She hands him the ring.*)

GERALD I see. Well, I was expecting this.

SHEILA I don't dislike you as I did half an hour ago, Gerald. In fact, in some odd way, I rather respect you more than I've ever done before. But this has made a difference. You and I aren't the same people who sat down to dinner here. We'd have to start all over again, getting to know each other –

BIRLING Now, Sheila, I'm not defending him. But you must understand that a lot of young men –

SHEILA Don't interfere, please, Father. Gerald knows what I mean, and you apparently don't.

MRS B I think we've just about come to an end of this wretched business –

GERALD I don't think so. Excuse me.

He goes out. They watch him go in silence. We hear the front door slam.

SHEILA (*To INSPECTOR*) You know, you never showed him that photograph.

MRS B You have a photograph of this girl?

INSPECTOR Yes. I think you'd better look at it.

MRS B I don't see any particular reason why I should –

INSPECTOR Probably not. But you'd better look at it. (*He produces photograph and she looks hard at it.*) You recognize her? Of course, she might have changed lately, but I can't believe she could have changed so much.

MRS B I don't understand you, Inspector.

INSPECTOR You mean you don't choose to, Mrs Birling.

MRS B I beg your pardon!

BIRLING Look here, I'm not going to have this, Inspector. You'll apologise at once.

INSPECTOR Apologise for what – doing my duty?

BIRLING No, for being so offensive about it. I'm a public man –

INSPECTOR (*Massively*) Public men, Mr Birling, have responsibilities as well as privileges.

BIRLING Possibly. But you weren't asked to come here to talk to me about my responsibilities.

SHEILA Let's hope not. Though I'm beginning to wonder.

MRS B Does that mean anything, Sheila?

SHEILA We've no excuse for putting on airs and if we've any sense we won't try. I know jolly well you did in fact recognize her, from the way you looked. Can't you see, both of you, you're making it worse?

She turns away. We hear the front door slam again.

MRS B Gerald must have come back.

INSPECTOR Unless your son has just gone out.

BIRLING I'll see.

He goes out quickly. INSPECTOR turns to MRS BIRLING.

INSPECTOR Mrs Birling – you're a prominent member of the Brumley Women's Charity Organisation, aren't you? (*MRS BIRLING does not reply.*) It's an organization to which women in distress can appeal for help. Isn't that so?

MRS B (*With dignity*) Yes. We've done a great deal of useful work in helping deserving cases.

INSPECTOR There was a meeting of the interviewing committee two weeks ago?

MRS B I dare say there was.

INSPECTOR You know very well there was, Mrs Birling. You were in the chair.

MRS B And if I was, what business is it of yours?

INSPECTOR (*Severely*) Do you want me to tell you – in plain words?

Enter BIRLING, looking rather agitated.

BIRLING That must have been Eric. He was in one of his excitable queer moods, and even though we don't need him here –

INSPECTOR (*Cutting in, sharply*) We do need him here.

BIRLING He's probably just gone to cool off. He'll be back soon.

INSPECTOR (*Severely*) I hope so.

MRS B And why should you hope so?

INSPECTOR I'll explain when you've answered my questions, Mrs Birling.

BIRLING Is there any reason why my wife should answer questions from you, Inspector?

INSPECTOR You'll remember that Mr Croft told us that he hadn't spoken to or seen Eva Smith since last September. But Mrs Birling spoke to and saw her only two weeks ago.

BIRLING Is this true?

MRS B *(After a pause)* Yes, quite true.

INSPECTOR She appealed to your organization for help?

MRS B First, she called herself Mrs Birling – and naturally that was one of the things that prejudiced me against her case.

BIRLING And I should think so! Damned impudence!

SHEILA Mother, she's just died a horrible death – don't forget.

MRS B I'm very sorry. But I think she had only herself to blame.

INSPECTOR Was it owing to your influence that help was refused the girl?

MRS B Yes it was. I didn't like her manner. She'd impertinently made use of our name, though she pretended afterwards it just happened to be the first she thought of. She had to admit that the story she told at first – about a husband who'd deserted her – was quite false.

INSPECTOR Why did she want help?

MRS B You know very well why she wanted help.

INSPECTOR No, I don't. I know why she needed help. But as I wasn't there, I don't know what she asked from your committee. You have no hope of *not* discussing it, Mrs Birling.

MRS B If you think you can bring any pressure to bear upon me, Inspector, you're quite mistaken. Unlike the other three, I did nothing I'm ashamed of. I consider I did my duty. You have no power to make me change my mind.

INSPECTOR Yes I have.

MRS B No you haven't. Simply because I've done nothing wrong – and you know it.

INSPECTOR *(Very deliberately)* I think you did something terribly wrong – and that you're going to spend the rest of your life regretting it. I wish you'd been with me tonight in the Infirmary...

SHEILA *(Bursting in)* No, no, please! I've imagined it enough already.

INSPECTOR *(Very deliberately)* Then the next time you imagine it, just remember that this girl was going to have a child. It was because she was going to have a child that she went to your mother's committee.

MRS B I'll tell you what I told her. Go and look for the father of the child. It's his responsibility.

INSPECTOR That doesn't make it any the less yours. She needed not only money but advice, sympathy, friendliness. You've had children. You must have known what she was feeling. And you slammed the door in her face.

SHEILA *(With feeling)* Mother, I think it was cruel and vile.

BIRLING *(Dubiously)* I must say, Sybil, that when this comes out at the inquest, the Press might easily take it up –

MRS B *(Agitated now)* Oh, stop it, both of you. It wasn't I who had her turned out of her employment – which probably began it all. In the circumstances I think I was justified. She knew who the father was, and so I told her it was her business to make him responsible. She was claiming elaborate fine feelings and scruples that were simply absurd in a girl in her position.

INSPECTOR *(Very sternly)* Her position now is that she lies with a burnt-out inside on a slab. *(As BIRLING tries to protest, turns on him.)* Don't stammer and yammer at me again, man. I'm losing all patience with you people. *What did she say?*

MRS B *(Rather cowed)* She said that the father was only a youngster – silly and wild and drinking too much. He had given her money but she didn't want to take any more

money from him.

INSPECTOR Why didn't she want to take any more money from this boy?

MRS B Oh – she had some fancy reason. As if a girl of that sort would ever refuse money!

INSPECTOR *(Sternly)* I warn you, you're making it worse for yourself.

MRS B Her story was – he'd stolen it. It sounded ridiculous to me. So I was perfectly justified in advising my committee not to allow her claim for assistance.

INSPECTOR You're not even sorry now, when you know what happened to the girl?

MRS B I'm sorry she should have come to such a horrible end. But I accept no blame for it at all. I blame the young man who was the father of the child she was going to have. He should be made an example of.

INSPECTOR And if her story is true – that he was stealing money –

MRS B Then he'd be entirely responsible. And he ought to be dealt with very severely –

SHEILA *(With sudden alarm)* Mother – stop – stop! But don't you see –

MRS B *(Severely)* You're behaving like an hysterical child tonight. *(Sheila begins crying quietly. MRS BIRLING turns to the INSPECTOR.)* And if you'd take some steps to find this young man and then make sure that he's compelled to confess in public his responsibility, then you really would be doing your duty.

INSPECTOR No hushing up, eh? Make an example of the young man, eh? Public confession of responsibility – um?

MRS B I consider it your duty. And now no doubt you'd like to say good night.

INSPECTOR Not yet. I'm waiting. To do my duty.

MRS B *(Understanding now)* But surely... I mean... it's ridiculous. *(She stops, and exchanges a frightened glance with her husband.)*

BIRLING *(Terrified now)* Look Inspector, you're not trying to tell us that my boy – is mixed up in this – ?

INSPECTOR *(Sternly)* If he is, then we know what to do, don't we? Mrs Birling has just told us.

MRS B *(Agitated)* I don't believe it. I won't believe it.

SHEILA Mother – I begged you and begged you to stop –

INSPECTOR holds up a hand. We hear the front door. They waiting, looking towards the door.

ERIC enters, looking extremely pale and distressed. He meets their inquiring stress.

Curtain falls quickly.

END OF ACT TWO

ACT THREE

Exactly as at the end of Act Two. ERIC is standing just inside the room and the others are staring at him.

ERIC You know, don't you?

ERIC shuts the door and comes father in.

MRS B *(Distressed)* Eric, I can't believe it. You don't know what we've been saying.

SHEILA It's a good job for him he doesn't, isn't it?

ERIC *(Bitterly)* You haven't made it any easier for me, have you, Mother?

MRS B But I didn't know it was *you*. You're not the type – you don't get drunk –

SHEILA Of course he does. I told you he did.

ERIC *You* told her. Why, you little sneak!

SHEILA That's not fair, Eric. Don't forget – I've already been through it.

MRS B Sheila, I simply don't understand your attitude.

BIRLING Neither do I. If you'd had any sense of loyalty –

INSPECTOR *(Cutting in, smoothly)* There'll be plenty of time, when I've gone, for you all to adjust your family relationships. *(Turning to ERIC.)* Now then.

ERIC *(Miserably)* Could I have a drink first?

BIRLING *(Explosively)* No.

INSPECTOR *(Firmly)* Yes. He needs a drink now just to see him through.

ERIC goes for a whisky. His whole manner shows his familiarity with quick heavy drinking.

BIRLING *(Bitterly)* I understand a lot of things now I didn't understand before.

INSPECTOR When did you first meet this girl?

ERIC One night last November. In the Palace bar. I was a bit squiffy. I began talking to her, and stood her a few drinks. I was rather far gone by the time we had to go.

INSPECTOR Why had she gone there—?

ERIC She wasn't the usual sort. There was some woman who wanted her to go there. I never quite understood about that.

INSPECTOR You went with her to her lodgings that night?

ERIC Yes, I insisted – it seems. I was in that state when a chap easily turns nasty – and I threatened to make a row. And that's when it happened. And I didn't even remember – that's the hellish thing. Oh – my God! – how stupid it all is!

MRS B *(With a cry)* Oh – Eric – how could you?

BIRLING *(Sharply)* Sheila – take your mother along to the drawing room –

He goes to open the door while SHEILA takes her mother out. Then he closes it and comes in.

INSPECTOR When did you meet her again?

ERIC About a fortnight afterwards. I couldn't remember her name or where she lived. But I happened to see her again in the Palace bar. This time we talked a bit. She told me about herself and I talked too. I wasn't in love with her or anything – but I liked her – she was pretty and a good sport –

BIRLING *(Harshly)* So you had to go to bed with her?

ERIC Well, I'm old enough to be married, aren't I? And I hate these fat old tarts round the town – the ones I see some of your respectable friends with –

BIRLING *(Angrily)* I don't want any of that talk from you –

INSPECTOR *(Very sharply)* I don't want any of it from either of you. Did you arrange to see

each other after that?

ERIC Yes. And the next time – or the time after that – she told me she thought she was going to have a baby. I was in a hell of a state about it. She didn't want me to marry her. Said I didn't love her. In a way, she treated me – as if I were a kid. I insisted on giving her enough money to keep her going – until she refused to take any more –

INSPECTOR How much did you give her altogether?

ERIC I suppose – about fifty pounds all told.

BIRLING Where did you get fifty pounds from?

ERIC *(Miserably)* I got it – from the office –

BIRLING You mean – you stole the money?

MRS BIRLING and SHEILA come back.

MRS B I'm sorry Arthur. I had to know what's happening.

BIRLING *(Savagely)* Well, I can tell you. He's admitted he was responsible for the girl's condition, and now he's telling us he supplied her with money he stole from the office.

ERIC I intended to pay it back. I'd have managed somehow.

BIRLING I don't understand how you could take as much money as that out of the office without somebody knowing. I've got to cover this up as soon as I can. You damned fool – why didn't you come to me when you found yourself in this mess?

ERIC Because you're not the kind of father a chap could go to when he's in trouble.

BIRLING Your trouble is – you've been spoilt –

INSPECTOR *(Cutting in)* And my trouble is – that I haven't much time. You'll be able to divide the responsibility between you when I've gone. *(To ERIC.)* The girl discovered that this money you were giving her was stolen, didn't she?

ERIC *(Miserably)* Yes. She wouldn't take any more, and she didn't want to see me again. *(Sudden startled tone)* Here, but how did you know that?

SHEILA She told mother.

ERIC *(To MRS BIRLING)* She told you? Did she come here – but then she couldn't have done, she didn't even know I lived here. What happened? *(MRS BIRLING, distressed, shakes her head but does not reply.)* Tell me – what happened?

INSPECTOR *(With calm authority)* I'll tell you. She went to your mother's committee for help. Your mother refused that help.

ERIC *(Nearly at breaking point)* Then – you killed her. She came to you to protect me – you killed her – and the child she'd have had too – your own grandchild – damn you, damn you!

MRS B *(Very distressed now)* No – Eric – please – I didn't understand –

ERIC *(Almost threatening her)* You don't understand anything. You never did.

BIRLING *(Furious, intervening)* Why, you hysterical young fool – get back – or I'll –

INSPECTOR *(Taking charge, masterfully)* Stop! *(They are suddenly quiet, staring at him.)* And be quiet for a moment and listen to me. I don't need to know any more. Neither do you. This girl died a horrible death. But each of you helped to kill her. Never forget it. But then I don't think you ever will. Remember what you did, Mrs Birling. You turned her away when she most needed help. You refused her even the pitiable little bit of organized charity you had in your power to grant her. Remember what you did –

ERIC *(Unhappily)* My God – I'm not likely to forget.

INSPECTOR Just used her for the end of a stupid drunken evening, as if she was an animal, not a person. No, you won't forget. *(He looks at SHEILA.)*

SHEILA *(Bitterly)* I had her turned out of a job. I started it.

INSPECTOR You helped – but didn't start it. *(Rather savagely, to BIRLING.)* You started it. She wanted twenty-five shillings a week. You made her pay a heavy price for that. And now she'll make you pay a heavier price still.

BIRLING *(Unhappily)* I'd give thousands – yes, thousands –

INSPECTOR You're offering money at the wrong time, Mr Birling. *(He makes a move as if concluding the session.)* No, I don't think any of you will forget. Nor that young man Croft, though he at least had some affection for her and made her happy for a time. Well, Eva Smith's gone. And you can't do her any more harm. And you can't do her any good now, either. You can't even say, 'I'm sorry, Eva Smith.' But just remember this. One Eva Smith has gone – but there are millions and millions and millions of Eva Smiths and John Smiths still left with us, with their lives, their hopes and fears, their suffering and chance of happiness, all intertwined with our lives, and what we think and say and do. We don't live alone. We are members of one body. We are responsible for each other. And I tell you that the time will soon come when, if men will not learn that lesson, then they will be taught it in fire and blood and anguish. Good night.

He walks straight out, leaving them staring, subdued and wondering. SHEILA is still quietly crying. MRS BIRLING has collapsed into a chair. ERIC is brooding desperately. BIRLING hears the front door slam, then pours himself a drink, which he hastily swallows.

BIRLING *(Angrily to ERIC)* You're the one I blame for this. You don't realize yet all you've done. There'll be a public scandal. You don't seem to care about anything. I was almost certain for a knighthood in the next Honours List –

ERIC laughs rather hysterically, pointing at him.

ERIC Oh – for God's sake! What does it matter now?

BIRLING Apparently nothing matters to you. But it may interest you to know that until every penny of that money you stole is repaid, you'll work for nothing. And there's going to be no more of this drinking – and picking up women –

MRS B *(Coming to life)* I should think not. I'm absolutely ashamed of you.

ERIC I'm ashamed of you as well – both of you.

BIRLING Drop that. There's every excuse for what both your mother and I did – it turned out unfortunately, that's all –

SHEILA *(Scornfully)* That's all. I behaved badly too. I'm ashamed of it. But now you're beginning all over again to pretend that nothing much has happened –

BIRLING Nothing much has happened! Haven't I already said that there'll be a public scandal?

SHEILA The point is, you don't seem to have learnt anything.

BIRLING You're quite wrong there. And you don't want me to tell you what I've learnt, I hope. When I think of what I was feeling when the five of us sat down to dinner...

ERIC *(Cutting in)* You told us a man has to make his own way, and that we weren't to take any notice of these cranks who tell us that everybody has to look after everybody else. Yes – and then one of those cranks walked in. *(Laughs bitterly.)* I didn't notice you told him that it's every man for himself.

SHEILA (*Sharply attentive*) Is that when the Inspector came, just after father had said that? It's queer – very queer – (*she looks at them reflectively.*)

MRS B (*With some excitement*) I've been wondering myself.

SHEILA It doesn't much matter now, of course – but was he really a police inspector?

BIRLING Makes all the difference.

SHEILA Well, it doesn't to me. And it oughtn't to you, either. If all that's come out tonight is true, then it doesn't much matter who it was who made us confess. That's what's important – and not whether a man is a police inspector or not.

ERIC He was our police inspector all right.

MRS B Well, I must say his manner was quite extraordinary: so rude – so assertive –

BIRLING Then look at the way he talked to me. He must have known I was an ex-Lord Mayor and a magistrate. Besides – the way he talked. I mean, they don't talk like that. I've had dealings with dozens of them.

SHEILA But it doesn't make any real difference, y'know.

ERIC Sheila's right.

BIRLING (*Angrily*) You're the one it makes *most* difference to. He can't do anything to your mother and Sheila and me – but as for you, he can ruin you.

SHEILA (*Slowly*) We hardly ever told him anything he didn't know. Did you notice that?

BIRLING The fact is, you allowed yourselves to be bluffed. He was prejudiced from the start. Probably a Socialist or some sort of crank. Instead of standing up to him, you let him bluff you into talking about your private affairs.

ERIC (*Sulkily*) Well, I didn't notice you standing up to him.

There is a ring at the front door. They look at each other in alarm. GERALD appears.

GERALD I hope you don't mind my coming back? I had a special reason for coming. *They all look inquiringly at GERALD.*

BIRLING (*Excitedly*) You know something. What is it?

GERALD (*Slowly*) That man wasn't a police officer. I met a police sergeant I know down the road. He swore there wasn't any Inspector Goole or anybody like him on the force.

BIRLING (*Excitedly*) By Jingo! A fake!

MRS B (*Triumphantly*) Didn't I say I couldn't imagine a real police inspector talking like that to us?

BIRLING (*Beginning to move*) I'm going to make certain of this. Ring up Chief Constable – Colonel Roberts. (*At telephone.*) Colonel Roberts, please... Sorry to ring you up so late, but can you tell me if an Inspector Goole has joined your staff lately... I see... No, just a little argument we were having here... Good night. (*He puts down the telephone and looks at the others.*) That man definitely wasn't a police inspector. We've been had.

SHEILA (*Bitterly*) I suppose we're all nice people now.

BIRLING If you've nothing more sensible than that to say, Sheila, you'd better keep quiet. Somebody put that fellow up to coming here and hoaxing us. We ought to have seen through it.

MRS B I was the only one who didn't give in to him.

BIRLING (*To ERIC, who is restless*) Eric, sit down. You needn't stand there – as if – as if –

ERIC As if – what?

BIRLING As if you'd nothing to do with us. If anybody's up to the neck in this business, you are, so you'd better take some interest in it.

ERIC I take too much, that's my trouble.

SHEILA Mine too.

ERIC *(Bursting out)* You're beginning to pretend that nothing's really happened at all. And I can't see it like that. This girl's still dead, isn't she? The fact remains that I did what I did. And mother did what she did. And the rest of you... According to you, I ought to feel a lot better – *(To GERALD)* I stole some money, you might as well know – *(As BIRLING tries to interrupt)* I don't care, let him know.

SHEILA Eric's absolutely right. You're just beginning to pretend all over again.

BIRLING Look – for God's sake!

MRS B *(Protesting)* Arthur!

BIRLING They're just so damned exasperating. They just won't try to understand our position or to see the difference between a lot of stuff like this coming out in private and a downright public scandal.

ERIC *(Shouting)* And I say the girl's dead and we all helped to kill her – and that's what matters.

BIRLING *(Also shouting, threatening Eric)* And I say – either stop shouting or get out.

ERIC *(Quietly, bitterly)* I don't give a damn now whether I stay here or not. It doesn't alter the fact that we all helped to kill her.

GERALD But is it a fact? Because I say – there's no more real evidence we did than there was that that chap was a police inspector. It's a hoax of some kind. Very artfully, he bluffs us into confessing we've all been mixed up in this girl's life. *But how do you know it's the same girl?* Look here, Mr Birling. You sack a girl called Eva Smith. You've forgotten, but he shows you a photograph. Then he happens to know that Sheila once had a girl sacked from Milwards. He tells us it's this same Eva Smith.

SHEILA Yes. The same photograph.

GERALD How do you know it's the same photograph? We've no proof it was the same photograph and therefore no proof it was the same girl.

BIRLING *(Eagerly)* And there wasn't the slightest proof that this Daisy Renton was really Eva Smith. He could have been lying all the time.

GERALD Now what happened after I left?

MRS B I was upset because Eric had left the house... Then quite suddenly he said I'd seen Eva Smith only two weeks ago. And like a fool I said I had.

BIRLING She didn't call herself Eva Smith when she came to see you, did she?

MRS B No, of course she didn't. But, feeling so worried, I answered more or less as he wanted me to answer.

SHEILA Don't forget that he showed you a photograph, and you obviously recognised it.

GERALD Did anybody else see it? Then, don't you see, there's still no proof it was really the same girl. Did he ask you to identify a photograph, Eric?

ERIC He didn't need a photograph by the time he'd got round to me. But obviously it must have been the girl I knew who went to see mother. She said she had to have help because she wouldn't take any more stolen money.

GERALD Even then, that may have been all nonsense.

ERIC I don't see much nonsense about it when a girl kills herself. You lot may be letting yourselves out nicely, but I can't. Nor can mother. We did her in all right.

BIRLING Don't be in such a hurry to put yourself into court. That interview could have been a put-up job. The whole damned thing can have been a piece of bluff.

ERIC *(Angrily)* How can it? The girl's dead, isn't she?

GERALD What girl? There were probably four or five different girls. How do we know any girl killed herself today? We can settle that at once.

SHEILA How?

GERALD By ringing up the Infirmary. Either there's a dead girl there or there isn't. *(He goes to telephone. The others watch tensely.)* Is that the Infirmary? This is Mr Gerald Croft – of Crofts Limited... We're rather worried about one of our employees. Have you had a girl brought in this afternoon who committed suicide by drinking disinfectant? Yes, I'll wait... *(As he waits, the others show their nervous tension.)* Yes? ...You're certain of that... Well, thank you very much... *(He puts down the telephone and looks at them.)* No girl has died in there today. They haven't had a suicide for months.

BIRLING *(Triumphantly)* There you are! Proof positive! The whole story's just a lot of moonshine. *(He produces a huge sigh of relief.)* Nobody likes to be sold as badly as that – but – for all that *(he smiles at them all)* Gerald, have a drink.

MRS B *(Smiling)* I must say, you've argued this very cleverly, and I'm most grateful.

BIRLING Well, here's to us. Come on, Sheila, don't look like that. All over now.

SHEILA The worst part is. But you're forgetting one thing I still can't forget. Everything we said happened really had happened. If it didn't end tragically, that's lucky for us.

BIRLING *(Jovially)* But the whole thing's different now. Come, come, you can see that? *(Imitating INSPECTOR)* You all helped to kill her. *(Pointing at SHEILA and ERIC, and laughing)* I wish you could have seen the look on your faces when he said that.

SHEILA moves towards door.

SHEILA *(Tensely)* I want to get out of this. It frightens me the way you talk.

BIRLING *(Heartily)* Nonsense! You'll have a good laugh over it yet. Look, you'd better ask Gerald for that ring you gave back to him. Then you'll feel better.

SHEILA *(Passionately)* You're pretending everything's just as it was before. I tell you - whoever that Inspector was, it was anything but a joke. You began to learn something. And now you've stopped. You're ready to go on in the same old way.

BIRLING *(Amused)* And you're not, eh?

SHEILA No, because I remember what he made me feel. Fire and blood and anguish. And it frightens me the way you talk.

ERIC It frightens me too.

MRS B They're over-tired. In the morning they'll be as amused as we are.

GERALD Everything's all right now, Sheila. *(Holds up ring.)* What about this ring?

SHEILA No, not yet. It's too soon. I must think.

BIRLING *(Pointing to ERIC and SHEILA)* The famous younger generation who know it all. And they can't even take a joke –

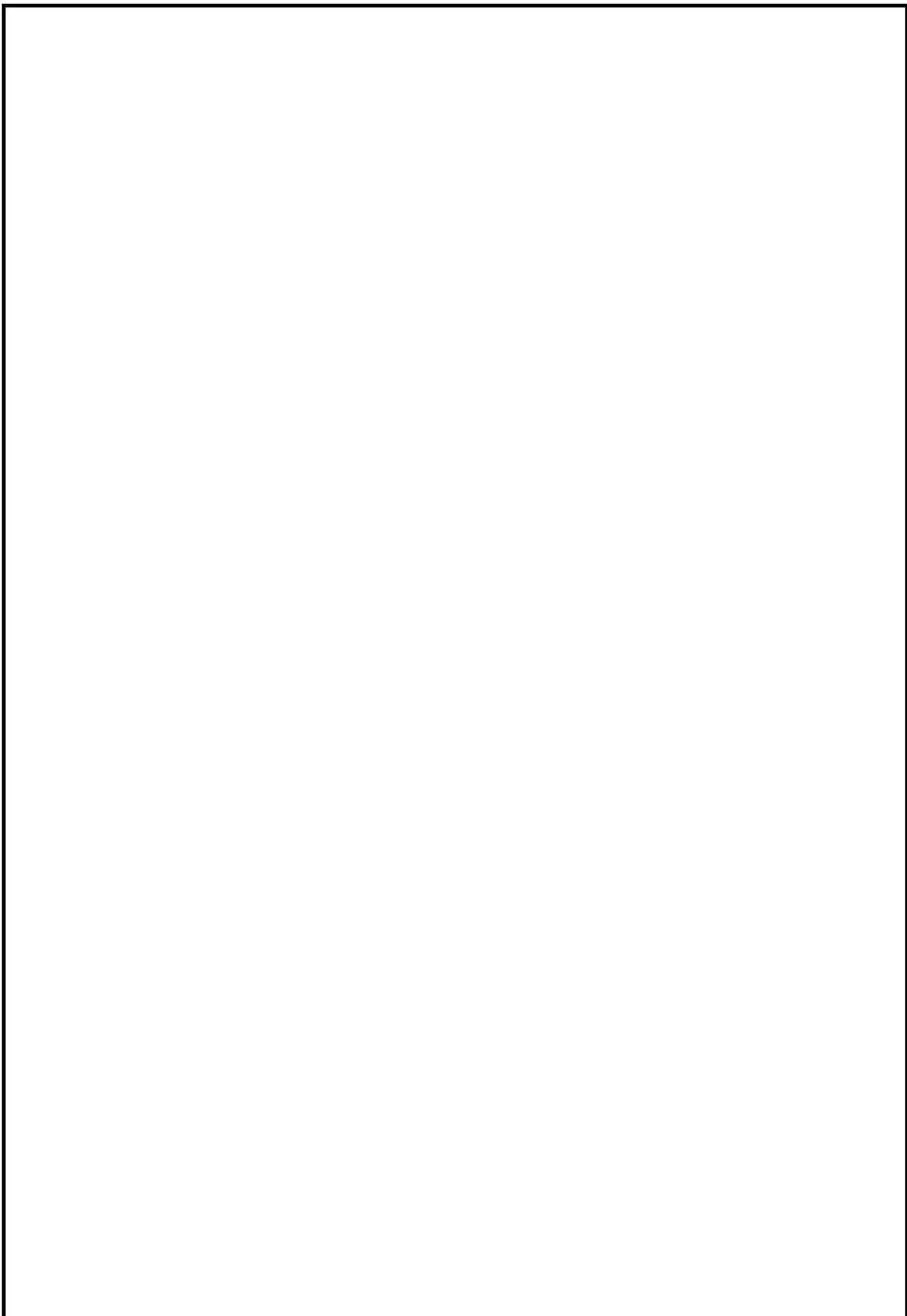
The telephone rings sharply. There is a moment's complete silence. BIRLING goes to answer it.

Yes? ...Mr Birling speaking... What? – here –

But obviously the other person has rung off. He puts the telephone down slowly and looks in a panic-stricken fashion at the others.

That was the police. A girl has just died – on her way to the Infirmary – after swallowing some disinfectant. And a police inspector is on his way here – to ask some – questions –

As they stare guiltily and dumbfounded, the curtain falls.



Forty-six thousand
eight hundred
tonnes...

