

Pillars of Society

by

Henrik Ibsen

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Dramatis Personae

KARSTEN BERNICK, a shipbuilder.

MRS. BERNICK, his wife.

OLAF, their son, thirteen years old.

MARTHA BERNICK, Karsten Bernick's sister.

JOHAN TONNESEN, Mrs. Bernick's younger brother.

LONA HESSEL, Mrs. Bernick's elder half-sister.

HILMAR TONNESEN, Mrs. Bernick's cousin.

DINA DORF, a young girl living with the Bernicks.

RORLUND, a schoolmaster.

RUMMEL, a merchant.

VIGELAND AND SANDSTAD, tradesman

KRAP, Bernick's confidential clerk.

AUNE, foreman of Bernick's shipbuilding yard.

MRS.RUMMEL.

HILDA RUMMEL, her daughter.

MRS.HOLT.

NETTA HOLT, her daughter.

MRS.LYNGE.

Townsfolk and visitors, foreign sailors, steamboat passengers, etc., etc.

(The action takes place at the Bernicks' house in one of the smaller coast towns in Norway)

ACT I

(SCENE.--A spacious garden-room in the BERNICKS' house. In the foreground on the left is a door leading to BERNICK'S business room; farther back in the same wall, a similar door. In the middle of the opposite wall is a large entrance-door, which leads to the street. The wall in the background is almost wholly composed of plate-glass; a door in it opens upon a broad flight of steps which lead down to the garden; a sun-awning is stretched over the steps. Below the steps a part of the garden is visible, bordered by a fence with a small gate in it. On the other side of the fence runs a street, the opposite side of which is occupied by small wooden houses painted in bright colours. It is summer, and the sun is shining warmly. People are seen, every now and then, passing along the street and stopping to talk to one another; others going in and out of a shop at the corner, etc.

In the room a gathering of ladies is seated round a table. MRS. BERNICK is presiding; on her left side are MRS. HOLT and her daughter NETTA, and next to them MRS. RUMMEL and HILDA RUMMEL. On MRS. BERNICK'S right are MRS. LYNGE, MARTHA BERNICK and DINA DORF. All the ladies are busy working. On the table lie great piles of linen garments and other articles of clothing, some half finished, and some merely cut out. Farther back, at a small table on which two pots of flowers and a glass of sugared water are standing, RORLUND is sitting, reading aloud from a book with gilt edges, but only loud enough for the spectators to catch a word now and then. Out in the garden OLAF BERNICK is running about and shooting at a target with a toy crossbow.

After a moment AUNE comes in quietly through the door on the right. There is a slight interruption in the reading. MRS. BERNICK nods to him and points to the door on the left. AUNE goes quietly across, knocks softly at the door of BERNICK'S room, and after a moment's pause, knocks again. KRAP comes out of the room, with his hat in his hand and some papers under his arm.)

Krap: Oh, it was you knocking?

Aune: Mr. Bernick sent for me.

Krap: He did--but he cannot see you. He has deputed me to tell you--

Aune: Deputed you? All the same, I would much rather--

Krap: --deputed me to tell you what he wanted to say to you. You must give up these Saturday lectures of yours to the men.

Aune: Indeed? I supposed I might use my own time--

Krap: You must not use your own time in making the men useless in working hours. Last Saturday you were talking to them of the harm that would be done to the workmen by our new machines and the new working methods at the yard. What makes you do that?

Aune: I do it for the good of the community.

Krap: That's curious, because Mr. Bernick says it is disorganising the community.

Aune: My community is not Mr. Bernick's, Mr. Krap! As President of the Industrial Association, I must--

Krap: You are, first and foremost, President of Mr. Bernick's shipbuilding yard; and, before everything else, you have to do your duty to the community known as the firm of Bernick & Co.; that is what every one of us lives for. Well, now you know what Mr. Bernick had to say to you.

Aune: Mr. Bernick would not have put it that way, Mr. Krap! But I know well enough whom I have to thank for this. It is that damned American boat. Those fellows expect to get work done here the way they are accustomed to it over there, and that--

Krap: Yes, yes, but I can't go into all these details. You know now what Mr. Bernick means, and that is sufficient. Be so good as to go back to the yard; probably you are needed there. I shall be down myself in a little while. --Excuse me, ladies! (Bows to the ladies and goes out through the garden and down the street. AUNE goes quietly out to the right. RORLUND, who has continued his reading during the foregoing conversation, which has been carried on in low tones, has now come to the end of the book, and shuts it with a bang.)

Rorlund: There, my dear ladies, that is the end of it.

Mrs. Rummel: What an instructive tale!

Mrs. Holt: And such a good moral!

Mrs. Bernick: A book like that really gives one something to think about.

Rorlund: Quite so; it presents a salutary contrast to what, unfortunately, meets our eyes every day in the newspapers and magazines. Look at the gilded and painted exterior displayed by any large community, and think what it really conceals!--emptiness and rottenness, if I may say so; no foundation of morality beneath it. In a word, these large communities of ours now-a-days are whited sepulchres.

Mrs. Holt: How true! How true!

Mrs. Rummel: And for an example of it, we need look no farther than at the crew of the American ship that is lying here just now.

Rorlund: Oh, I would rather not speak of such offscourings of humanity as that. But even in higher circles--what is the case there? A spirit of doubt and unrest on all sides; minds never at peace, and instability characterising all their behaviour. Look how

completely family life is undermined over there! Look at their shameless love of casting doubt on even the most serious truths!

Dina (without looking up from her work): But are there not many big things done there too?

Rorlund: Big things done--? I do not understand--.

Mrs. Holt (in amazement): Good gracious, Dina--!

Mrs. Rummel (in the same breath): Dina, how can you--?

Rorlund: I think it would scarcely be a good thing for us if such "big things" became the rule here. No, indeed, we ought to be only too thankful that things are as they are in this country. It is true enough that tares grow up amongst our wheat here too, alas; but we do our best conscientiously to weed them out as well as we are able. The important thing is to keep society pure, ladies--to ward off all the hazardous experiments that a restless age seeks to force upon us.

Mrs. Holt: And there are more than enough of them in the wind, unhappily.

Mrs. Rummel: Yes, you know last year we only by a hair's breadth escaped the project of having a railway here.

Mrs. Bernick: Ah, my husband prevented that.

Rorlund: Providence, Mrs. Bernick. You may be certain that your husband was the instrument of a higher Power when he refused to have anything to do with the scheme.

Mrs. Bernick: And yet they said such horrible things about him in the newspapers! But we have quite forgotten to thank you, Mr. Rorlund. It is really more than friendly of you to sacrifice so much of your time to us.

Rorlund: Not at all. This is holiday time, and--

Mrs. Bernick: Yes, but it is a sacrifice all the same, Mr. Rorlund.

Rorlund (drawing his chair nearer): Don't speak of it, my dear lady. Are you not all of you making some sacrifice in a good cause?--and that willingly and gladly? These poor fallen creatures for whose rescue we are working may be compared to soldiers wounded on the field of battle; you, ladies, are the kind-hearted sisters of mercy who prepare the lint for these stricken ones, lay the bandages softly on their wounds, heal them and cure them.

Mrs. Bernick: It must be a wonderful gift to be able to see everything in such a beautiful light.

Rorlund: A good deal of it is inborn in one--but it can be to a great extent acquired, too. All that is needful is to see things in the light of a serious mission in life. (To MARTHA:) What do you say, Miss Bernick? Have you not felt as if you were standing on firmer ground since you gave yourself up to your school work?

Martha: I really do not know what to say. There are times, when I am in the schoolroom down there, that I wish I were far away out on the stormy seas.

Rorlund: That is merely temptation, dear Miss Bernick. You ought to shut the doors of your mind upon such disturbing guests as that. By the "stormy seas"--for of course you do not intend me to take your words literally--you mean the restless tide of the great outer world, where so many are shipwrecked. Do you really set such store on the life you hear rushing by outside? Only look out into the street. There they go, walking about in the heat of the sun, perspiring and tumbling about over their little affairs. No, we undoubtedly have the best of it, who are able to sit here in the cool and turn our backs on the quarter from which disturbance comes.

Martha: Yes, I have no doubt you are perfectly right.

Rorlund: And in a house like this, in a good and pure home, where family life shows in its fairest colours--where peace and harmony rule-- (To MRS. BERNICK:) What are you listening to, Mrs. Bernick?

Mrs. Bernick (who has turned towards the door of BERNICK'S room): They are talking very loud in there.

Rorlund: Is there anything particular going on?

Mrs. Bernick: I don't know. I can hear that there is somebody with my husband.

(HILMAR TONNESEN, smoking a cigar, appears in the doorway on the right, but stops short at the sight of the company of ladies.)

Hilmar: Oh, excuse me-- (Turns to go back.)

Mrs. Bernick: No, Hilmar, come along in; you are not disturbing us. Do you want something?

Hilmar: No, I only wanted to look in here--Good morning, ladies. (To MRS. BERNICK :) Well, what is the result?

Mrs. Bernick: Of what?

Hilmar: Karsten has summoned a meeting, you know.

Mrs.Bernick: Has he? What about?

Hilmar: Oh, it is this railway nonsense over again.

Mrs.Rummel: Is it possible?

Mrs.Bernick: Poor Karsten, is he to have more annoyance over that?

Rorlund: But how do you explain that, Mr. Tonnesen? You know that last year Mr. Bernick made it perfectly clear that he would not have a railway here.

Hilmar: Yes, that is what I thought, too; but I met Krap, his confidential clerk, and he told me that the railway project had been taken up again, and that Mr. Bernick was in consultation with three of our local capitalists.

Mrs.Rummel: Ah, I was right in thinking I heard my husband's voice.

Hilmar: Of course Mr. Rummel is in it, and so are Sandstad and Michael Vigeland, "Saint Michael", as they call him.

Rorlund: Ahem!

Hilmar: I beg your pardon, Mr. Rorlund?

Mrs.Bernick: Just when everything was so nice and peaceful.

Hilmar: Well, as far as I am concerned, I have not the slightest objection to their beginning their squabbling again. It will be a little diversion, any way.

Rorlund: I think we can dispense with that sort of diversion.

Hilmar: It depends how you are constituted. Certain natures feel the lust of battle now and then. But unfortunately life in a country town does not offer much in that way, and it isn't given to every one to (turns the leaves of the book RORLUND has been reading). "Woman as the Handmaid of Society." What sort of drivel is this?

Mrs.Bernick: My dear Hilmar, you must not say that. You certainly have not read the book.

Hilmar: No, and I have no intention of reading it, either.

Mrs.Bernick: Surely you are not feeling quite well today.

Hilmar: No, I am not.

Mrs.Bernick: Perhaps you did not sleep well last night?

Hilmar: No, I slept very badly. I went for a walk yesterday evening for my health's sake; and I finished up at the club and read a book about a Polar expedition. There is something bracing in following the adventures of men who are battling with the elements.

Mrs.Rummel: But it does not appear to have done you much good, Mr. Tonnesen.

Hilmar: No, it certainly did not. I lay all night tossing about, only half asleep, and dreamt that I was being chased by a hideous walrus.

Olaf (who meanwhile has come up the steps from the garden): Have you been chased by a walrus, uncle?

Hilmar: I dreamt it, you duffer! Do you mean to say you are still playing about with that ridiculous bow? Why don't you get hold of a real gun?

Olaf: I should like to, but--

Hilmar: There is some sense in a thing like that; it is always an excitement every time you fire it off.

Olaf: And then I could shoot bears, uncle. But daddy won't let me.

Mrs.Bernick: You really mustn't put such ideas into his head, Hilmar.

Hilmar: Hm! It's a nice breed we are educating up now-a-days, isn't it! We talk a great deal about manly sports, goodness knows--but we only play with the question, all the same; there is never any serious inclination for the bracing discipline that lies in facing danger manfully. Don't stand pointing your crossbow at me, blockhead--it might go off!

Olaf: No, uncle, there is no arrow in it.

Hilmar: You don't know that there isn't--there may be, all the same. Take it away, I tell you!--Why on earth have you never gone over to America on one of your father's ships? You might have seen a buffalo hunt then, or a fight with Red Indians.

Mrs.Bernick: Oh, Hilmar--!

Olaf: I should like that awfully, uncle; and then perhaps I might meet Uncle Johan and Aunt Lona.

Hilmar: Hm!--Rubbish.

Mrs.Bernick: You can go down into the garden again now, Olaf.

Olaf: Mother, may I go out into the street too?

Mrs.Bernick: Yes, but not too far, mind.

(OLAF runs down into the garden and out through the gate in the fence.)

Rorlund: You ought not to put such fancies into the child's head, Mr. Tonnesen.

Hilmar: No, of course he is destined to be a miserable stay-at-home, like so many others.

Rorlund: But why do you not take a trip over there yourself?

Hilmar: I? With my wretched health? Of course I get no consideration on that account. But putting that out of the question, you forget that one has certain obligations to perform towards the community of which one forms a part. There must be some one here to hold aloft the banner of the Ideal.--Ugh, there he is shouting again !

The Ladies: Who is shouting?

Hilmar: I am sure I don't know. They are raising their voices so loud in there that it gets on my nerves.

Mrs.Bernick: I expect it is my husband, Mr. Tonnesen. But you must remember he is so accustomed to addressing large audiences.

Rorlund: I should not call the others low-voiced, either.

Hilmar: Good Lord, no!--not on any question that touches their pockets. Everything here ends in these petty material considerations. Ugh!

Mrs.Bernick: Anyway, that is a better state of things than it used to be when everything ended in mere frivolity.

Mrs.Lynge: Things really used to be as bad as that here?

Mrs.Rummel: Indeed they were, Mrs. Lynge. You may think yourself lucky that you did not live here then.

Mrs.Holt: Yes, times have changed, and no mistake, when I look back to the days when I was a girl.

Mrs. Rummel: Oh, you need not look back more than fourteen or fifteen years. God forgive us, what a life we led! There used to be a Dancing Society and a Musical Society-

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