



J. B. Priestley

AN INSPECTOR CALLS

EDITED AND ILLUSTRATED BY
Ruth Benton Blackmore

Hodder Murray

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First published in 2006 by
Hodder Murray, an imprint of Hodder Education,
a member of the Hodder Headline Group
338 Euston Road
London NW1 3BH

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|-------------------|--------------------------|
| Impression number | 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 |
| Year | 2010 2009 2008 2007 2006 |

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Cover photo © Joshua Sheldon/Photonica/Getty Images
Typeset in Adobe Garamond 13pt by DC Graphic Design Limited, Swanley Village, Kent
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Martins the Printers, Berwick-upon-Tweed

A catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library

ISBN-10: 0340 92750 X
ISBN-13: 978 0340 92750 2

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About the play and the author

An Inspector Calls was first performed in London, in 1946, just after World War II, though the play is firmly set in 1912. It was a time of great uncertainty, two years before the outbreak of World War I. Unrest was spreading throughout Europe, and in Britain workers were beginning to question the absolute power of their bosses and to take group action in the form of strikes. Abroad, Kaiser Bill (King Wilhelm II of Germany) was trying his strength and war was threatening.

The workers were not alone in questioning the way society was ordered. Writers like Priestley, George Bernard Shaw and T. S. Eliot also wanted to change the world. They had a vision of a compassionate society in which people understood that their actions affected others and were prepared to take responsibility not only for themselves, but also for those around them.

J. B. Priestley was born in Bradford, Yorkshire, in 1894 and wrote many plays, essays and novels, until his death in 1984. He drew on his own experiences in his work, he left school at 16 and worked in a firm very much like Mr Birling's in the play. He was 20 years old when World War I broke out. He joined the army and experienced firsthand the 'fire, blood and anguish' that the Inspector prophesies in the play.

An Inspector Calls is a 'whodunit', with moments of suspense, cliff-hanger endings and a terrific twist at the end. The audience is drawn in to make guesses and judgements, and gradually to learn the truth along with the characters on stage. But what sort of truth do they learn, and exactly who is the Inspector?

Read the play and see what you think.

Cast of characters



Mr Arthur Birling

Founder of a successful and growing manufacturing business, he is important in the town as a major employer, has been Lord Mayor and is a magistrate



Gerald Croft

The son of another long-established and prosperous manufacturing family, aged about 30, Sheila's fiancé



Mrs Sybil Birling

Arthur's wife, a cold woman, conscious of her social position and, unlike her husband, born into wealth



Sheila Birling

The Birlings' daughter, in her early twenties, cared for and protected by her parents, and about to make a very useful marriage



Inspector Goole

Introduced as a police inspector investigating a suicide, he is a man who naturally dominates and has a disconcertingly direct gaze



Eric Birling

The Birlings' son, younger than his sister Sheila, not as confident as her, nor as at ease as Gerald



Edna

The Birlings' servant



Eva Smith

Present but unseen – her first contact with the Birlings was as a worker at the Birling factory ...



The Birlings' home, a large suburban villa in Brumley, a North Midlands industrial city. It is a spring evening in the year 1912 and the family are dining with a special guest.

Act I

Mr Arthur Birling makes one announcement and hints at another. Celebration is mixed with words of advice.

Now then, Sybil, you must take a little tonight. Special occasion, y'know.

Yes, go on, Mummy. You must drink our health.

Well, well – this is very nice. Very nice.



I'm treating Gerald like one of the family. And I'm sure he won't object.



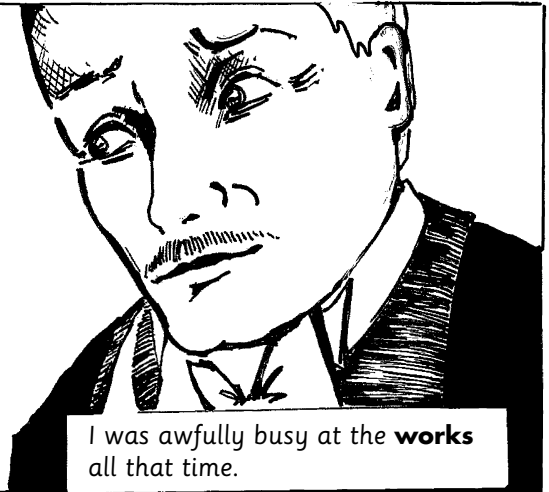
Go on, Gerald – just you object!



Wouldn't dream of it. I've been trying long enough, haven't I?

Haven't I?

Yes – except for all last summer, when you never came near me, and I wondered what had happened to you.



I was awfully busy at the **works** all that time.

That's what *you* say.



Now – what's the joke?

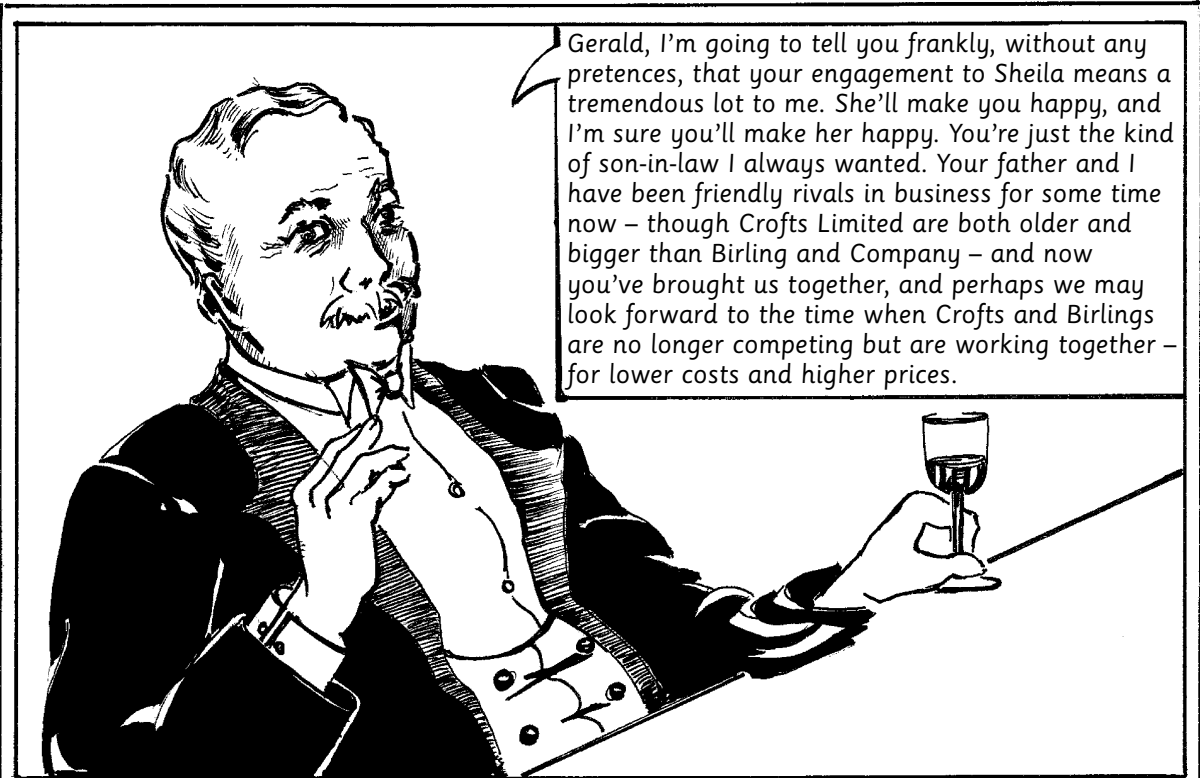


Suddenly I felt I just had to laugh.

You're **squiffy**.



works – manufactory
squiffy – early twentieth-century fashionable slang for being drunk



Gerald, I'm going to tell you frankly, without any pretences, that your engagement to Sheila means a tremendous lot to me. She'll make you happy, and I'm sure you'll make her happy. 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 – though Crofts Limited are both older and bigger than Birling and Company – and now you've brought us together, and perhaps we may look forward to the time when Crofts and Birlings are no longer competing but are working together – for lower costs and higher prices.

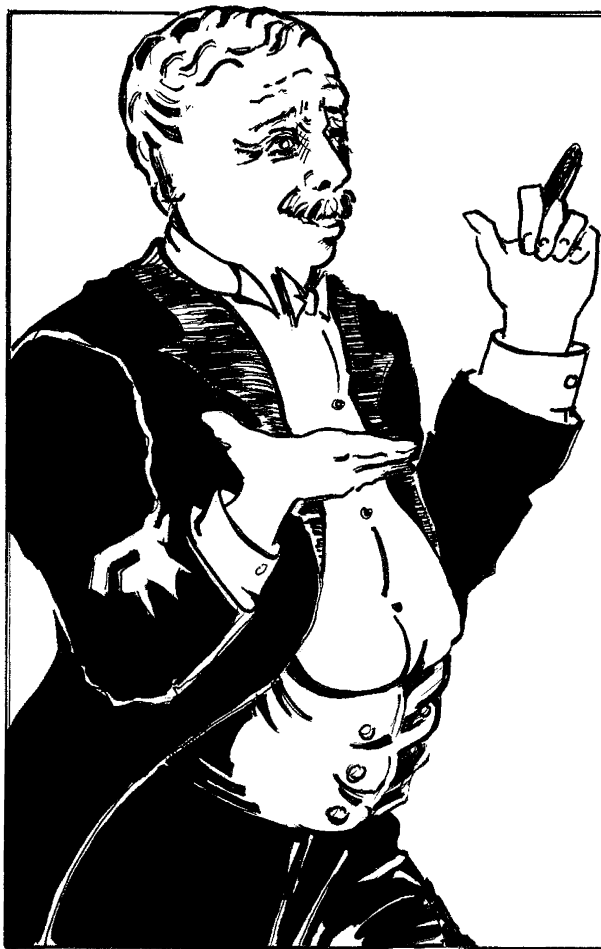


Hear, hear! And I think my father would agree to that.

Oh – Gerald – you've got it – is it the one you wanted me to have? I think it's perfect. Now I really feel engaged.

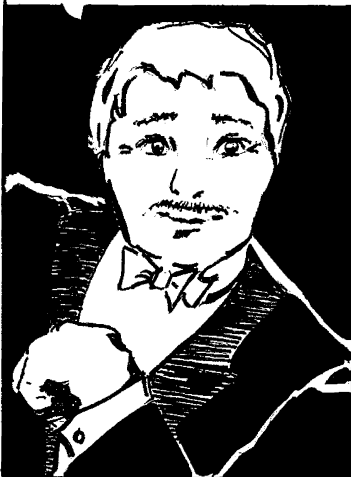


- What does Mr Birling like best about his daughter's engagement?
- 'Lower costs and higher prices' – who would benefit most from this and who would benefit least?

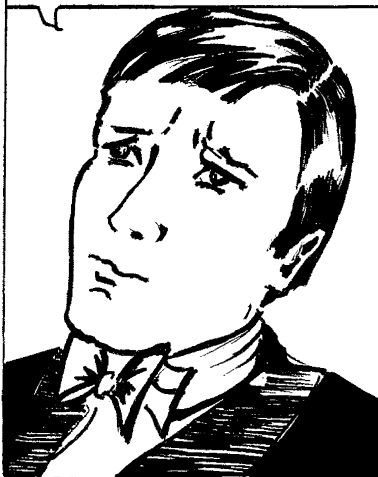


I just want to say this. There's a good deal of silly talk about these days – but – and I speak as a hard-headed business man, who has to take risks and knows what he's about – I say, you can ignore all this silly pessimistic talk. When you marry, you'll be marrying at a very good time. Yes, a very good time – and soon it'll be an even better time. Last month, just because the miners came out on strike, there's a lot of wild talk about possible labour trouble in the near future. Don't worry. We've passed the worst of it. We employers at last are coming together to see that our interests – and the **interests of Capital** – are properly protected. And we're in for a time of steadily increasing prosperity.

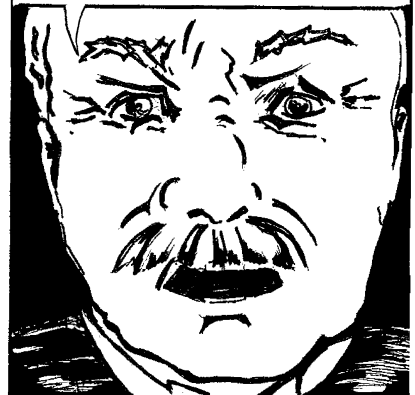
I believe you're right, sir.



What about war?



Just let me finish, Eric. You've a lot to learn yet. And I say there isn't a chance of war.

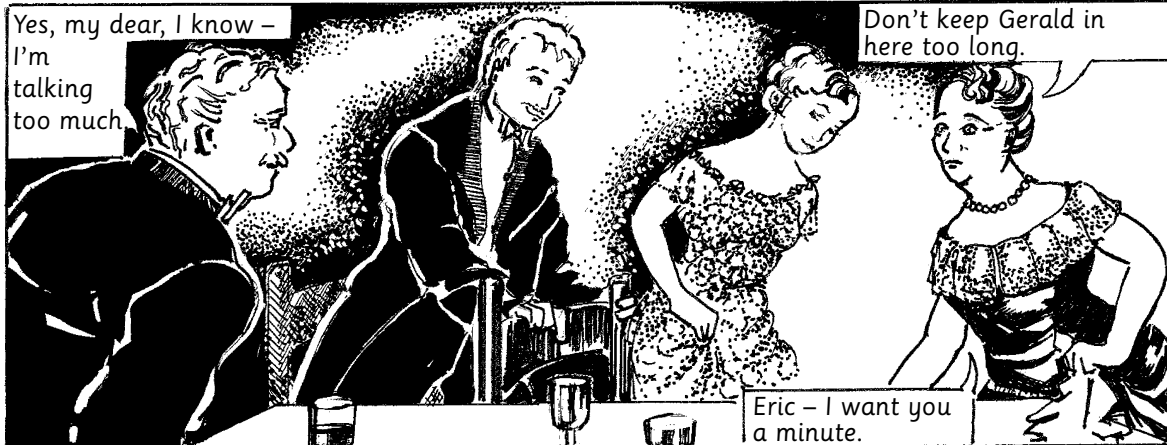


interests of Capital – of advantage to capitalism
Capitalism – a system of society based on the uses of money in private as well as public ownership



• Is Mr Birling right in his vision of the future? See page iv.

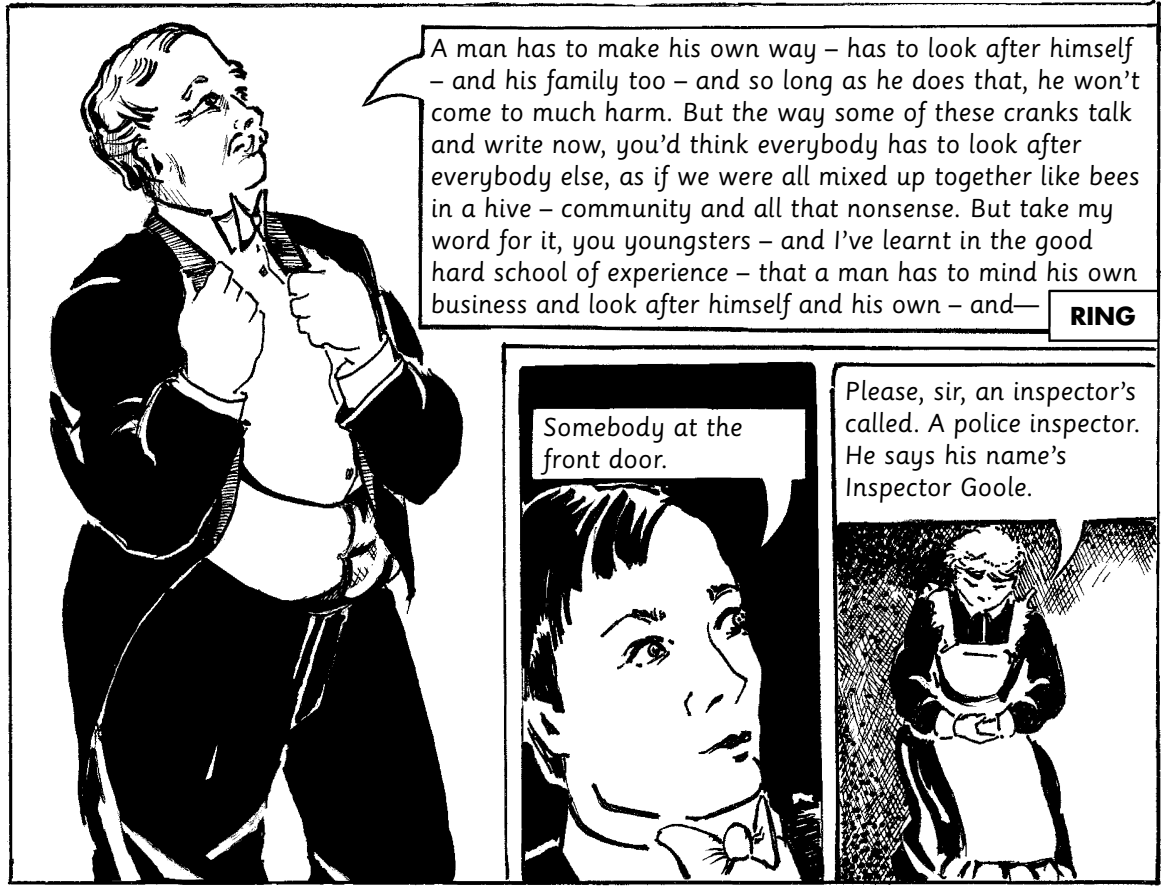
Mrs Birling and Sheila leave the room with Eric, Arthur Birling gives Gerald some information.



• After dinner it was customary for the ladies to withdraw – hence '(with)drawing-room' – leaving the gentlemen to their port.

• Why might Mr Birling confide in Gerald and not in his own son?

Eric enters the room while the other two are laughing.
Mr Birling's philosophy is interrupted by an unexpected visitor.



A man has to make his own way – has to look after himself – and his family too – and so long as he does that, he won't come to much harm. 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. But take my word for it, you youngsters – and I've learnt in the good hard school of experience – that a man has to mind his own business and look after himself and his own – and—

RING

Somebody at the front door.

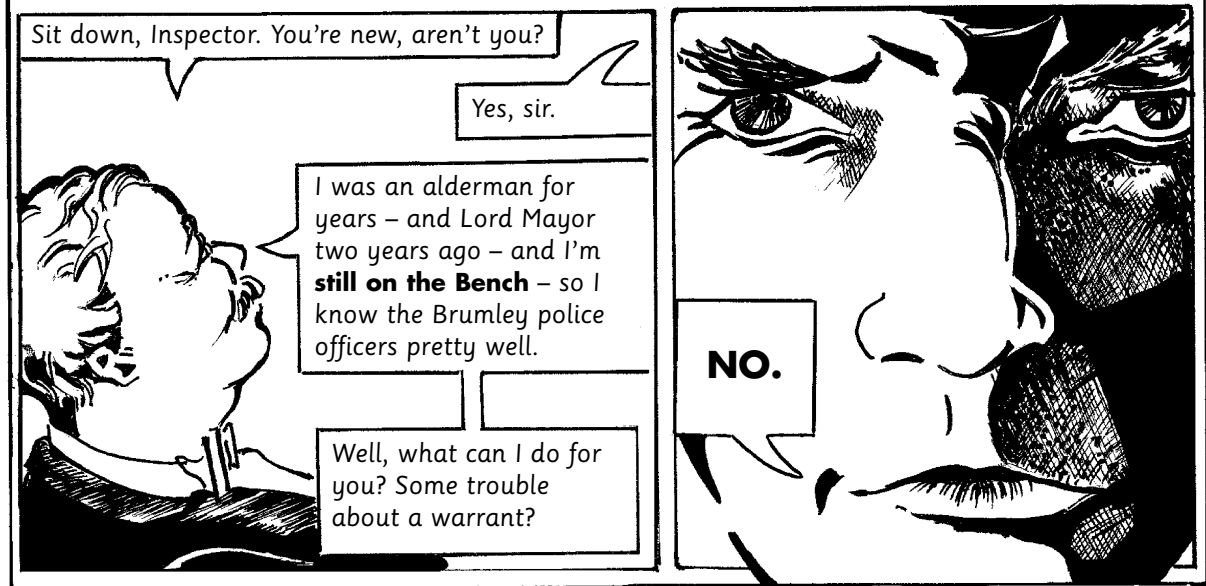
Please, sir, an inspector's called. A police inspector. He says his name's Inspector Goole.



• If every man or woman were to put the interest of themselves and their family above all others, how would it affect the larger community?



Inspector Goole.



Sit down, Inspector. You're new, aren't you?

Yes, sir.

I was an alderman for years – and Lord Mayor two years ago – and I'm **still on the Bench** – so I know the Brumley police officers pretty well.

Well, what can I do for you? Some trouble about a warrant?

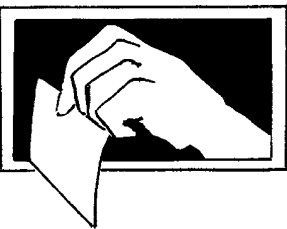
NO.

still on the Bench – still works for the law, he is a magistrate



• Why does Mr Birling give the inspector this information?

The inspector tells of a death, asks a question and shows a photograph to Arthur Birling. He doesn't show it to Gerald and Eric.



Birling: (*after a pause, with a touch of impatience*) Well, what is it then?

Inspector: I'd like some information, if you don't mind, Mr Birling. Two hours ago a young woman died in the Infirmary. She'd been taken there this afternoon because she'd swallowed a lot of strong disinfectant. Burnt her inside out, of course.

Eric: (*involuntary*) My God!

Inspector: Yes, she was in great agony. They did everything they could for her at the Infirmary, but she died. Suicide, of course.

Birling: (*rather impatiently*) Yes, yes. Horrid business. But I don't understand why you should come here, Inspector—

Inspector: (*cutting through, massively*) I've been round to the room she had, and she'd left a letter there 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.

Birling: (*thoughtfully*) Eva Smith?

Inspector: Do you remember her, Mr Birling?

Birling: (*slowly*) No – I seem to remember hearing that name – Eva Smith – somewhere. But it doesn't convey anything to me. And I don't see where I come into this.

Inspector: She was employed in your works at one time.

Birling: Oh – that's it, is it? Well, we've several hundred young women there, y'know, and they keep changing.

Inspector: This young woman, Eva Smith, was a bit out of the ordinary. I found a photograph of her in her lodgings. Perhaps you'd remember her from that.

Inspector takes a photograph, about postcard size, out of his pocket and goes to **Birling**. Both **Gerald** and **Eric** rise to have a look at the photograph, but the **Inspector** interposes himself between them and the photograph. They are surprised and rather annoyed. **Birling** stares hard, and with recognition, at the photograph, which the **Inspector** then replaces in his pocket. The **Inspector** makes it clear that he will control how and when things are done.

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

Inspector: (*coolly, looking hard at him*) There might be.

Eric: And the same applies to me, I suppose?

Inspector: Yes.

Gerald: I can't imagine what it could be.

Eric: Neither can I.

Birling: And I must say, I agree with them, Inspector.

Inspector: It's the way I like to go to work. One person and one line of inquiry at a time. Otherwise, there's a muddle.

Birling: I see. Sensible really. (*Moves restlessly, then turns.*) You've had enough of that port, Eric.

The Inspector is watching Birling and now Birling notices him.

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

Birling: Yes, I do. She was one of my employees and then I discharged her.

Eric: Is that why she committed suicide? When was this, Father?

Birling: Just keep quiet, Eric, and don't get excited. This girl left us nearly two years ago. Let me see – it must have been in the early autumn of nineteen-ten.

Inspector: Yes. End of September, nineteen-ten.

Birling: That's right.

Gerald: Look here, sir. Wouldn't you rather I was out of this?

Birling: I don't mind your being here, Gerald. And I'm sure you've no objection, have you, Inspector? Perhaps I ought to explain first that this is Mr Gerald Croft – the son of Sir George Croft – you know, Crofts Limited.

Inspector: Mr Gerald Croft, eh?

Birling: Yes. Incidentally we've been modestly celebrating his engagement to my daughter, Sheila.

Inspector: I see. Mr Croft is going to marry Miss Sheila Birling?

Gerald: (*smiling*) I hope so.

Inspector: (*gravely*) Then I'd prefer you to stay.



- How is Mr Birling's attitude to his son shown in the way that he speaks to him?
- Why does Mr Birling explain who Gerald is?