Higgins [*eagerly*] Well, Mrs. Pearce: is it all right?

Mrs. Pearce [*at the door*] I just wish to trouble you with a word, if I may, Mr. Higgins.

Higgins. Yes, certainly. Come in. [*She comes forward*]. Don’t burn that, Mrs. Pearce. I’ll keep it as a curiosity. [*He takes the hat*].

Mrs. Pearce. Handle it carefully, sir, please. I had to promise her not to burn it; but I had better put it in the oven for a while.

Higgins [*putting it down hastily*] Oh! thank you. Well, what have you to say to me?

Pickering. Am I in the way?

Mrs. Pearce. Not at all, sir. Mr. Higgins: will you please be very particular what you say before the girl?

Higgins [*sternly*] Of course. I’m always particular about what I say. Why do you say this to me?

Mrs. Pearce [*unmoved*] No, sir: you’re not at all particular when you’ve mislaid anything or when you get a little impatient. Now it doesn’t matter before me: I’m used to it. But you really must not swear before the girl.

Higgins [*indignantly*] I swear! [*Most emphatically*] I never swear. I detest the habit. What the devil do you mean?

Mrs. Pearce [*stolidly*] That’s what I mean, sir. You swear a great deal too much. I don’t mind your damning and blasting, and what the devil and where the devil and who the devil —

Higgins. Really! Mrs. Pearce: this language from your lips!

Mrs. Pearce [*not to be put off*]— but there is a certain word I must ask you not to use. The girl has just used it herself because the bath was too hot. It begins with the same letter as bath. She knows no better: she learnt it at her mother’s knee. But she must not hear it from your lips.

Higgins [*loftily*] I cannot charge myself with having ever uttered it, Mrs. Pearce. [*She looks at him steadfastly. He adds, hiding an uneasy conscience with a judicial air*] Except perhaps in a moment of extreme and justifiable excitement.

Mrs. Pearce. Only this morning, sir, you applied it to your boots, to the butter, and to the brown bread.

Higgins. Oh, that! Mere alliteration, Mrs. Pearce, natural to a poet.

Mrs. Pearce. Well, sir, whatever you choose to call it, I beg you not to let the girl hear you repeat it.

Higgins. Oh, very well, very well. Is that all?

Mrs. Pearce. No, sir. We shall have to be very particular with this girl as to personal cleanliness.

Higgins. Certainly. Quite right. Most important.

Mrs. Pearce. I mean not to be slovenly about her dress or untidy in leaving things about.

Higgins [*going to her solemnly*] Just so. I intended to call your attention to that [*He passes on to Pickering, who is enjoying the conversation immensely*]. It is these little things that matter, Pickering. Take care of the pence and the pounds will take care of themselves is as true of personal habits as of money. [*He comes to anchor on the hearthrug, with the air of a man in an unassailable position*].

Mrs. Pearce. Yes, sir. Then might I ask you not to come down to breakfast in your dressing-gown, or at any rate not to use it as a napkin to the extent you do, sir. And if you would be so good as not to eat everything off the same plate, and to remember not to put the porridge saucepan out of your hand on the clean tablecloth, it would be a better example to the girl. You know you nearly choked yourself with a fishbone in the jam only last week.

Higgins I may do these things sometimes in absence of mind; but surely, I don’t do them habitually? [*Angrily*] By the way: my dressing-gown smells most damnably of benzine.

Mrs. Pearce. No doubt it does, Mr. Higgins. But if you will wipe your fingers —

Higgins [*yelling*] Oh very well, very well: I’ll wipe them in my hair in future.

Mrs. Pearce. I hope you’re not offended, Mr. Higgins.

Higgins [*shocked at finding himself thought capable of an unamiable sentiment*] Not at all, not at all. You’re quite right, Mrs. Pearce: I shall be particularly careful before the girl. Is that all?

Mrs. Pearce. No, sir. Might she use some of those Japanese dresses you brought from abroad? I really can’t put her back into her old things.

Higgins. Certainly. Anything you like. Is that all?

Mrs. Pearce. Thank you, sir. That’s all. [*She goes out*].