Pygmalion - Act I

di George Bernard Shaw (1913)

ACT I

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Covent Garden at 11.15 p.m. Torrents of heavy summer rain. Cab whistles blowing frantically in all directions. Pedestrians running for shelter into the market and under the portico of St. Paul's Church, where there are already several people, among them a lady and her daughter in evening dress. They are all peering out gloomily at the rain, except one man with his back turned to the rest, who seems wholly preoccupied with a notebook in which he is writing busily.

The church clock strikes the first quarter.

THE DAUGHTER: *in the space between the central pillars, close to the one on her left* I'm getting chilled to the bone. What can Freddy be doing all this time? He's been gone twenty minutes.

THE MOTHER: *on her daughter's right* Not so long. But he ought to have got us a cab by this.

A BYSTANDER: *on the lady's right* He won't get no cab not until half-past eleven, missus, when they come back after dropping their theatre fares.

THE MOTHER: But we must have a cab. We can't stand here until half-past eleven. It's too bad.

THE BYSTANDER: Well, it ain't my fault, missus.

THE DAUGHTER: If Freddy had a bit of gumption, he would have got one at the theatre door.

THE MOTHER: What could he have done, poor boy?

THE DAUGHTER: Other people got cabs. Why couldn't he?

Freddy rushes in out of the rain from the Southampton Street side, and comes between them closing a dripping umbrella. He is a young man of twenty, in evening dress, very wet around the ankles.

THE DAUGHTER: Well, haven't you got a cab?

FREDDY: There's not one to be had for love or money.

THE MOTHER: Oh, Freddy, there must be one. You can't have tried.

THE DAUGHTER: It's too tiresome. Do you expect us to go and get one ourselves?

FREDDY: I tell you they're all engaged. The rain was so sudden: nobody was prepared; and everybody had to take a cab. I've been to Charing Cross one way and nearly to Ludgate Circus the other; and they were all engaged.

THE MOTHER: Did you try Trafalgar Square?

FREDDY: There wasn't one at Trafalgar Square.

THE DAUGHTER: Did you try?

FREDDY: I tried as far as Charing Cross Station. Did you expect me to walk to Hammersmith?

THE DAUGHTER: You haven't tried at all.

THE MOTHER: You really are very helpless, Freddy. Go again; and don't come back until you have found a cab.

FREDDY: I shall simply get soaked for nothing.

THE DAUGHTER: And what about us? Are we to stay here all night in this draught, with next to nothing on. You selfish pig--

FREDDY: Oh, very well: I'll go, I'll go. *He opens his umbrella and dashes off trandwards, but comes into collision with a flower girl, who is hurrying in for shelter, knocking her basket out of her hands. A blinding flash of lightning, followed instantly by a rattling peal of thunder, orchestrates the incident*

THE FLOWER GIRL: Nah then, Freddy: look wh' y' gowin, deah.

FREDDY: Sorry *he rushes off*

THE FLOWER GIRL: *picking up her scattered flowers and replacing them in the basket* There's menners f' yer! Te-oo banches o voylets trod into the mad.

She sits down on the plinth of the column, sorting her flowers, on the lady's right. She is not at all an attractive person. She is perhaps eighteen, perhaps twenty, hardly older. She wears a little sailor hat of black straw that has long been exposed to the dust and soot of London and has seldom if ever been brushed. Her hair needs washing rather badly: its mousy color can hardly be natural. She wears a shoddy black coat that reaches nearly to her knees and is shaped to her waist. She has a brown skirt with a coarse apron. Her boots are much the worse for wear. She is no doubt as clean as she can afford to be; but compared to the ladies she is very dirty. Her features are no worse than theirs; but their condition leaves something to be desired; and she needs the services of a dentist.

THE MOTHER: How do you know that my son's name is Freddy, pray?

THE FLOWER GIRL: Ow, eez ye-ooa san, is e? Wal, fewd dan y' de-ooty bawmz a mather should, eed now bettern to spawl a pore gel's flahrzn than ran awy athaht pyin. Will ye-oo py me f'them?

Here, with apologies, this desperate attempt to represent her dialect without a phonetic alphabet must be abandoned as unintelligible outside London.

THE DAUGHTER: Do nothing of the sort, mother. The idea!

THE MOTHER: Please allow me, Clara. Have you any pennies?

THE DAUGHTER: No. I've nothing smaller than sixpence.

THE FLOWER GIRL: *hopefully* I can give you change for a tanner, kind lady.

THE MOTHER: *to Clara* Give it to me. *Clara parts reluctantly* Now *to the girl* This is for your flowers.

THE FLOWER GIRL: Thank you kindly, lady.

THE DAUGHTER: Make her give you the change. These things are only a penny a bunch.

THE MOTHER: Do hold your tongue, Clara. *To the girl* You can keep the change.

THE FLOWER GIRL: Oh, thank you, lady.

THE MOTHER: Now tell me how you know that young gentleman's name.

THE FLOWER GIRL: I didn't.

THE MOTHER: I heard you call him by it. Don't try to deceive me.

THE FLOWER GIRL: *protesting* Who's trying to deceive you? I called him Freddy or Charlie same as you might yourself if you was talking to a stranger and wished to be pleasant. *She sits down beside her basket*

THE DAUGHTER: Sixpence thrown away! Really, mamma, you might have spared Freddy that. *She retreats in disgust behind the pillar*

An elderly gentleman of the amiable military type rushes into shelter, and closes a dripping umbrella. He is in the same plight as Freddy, very wet about the ankles. He is in evening dress, with a light

overcoat. He takes the place left vacant by the daughter's retirement.

THE GENTLEMAN: Phew!

THE MOTHER: *to the gentleman* Oh, sir, is there any sign of its stopping?

THE GENTLEMAN: I'm afraid not. It started worse than ever about two minutes ago. *He goes to the plinth beside the flower girl; puts up his foot on it; and stoops to turn down his trouser ends*

THE MOTHER: Oh, dear! *She retires sadly and joins her daughter*

THE FLOWER GIRL: *taking advantage of the military gentleman's proximity to establish friendly relations with him* If it's worse it's a sign it's nearly over. So cheer up, Captain; and buy a flower off a poor girl.

THE GENTLEMAN: I'm sorry, I haven't any change.

THE FLOWER GIRL: I can give you change, Captain,

THE GENTLEMEN: For a sovereign? I've nothing less.

THE FLOWER GIRL: Garn! Oh do buy a flower off me, Captain. I can change half-a-crown. Take this for tuppence.

THE GENTLEMAN: Now don't be troublesome: there's a good girl. *Trying his pockets* I really haven't any change--Stop: here's three hapence, if that's any use to you *he retreats to the other pillar*

THE FLOWER GIRL: *disappointed, but thinking three halfpence better than nothing* Thank you, sir.

THE BYSTANDER: *to the girl* You be careful: give him a flower for it. There's a bloke here behind taking down every blessed word you're saying. *All turn to the man who is taking notes*

THE FLOWER GIRL: *springing up terrified* I ain't done nothing wrong by speaking to the gentleman. I've a right to sell flowers if I keep off the kerb. *Hysterically* I'm a respectable girl: so help me, I never spoke to him except to ask him to buy a flower off me.

General hubbub, mostly sympathetic to the flower girl, but deprecating her excessive sensibility. Cries of don't start hollerin. Who's hurting you? Nobody's going to touch you. What's the good of fussing? Steady on. Easy, easy, etc., come from the elderly staid spectators, who pat her comfortingly. Less patient ones bid her shut her head, or ask her roughly what is wrong with her. A remoter group, not knowing what the matter is, crowd in and increase the noise with question and answer: What's the row? What she do? Where is he? A tec taking her down. What! him? Yes: him over there: Took money off the gentleman, etc.

THE FLOWER GIRL: *distraught and mobbed, breaks through them to the gentleman, crying wildly* Oh, sir, don't let him charge me. You dunno what it means to me. They'll take away my character and drive me on the streets for speaking to gentlemen. They--

THE NOTE TAKER: *coming forward on her right, the rest crowding after him* There, there, there, there! Who's hurting you, you silly girl? What do you take me for?

THE BYSTANDER: It's all right: he's a gentleman: look at his boots. *Explaining to the note taker* She thought you was a copper's nark, sir.

THE NOTE TAKER: *with quick interest* What's a copper's nark?

THE BYSTANDER: *inept at definition* It's a—well, it's a copper's nark, as you might say. What else would you call it? A sort of informer.

THE FLOWER GIRL: *still hysterical* I take my Bible oath I never said a word—

THE NOTE TAKER: *overbearing but good-humored* Oh, shut up, shut up. Do I look like a policeman?

THE FLOWER GIRL: *far from reassured* Then what did you take down my words for? How do I know whether you took me down right? You just show me what you've wrote about me. *The note taker opens his book and holds it steadily under her nose, though the pressure of the mob trying to read it over his shoulders would upset a weaker man* What's that? That ain't proper writing. I can't read that.

THE NOTE TAKER: I can. *Reads, reproducing her pronunciation exactly* "Cheer ap, Keptin; n' haw ya flahr orf a pore gel."

THE FLOWER GIRL: *much distressed* It's because I called him Captain. I meant no harm. *To the gentleman* Oh, sir, don't let him lay a charge agen me for a word like that. You—

THE GENTLEMAN: Charge! I make no charge. *To the note taker* Really, sir, if you are a detective, you need not begin protecting me against molestation by young women until I ask you. Anybody could see that the girl meant no harm.

THE BYSTANDERS GENERALLY: *demonstrating against police espionage* Course they could. What business is it of yours? You mind your own affairs. He wants promotion, he does. Taking down people's words! Girl never said a word to him. What harm if she did? Nice thing a girl can't shelter from the rain without being insulted, etc., etc., etc. *She is conducted by the more sympathetic demonstrators back to her plinth, where she resumes her seat and struggles with her emotion*

THE BYSTANDER: He ain't a tec. He's a blooming busybody: That's what he is. I tell you, look at his boots.

THE NOTE TAKER: *turning on him genially* And how are all your people down at Selsey?

THE BYSTANDER: *suspiciously* Who told you my people come from Selsey?

THE NOTE TAKER: Never you mind. They did. *To the girl* How do you come to be up so far east? You were born in Lisson Grove.

THE FLOWER GIRL: *appalled* Oh, what harm is there in my leaving Lisson Grove? It wasn't fit for a pig to live in; and I had to pay four-and-six a week. *In tears* Oh, boo--hoo--oo--

THE NOTE TAKER: Live where you like; but stop that noise.

THE GENTLEMAN: *to the girl* Come, come! he can't touch you: you have a right to live where you please.

A SARCASTIC BYSTANDER: *thrusting himself between the note taker and the gentleman* Park Lane, for instance. I'd like to go into the Housing Question with you, I would.

THE FLOWER GIRL: *subsiding into a brooding melancholy over her basket, and talking very low-spiritedly to herself* I'm a good girl, I am.

THE SARCASTIC BYSTANDER: *not attending to her* Do you know where I come from?

THE NOTE TAKER: *promptly* Hoxton.

Titterings. Popular interest in the note taker's performance increases.

THE SARCASTIC ONE: *amazed* Well, who said I didn't? Bly me! You know everything, you do.

THE FLOWER GIRL: *still nursing her sense of injury* Ain't no call to meddle with me, he ain't.

THE BYSTANDER: *to her* Of course he ain't. Don't you stand it from him. *To the note taker* See here: what call have you to know about people what never offered to meddle with you? Where's your warrant?

SEVERAL BYSTANDERS: *encouraged by this seeming point of law* Yes: where's your warrant?

THE FLOWER GIRL: Let him say what he likes. I don't want to have no truck with him.

THE BYSTANDER: You take us for dirt under your feet, don't you? Catch you taking liberties with a gentleman!

THE SARCASTIC BYSTANDER: Yes: tell HIM where he come from if you want to go fortune-telling.

THE NOTE TAKER: Cheltenham, Harrow, Cambridge, and India.

THE GENTLEMAN: Quite right. *Great laughter. Reaction in the note taker's favor. Exclamations of He knows all about it. Told him proper. Hear him tell the toff where he come from? etc..* May I ask, sir, do you do this for your living at a music hall?

THE NOTE TAKER: I've thought of that. Perhaps I shall some day.

The rain has stopped; and the persons on the outside of the crowd begin to drop off.

THE FLOWER GIRL: *resenting the reaction* He's no gentleman, he ain't, to interfere with a poor girl.

THE DAUGHTER: *out of patience, pushing her way rudely to the front and displacing the gentleman, who politely retires to the other side of the pillar* What on earth is Freddy doing? I shall get pneumonia if I stay in this draught any longer.

THE NOTE TAKER: *to himself, hastily making a note of her pronunciation of "monia"* Earlscourt.

THE DAUGHTER: *violently* Will you please keep your impertinent remarks to yourself?

THE NOTE TAKER: Did I say that out loud? I didn't mean to. I beg your pardon. Your mother's Epsom, unmistakeably.

THE MOTHER: *advancing between her daughter and the note taker* How very curious! I was brought up in Largelady Park, near Epsom.

THE NOTE TAKER: *uproariously amused* Ha! ha! What a devil of a name! Excuse me. *To the daughter* You want a cab, do you?

THE DAUGHTER: Don't dare speak to me.

THE MOTHER: Oh, please, please Clara. *Her daughter repudiates her with an angry shrug and retires haughtily.* We should be so grateful to you, sir, if you found us a cab. *The note taker produces a whistle* Oh, thank you. *She joins her daughter* The note taker blows a piercing blast.

THE SARCASTIC BYSTANDER: There! I knowed he was a plain-clothes copper.

THE BYSTANDER: That ain't a police whistle: that's a sporting whistle.

THE FLOWER GIRL: *still preoccupied with her wounded feelings* He's no right to take away my character. My character is the same to me as any lady's.

THE NOTE TAKER: I don't know whether you've noticed it; but the rain stopped about two minutes ago.

THE BYSTANDER: So it has. Why didn't you say so before? and us losing our time listening to your silliness. *He walks off towards the Strand*

THE SARCASTIC BYSTANDER: I can tell where you come from. You come from Anwell Go back there.

THE NOTE TAKER: *helpfully* Hanwell.

THE SARCASTIC BYSTANDER: *affecting great distinction of speech* Thenk you, teacher. Haw haw! So long *he touches his hat with mock respect and strolls off*

THE FLOWER GIRL: Frightening people like that! How would he like it himself.

THE MOTHER: It's quite fine now, Clara. We can walk to a motor bus. Come. *She gathers her skirts*

above her ankles and hurries off towards the Strand

THE DAUGHTER: But the cab—*her mother is out of hearing* Oh, how tiresome! *She follows angrily*

All the rest have gone except the note taker, the gentleman, and the flower girl, who sits arranging her basket, and still pitying herself in murmurs.

THE FLOWER GIRL: Poor girl! Hard enough for her to live without being worrited and chivied.

THE GENTLEMAN: *returning to his former place on the note taker's left* How do you do it, if I may ask?

THE NOTE TAKER: Simply phonetics. The science of speech. That's my profession; also my hobby. Happy is the man who can make a living by his hobby! You can spot an Irishman or a Yorkshireman by his brogue. I can place any man within six miles. I can place him within two miles in London. Sometimes within two streets.

THE FLOWER GIRL: Ought to be ashamed of himself, unmanly coward!

THE GENTLEMAN: But is there a living in that?

THE NOTE TAKER: Oh yes. Quite a fat one. This is an age of upstarts. Men begin in Kentish Town with 80 pounds a year, and end in Park Lane with a hundred thousand. They want to drop Kentish Town; but they give themselves away every time they open their mouths. Now I can teach them—

THE FLOWER GIRL: Let him mind his own business and leave a poor girl—

THE NOTE TAKER: *explosively* Woman: cease this detestable boohooing instantly; or else seek the shelter of some other place of worship.

THE FLOWER GIRL: *with feeble defiance* I've a right to be here if I like, same as you.

THE NOTE TAKER: A woman who utters such depressing and disgusting sounds has no right to be anywhere—No right to live. Remember that you are a human being with a soul and the divine gift of articulate speech: that your native language is the language of Shakespear and Milton and The Bible; and don't sit there crooning like a bilious pigeon.

THE FLOWER GIRL: *quite overwhelmed, and looking up at him in mingled wonder and deprecation without daring to raise her head* Ah--ah--ah--ow--ow--oo!

THE NOTE TAKER: *whipping out his book* Heavens! what a sound! *He writes; then holds out the book and reads, reproducing her vowels exactly* Ah--ah--ah--ow--ow--ow--oo!

THE FLOWER GIRL: *tickled by the performance, and laughing in spite of herself* Garn!

THE NOTE TAKER: You see this creature with her kerbstone English: The English that will keep her in the gutter to the end of her days. Well, sir, in three months I could pass that girl off as a duchess at an ambassador's garden party. I could even get her a place as lady's maid or shop assistant, which requires better English. That's the sort of thing I do for commercial millionaires. And on the profits of it I do genuine scientific work in phonetics, and a little as a poet on Miltonic lines.

THE GENTLEMAN: I am myself a student of Indian dialects; and—

THE NOTE TAKER: *eagerly* Are you? Do you know Colonel Pickering, the author of Spoken Sanscrit?

THE GENTLEMAN: I am Colonel Pickering. Who are you?

THE NOTE TAKER: Henry Higgins, author of Higgins's Universal Alphabet.

PICKERING: *with enthusiasm* I came from India to meet you.

HIGGINS: I was going to India to meet you.

PICKERING: Where do you live?

HIGGINS: 27A Wimpole Street. Come and see me tomorrow.

PICKERING: I'm at the Carlton. Come with me now and let's have a jaw over some supper.

HIGGINS: Right you are.

THE FLOWER GIRL: *to Pickering, as he passes her* Buy a flower, kind gentleman. I'm short for my lodging.

PICKERING: I really haven't any change. I'm sorry *he goes away*

HIGGINS: *shocked at girl's mendacity* Liar. You said you could change half-a-crown.

THE FLOWER GIRL: *rising in desperation* You ought to be stuffed with nails, you ought. *Flinging the basket at his feet* Take the whole blooming basket for sixpence.

The church clock strikes the second quarter.

HIGGINS: *hearing in it the voice of God, rebuking him for his Pharisaic want of charity to the poor girl* A reminder. *He raises his hat solemnly; then throws a handful of money into the basket and follows Pickering*

THE FLOWER GIRL: *picking up a half-crown* Ah--ow--ooh! *Picking up a couple of florins* Aaah--ow--ooh! *Picking up several coins* Aaaaaah--ow--ooh! *Picking up a half-sovereign* Aasaaaaaaaaah—ow--ooh!!!

FREDDY: *springing out of a taxicab* Got one at last. Hallo! *To the girl* Where are the two ladies that were here?

THE FLOWER GIRL: They walked to the bus when the rain stopped.

FREDDY: And left me with a cab on my hands. Damnation!

THE FLOWER GIRL: *with grandeur* Never you mind, young man. I'm going home in a taxi. *She sails off to the cab. The driver puts his hand behind him and holds the door firmly shut against her. Quite understanding his mistrust, she shows him her handful of money* Eightpence ain't no object to me, Charlie. *He grins and opens the door* Angel Court, Drury Lane, round the corner of Micklejohn's oil shop. Let's see how fast you can make her hop it. *She gets in and pulls the door to with a slam as the taxicab starts*

FREDDY: Well, I'm dashed! What about the basket?

TAXIMAN: Give it here. Tuppence extra.

LIZA: No: I dont want nobody to see it. *She crushes it into the cab and gets in, continuing the conversation through the window* Good-bye, Freddy.

FREDDY: *dazedly raising his hat* Goodbye.

TAXIMAN: Where to?

LIZA: Bucknam Pellis *(Buckingham Palace).*

TAXIMAN: What d'ye mean—BucknamPellis?

LIZA: Dont you know where it is? In the Green Park, where the King lives. Goodbye, Freddy. Dont let me keep you standing there. Goodbye.

FREDDY: Goodbye *He goes*

TAXIMAN: Here? What's this about Bucknam Pellis? What business have you at Bucknam Pellis?

LIZA: Of course I havn't none. But I wasn't going to let him know that. You drive me home.

TAXIMAN: And where's home?

LIZA: Angel Court, Drury Lane, next Meiklejohn's oil shop.

TAXIMAN: That sounds more like it, Judy. *He drives off*

Let us follow the taxi to the entrance to Angel Court, a narrow little archway between two shops, one of them Meiklejohn's oil shop. When it stops there, Eliza gets out, dragging her basket with her.

LIZA: How much?

TAXIMAN: *indicating the taximeter* Cant you read? A shilling.

LIZA: A shilling for two minutes!!

TAXIMAN: Two minutes or ten: It's all the same.

LIZA: Well, I dont call it right.

TAXIMAN: Ever been in a taxi before?

LIZA: *with dignity* Hundreds and thousands of times, young man.

TAXIMAN: *laughing at her* Good for you, Judy. Keep the shilling, darling, with best love from all at home. Good luck! *He drives off*

LIZA: *humiliated* Impidence!

She picks up the basket and trudges up the alley with it to her lodging: a small room with very old wall paper hanging loose in the damp places. A broken pane in the window is mended with paper. A portrait of a popular actor and a fashion plate of ladies' dresses, all wildly beyond poor ELIZA's means, both torn from newspapers, are pinned up on the wall. A birdcage hangs in the window; but its tenant died long ago: it remains as a memorial only. These are the only visible luxuries: The rest is the irreducible minimum of poverty's needs: A wretched bed heaped with all sorts of coverings that have any warmth in them, a draped packing case with a basin and jug on it and a little looking glass over it, a chair and table, the refuse of some suburban kitchen, and an American alarum clock on the shelf above the unused fireplace: the whole lighted with a gas lamp with a penny in the slot meter. Rent: Four shillings a week.

Here Eliza, chronically weary, but too excited to go to bed, sits, counting her new riches and dreaming and planning what to do with them, until the gas goes out, when she enjoys for the first time the sensation of being able to put in another penny without grudging it. This prodigal mood does not extinguish her gnawing sense of the need for economy sufficiently to prevent her from calculating that she can dream and plan in bed more cheaply and warmly than sitting up without a fire. So she takes off her shawl and skirt and adds them to the miscellaneous bedclothes. Then she kicks off her shoes and gets into bed without any further change.

Le note di scena sono tra parentesi *quadre* o *(tonde).*

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