

EDWARD THOMPSON



Edward Thompson

Atonement

Enriched edition.

Introduction, Studies and Commentaries by Hannah Nolan

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ATONEMENT

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PREFACE

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This play deals with a situation and problems which are exciting deep passion. This makes it necessary that the reader should be reminded that it is presented as a play and not as propaganda—that no statement purports to be anything but the belief or opinion of the *dramatis persona* who utters it.

DRAMATIS PERSONÆ

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Ganapati Banerjee	<i>District Collector and Magistrate, Durgapur.</i>
Walsh	<i>District Judge.</i>
Gregory	<i>Principal, Baptist Missionary College.</i>
Lomax	<i>District Superintendent of Police.</i>
Horton	<i>Labour Recruiting Agent.</i>
Thorp	<i>An ex-Missionary, now with the Non-Co-operation Party.</i>
Nagendranath Singh	<i>Leader of the Non-Co-operation Party, Durgapur.</i>
Saratchandra Datta	<i>Professor at the Baptist Missionary College.</i>
Basantakumar Chatterjee Inayat Khan	{ <i>Indian extremists.</i>
Mahatma Ranade	<i>Leader of the Non-Co-operation Party in India.</i>
Sub-Inspector	

of Police

Mrs. Walsh

Mrs. Gregory

Mrs. Lomax

Indian Police, Servants, etc.

The action takes place in Durgapur, an up-country town in Bengal, and in a village near Durgapur.

Acts I, II, and III take place on the afternoon and night of a day in April. Act IV takes place three months later.

The period is next year—or, possibly, this year.

ACT I

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The Judge's compound, in the mofussil[1] station of Durgapur, Bengal. An arid stretch of brown "lawn." Large trees at the back, along the whitewashed compound wall, and several smaller trees towards the front (left). In the shade of the smaller trees, a row of easy chairs facing the tennis-court, which is just off the stage (right). In charge of a uniformed, turbaned "bearer," a table holding drinks, glasses, etc., and an ice-box containing bottles of soda-water.

It is late afternoon in mid-April, sunny and sweltering[1q]. The trees are casting long shadows.

Walsh, the Judge, is lying back in an easy chair. He is dressed in flannels, a racquet under his chair. He is a man of about forty, well-preserved and young-looking, with keen, sharp face.

There is the sound of a car being driven up, and stopping a little distance away. Walsh rises, and goes to the left of the stage, to greet two ladies, his guests.

[Enter two ladies. Mrs. Lomax is a large, motherly person, to the initiated unmistakably "country-born." She is the wife of the Superintendent of Police, and still rather surprised to find herself one of a European "station." People wonder why Lomax married her. But they would not have wondered if they had seen her ten years ago—she has aged rapidly, after the manner of her race, and lost her good looks.

[Mrs. Gregory, the College Principal's wife, tall, attractive in appearance, seems much younger. Her manner is languid and bored, though she can show a sprightly enough vivacity on occasion.

Walsh: Good afternoon, ladies. Aren't any men going to turn up?

Mrs. Lomax: Oh, Mr. Walsh, how *can* Harry come, with all this going on in the bazar? I've hardly seen him all day long. *Up and down, up and down* (*she makes illustrative movements*), he's just on the rush *all* the time. And Mr. Banerjee's chaprasi has been coming with chits *all* the time—he's been simply living on our verandah. I got *so* tired of it, so after tea I thought I would give Mrs. Gregory a lift round here, and see if anyone was going to turn up.

Mrs. Gregory: Tom's away, but he'll be back on the four-forty. He promised to drop in here, and fetch me home after tennis. (*They all sit down.*)

Mrs. Lomax: Well, I can give you both a lift back. But then, he'll have his bike, won't he?

Mrs. Gregory: It's *so* good of you, Mrs. Lomax. But I'd love to walk home after tennis, and my husband would, too.

Walsh (*jumping up*): Here's my wife. We might be able to make up a four.

Mrs. Lomax (*giving a noisy, rattling laugh*): Walk, indeed! In this weather! You wouldn't catch *me* doing it!

Mrs. Walsh (*dressed in the daintiest and lightest fashion, as always—seeming like twenty, so far as profile and figure and manner go. But her eyes are tired and hard. She glides*

in and speaks softly): Ah, you feel the heat, do you? Some do feel it more than others.

Mrs. Lomax (*again with that laugh*): Feel it! (*She snorts.*) I should just think I do feel it. I seem to feel it more every year I'm out here. (*Plaintively.*) I wish Harry would take his pension and we could go home.

Mrs. Walsh (*eyeing the almost manless company with disfavour*): Dreadful, isn't it? Victor, I don't know why on earth you ever took a job in a place like this. When I married him, he was billeted in Darjiling, and he made me suppose that I should always live near a club, with dances and *tamashas*^[1] every night. Why don't they let a native run this court? Here we even have to send to the railway station for ice.

Mrs. Lomax: And half of it melts on the way up to your house. You can bet your life your coolie's been standing about in the bazar, gaping at some show or other, or *bukking*^[2] to some other native. Just worrying the life out of you *all* the time, *all* the time.

Walsh: Well, what about a spot of tennis? I'll play till another man comes.

Mrs. Lomax: Oh, Mr. Walsh, it's *too* hot. Let us wait a few more minutes. Besides, I wanted specially to ask Mrs. Walsh about her *dirzi*^[2]_[3].

Mrs. Walsh: My dear, I take no interest *whatever* in the servants^[2q]. Victor pays them and runs them—that's all I know about them.

Mrs. Lomax (*unabashed*): My *dirzi* tells me you're paying yours eight annas^[3] a day. I told him I didn't believe such a yarn. *He's* asking for eight annas, too.

Mrs. Walsh: Ask Victor, my dear. I know nothing about it.

Mrs. Lomax: Mr. Walsh!

Walsh (*reluctantly giving her his attention*): Yes, Mrs. Lomax.

Mrs. Lomax: You don't mean to say you're paying a dirzi eight annas a day!

Walsh: Well, I didn't mean to say it, but since you press for information on the point, I'm afraid I am. I understood it was the regular price. I know nothing about these things.

Mrs. Lomax: Oh, Mr. Walsh, you shouldn't go spoiling the rates in this way. No dirzi ever gets more than seven annas a day.

Walsh: But what's the difference? It's less than a couple of dibs^[4] a month, isn't it? A couple of bob, say. In a month!

Mrs. Lomax (*who is a pertinacious person, much respected in the bazar and avoided by the itinerant vendors of a whole province*): But that's a whole fortune to a native! If we keep on giving in to them like this, we spoil them. They'll be making trouble *all* the time.

[A frosty silence falls on the company. Mrs. Lomax, however, is undaunted; the subject to her is engrossing above the fate of empires.]

I've been having a *dreadful* time with the servants. Do you know how many flower-pots my mali^[5] has broken since last October? Just guess. (*No one responds.*)

(*Impressively.*) He's broken no less than seven. Seven! Seven pots in seven months—no, only six months!

Mrs. Walsh: That must be nearly three annas' worth, isn't it? Or are they only a pice^[6] each?

Mrs. Lomax (*whose mind is too serious to notice sarcasm. Again with that laugh*): A pice indeed! (*She laughs again, as the grim absurdity of the suggestion penetrates deeper.*) A pice! No, you won't get them anywhere now for less than three pice for two pots.

Mrs. Gregory (*anxious to close down the discussion*): Don't the pots get frightfully dry in this weather, and crack of themselves?

Mrs. Lomax (*turning on her indignantly*): Your mali no doubt tells you that! If you believe him, he'll be having you on *all* the time, *all* the time. If they do, it's his laziness. If he stood *every* pot in water overnight, they wouldn't crack. You make enquiries, and you'll find he hasn't been doing that. You just ask him. (*A pause. Mrs. Walsh yawns, with her racquet before her face.*) It isn't only the mali who's been getting slack. My cook—

Walsh: What's *he* done? Been embezzling the vegetable-money? Send him up to my court, and I'll give him six months for every cauliflower whose price he's stolen. You're quite right, Mrs. Lomax. It's time we stood together, and put a stop to the way these servants behave. Low, downright cheating, I call it.

Mrs. Lomax (*mollified by this support*): Well, we all know what these natives are, don't we, Mr. Walsh? What can you expect of people who haven't had our advantages?

Mrs. Walsh (*jumping up*): Victor, let's have a game of sorts.

Walsh (*also rising*): Quite so. They take it out of us by pinching our dusters and turning their goats into our vegetable-gardens**[3q]**. The heathen have some horrid

ways. Right-o, my dear. How shall we play? You and I take these ladies on?

Mrs. Walsh (*dismally*): I suppose so. (*Lingering—but no one seems in a hurry to move off to the court.*) I never saw such men as you have in this station. It's just *too* dull, having to play with your own husband for a partner. You can't even rely on him to pick up your balls for you. I *won't* go out. Where's that wretched boy Max? *He's* got nothing to keep him away.

Mrs. Lomax (*to whom the delay is welcome, as giving another chance to open up her favourite topic*): It all comes of educating these natives. Before we started educating them, they were happy and contented. Each one had his little house and his little garden, and his little cow, and his little goats—

Walsh: Bless my soul, they've still got those, curse the brutes! And they're not so little! I shan't forget the sight of that huge yellow cow that spent most of last cold weather pasturing in the peas I'd grown with such care. And as for goats! Goats galore! You don't mean to say, Mrs. Lomax, that you maintain *they've* disappeared owing to the wicked educational policy of Government! Shall I tell my servants to catch a couple of hundred and send them round to you?

Mrs. Lomax (*to whom the pathos of changed times appeals too poignantly for her to let her lyrical periods be broken up in this way*): Each house had its little bit of ground, and its little vegetable-plot, and its mangoes and jack-trees, and its little fowl-run. And they were happy and loyal, and no one dreamed of passing a saheb or a memsaheb without salaaming [5q]. And then we spoilt them