

Mrs Birling: 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.

//*He and Mrs Birling look at each other for a moment. Then Mrs Birling turns to sheila again*//

Mrs Birling: you're looking tired, dear. I think you ought to go to bed – and forget about this absurd business. You'll feel better in the morning.

Sheila: mother, I couldn't possibly go. Nothing could be worse for me. We've settled all that. I'm staying here until I know why that girl killed herself.

Mrs Birling: nothing but morbid curiosity.

Sheila: no it isn't.

Mrs Birling: please don't contradict me like that. And in any case I don't suppose for a moment that we can understand why the 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 Birling: (*annoyed*) mustn't – what? Really, sheila!

Sheila: (*slowly, carefully now*) you mustn't try to build up a kind of wall between us and that girl. If you do, then the inspector will just break it down. And it'll be all the worse when he does.

Mrs Birling: I don't understand you. (*to inspector.*) Do you?

Inspector: yes. And she'd right.

Mrs Birling: (*haughtily*) I beg your pardon!

Inspector: (*very plainly*) I said yes – I do understand her. And she's right.

Mrs Birling: that – I consider – is a trifle impertinent, inspector.

// *sheila gives short hysterical laugh*//  
now, what is it, sheila?

Sheila: I don't know. Perhaps it's because impertinent is such a silly word.

Mrs Birling: in any case....

Sheila: but, mother, do stop before it's too late.

Mrs Birling: if you mean that the inspector will take offence-

inspector: (*cutting in, clamly*) no, no. I never take offence.

Mrs Birling: i'm glad to hear it. Though I must add that it seems to me that we have more reason for taking offence.

Inspector: let's leave offence out of it, shall we?

Gerald: I think we'd better.

Sheila: so do I.

Mrs Birling: (*rebulking them*) I'm talking to the inspector now, if you don't mind. (*to inspector, rather grandly.*) I realize that you may have to conduct some sort of inquiry, but I must say that so far you seem to be conducting in a rather peculiar and offensive manner. You know of course that my husband was lord mayor only two years ago and that he's still a magistrate--

Gerald: (*cutting, rather impatiently*) Mrs Birling, the inspector knows all that. And I don't think it's a very good idea to remind him--

Sheila: (*cutting in*) It's crazy. Stop it, please, mother.

Inspector: (*imperturbable*) Yes. Now what about Mr Birling?

Mrs Birling: He's coming back in a moment. He's just talking to my son, Eric, who seems to be in an excitable silly mood.

Inspector: What's the matter with him?

Mrs Birling: Eric? Oh – I'm afraid he may have had rather too much to drink tonight. We were having a little celebration here--

inspector: (*cutting in*) isn't he used to drinking?

Mrs Birling: 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.

Mrs Birling: (*very sharply*) Sheila!

Sheila: (*urgently*) I don't want to get poor Eric into trouble. He's probably in enough trouble already. But we really must stop these silly pretences. This isn't the time to pretend that Eric isn't used to drink. He's been steadily drinking too much for the last two years.

Mrs Birling: (*staggered*) it isn't true. You know him, Gerald -and you're a man – you must know it isn't true.

Inspector: (*as Gerald hesitates*) Well, Mr Croft?

Gerald: (*apologetically, to Mrs Birling*) I'm afraid it is, y'know. Actually I've never seen much of him outside this house – but- well, I have gathered that he does drink pretty hard.

Mrs Birling: (*bitterly*) And this is the time you choose to tell me.

Sheila: yes, of course it is. That's what I meant when I talked about building up a wall that's sure to be knocked flat. It makes it all harder to bear.

Mrs Birling: 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 Birling: (*after a pause, recovering herself*) if necessary I shall be glad to answer any questions the inspector wishes to ask me. Though naturally I don't know anything about this girl.

Inspector: (*gravely*) we'll see, Mrs Birling.

*//enter birling, who closes door behind him//*

Birling: (*rather hot, bothered*) I've been trying to persuade Eric to go to bed, but he won't. Now he says you told him to stay up. Did you?

Inspector: Yes, I did.

Birling: why?

Inspector: because I shall want to talk to him, Mr Birling.

Birling: I can't see why you should, but if you must, then I suggest you do it now. Have him in and get it over, then let the lad go.

Inspector: no, I can't do that yet. I'm sorry, but he'll have to wait.

Birling: now look here, inspector--

inspector: (*cutting in, with authority*) he must wait his turn.