

The Last Straw

BY BOSWORTH CROCKER

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In addition to *Pawns of War* and *Stone Walls*, he has written a number of one-act plays, *The Dog*, *The First Time*, *The Cost of a Hat*, *The Hour Before*, *The Baby Carriage*, and *The Last Straw*.

The Last Straw, produced by the Washington Square Players in New York City, is an excellent one-act tragedy, based upon the psychological law of suggestion.

CAST

FRIEDRICH BAUER, *janitor of the Bryn Mawr* MIENE, *his wife*
KARL, *elder son, aged ten* FRITZI, *younger son, aged seven* JIM
LANE, *a grocer boy*

THE LAST STRAW[G]

TIME: *The present day.*

SCENE: *The basement of a large apartment-house in New York City.*

SCENE: *The kitchen of the Bauer flat in the basement of the Bryn Mawr. A window at the side gives on an area and shows the walk above and the houses across the street. Opposite the windows is a door to an inner room. Through the outer door, in the centre of the back wall, a dumb-waiter and whistles to tenants can be seen. A broken milk-bottle lies in a puddle of milk on the cement floor in front of the dumb-waiter. To the right of the outer door, a telephone; gas-range on which there are flat-irons heating and vegetables cooking. To the left of the outer door is an old sideboard; over it hangs a*

picture of Schiller. Near the centre of the room, a little to the right, stands a kitchen table with four chairs around it. Ironing-board is placed between the kitchen table and the sink, a basket of dampened clothes under it. A large calendar on the wall. An alarm-clock on the window-sill. Time: a little before noon. The telephone rings; MRS. BAUER leaves her ironing and goes to answer it.

MRS. BAUER. No, Mr. Bauer's out yet. [*She listens through the transmitter.*] Thank you, Mrs. Mohler. [*Another pause.*] I'll tell him just so soon he comes in--yes, ma'am.

[*MRS. BAUER goes back to her ironing. Grocer boy rushes into basement, whistling; he puts down his basket, goes up to MRS. BAUER'S door and looks in.*

LANE. Say--where's the boss?

MRS. BAUER. He'll be home soon, I--hope--Jim. What you want?

[*He stands looking at her with growing sympathy.*

LANE. Nothin'. Got a rag 'round here? Dumb-waiter's all wet.... Lot of groceries for Sawyers.

MRS. BAUER. [*Without lifting her eyes, mechanically hands him a mop which hangs beside the door.*] Here.

LANE. What's the matter?

MRS. BAUER. [*Dully.*] Huh?

LANE. [*Significantly.*] Oh, I know.

MRS. BAUER. What you know?

LANE. About the boss. [*MRS. BAUER looks distressed.*] Heard your friends across the street talkin'.

MRS. BAUER. [*Bitterly.*] Friends!

LANE. Rotten trick to play on the boss, all right, puttin' that old maid up to get him pinched.

MRS. BAUER. [*Absently.*] Was she an old maid?

LANE. The cruelty-to-animals woman over there [*waves his hand*]--regular old crank. Nies[H] put her up to it all right.

MRS. BAUER. I guess it was his old woman. Nies ain't so bad. She's the one. Because my two boys dress up a little on Sunday, she don't like it.

LANE. Yes, she's sore because the boys told her the boss kicks their dog.

MRS. BAUER. He don't do nothin' of the sort--jus' drives it 'way from the garbage-pails--that's all. We coulda had that dog took up long ago--they ain't got no license. But Fritz--he's so easy--he jus' takes it out chasin' the dog and hollerin'.

LANE. That ain't no way. He ought to make the dog holler--good and hard--once; then it'd keep out of here.

MRS. BAUER. Don't you go to talkin' like that 'round my man. Look at all this trouble we're in on account of a stray cat.

LANE. I better get busy. They'll be callin' up the store in a minute. That woman's the limit.... Send up the groceries in that slop, she'd send them down again. High-toned people like her ought to keep maids.

[He mops out the lower shelf of the dumb-waiter, then looks at the broken bottle and the puddle of milk inquiringly.]

MRS. BAUER. [*Taking the mop away from him.*] I'll clean that up. I forgot--in all this trouble.

LANE. Whose milk?

MRS. BAUER. The Mohlers'. That's how it all happened. Somebody upset their milk on the dumb-waiter and the cat was on the shelf lickin' it up; my man, not noticin', starts the waiter up and the cat tries to jump out; the bottle rolls off and breaks. The cat was hurt awful--caught in the shaft. I don't see how it coulda run after that, but it did--right into the street, right into that woman--Fritz after it. Then it fell over. "You did that?" she says to Fritz. "Yes," he says, "I did that." He didn't say no more, jus' went off, and then after a while they came for him and---- [*She begins to cry softly.*]

LANE. Brace up; they ain't goin' to do anything to him.... [*Comes into kitchen. Hesitatingly.*] Say!... He didn't kick the cat--did he?

MRS. BAUER. Who said so?

LANE. Mrs. Nies--says she saw him from her window.

MRS. BAUER. [*As though to herself.*] I dunno. [*Excitedly.*] Of course he didn't kick that cat. [*Again, as though to herself.*] Fritz is so quick-tempered he mighta kicked it 'fore he knew what he was about. No one'd ever know how good Fritz is unless they lived with him. He never hurt no one and nothing except himself.

LANE. Oh, I'm on to the boss. I never mind his hollerin'.

MRS. BAUER. If you get a chance, bring me some butter for dinner--a pound.

LANE. All right. I'll run over with it in ten or fifteen minutes, soon as I get rid of these orders out here in the wagon.

MRS. BAUER. That'll do.

[*She moves about apathetically, lays the cloth on the kitchen table and begins to set it. LANE goes to the dumb-waiter, whistles up the tube, puts the basket of groceries on the shelf of the dumb-waiter, pulls rope and sends waiter up. MRS. BAUER continues to set the table. Boys from the street suddenly swoop into the basement and yell.*]

CHORUS OF BOYS' VOICES. Who killed the cat! Who killed the cat!

LANE. [*Letting the rope go and making a dive for the boys.*] I'll show you, you----

[*They rush out, MRS. BAUER stands despairingly in the doorway shaking her clasped hands.*]

MRS. BAUER. Those are Nies's boys.

LANE. Regular toughs! Call the cop and have 'em pinched if they don't stop it.

MRS. BAUER. If my man hears them--you know--there'll be more trouble.

LANE. The boss ought to make it hot for them.

MRS. BAUER. Such trouble!

LANE. [*Starts to go.*] Well--luck to the boss.

MRS. BAUER. There ain't no such thing as luck for us.

LANE. Aw, come on....

MRS. BAUER. Everything's against us. First Fritz's mother dies. We named the baby after her--Trude.... Then we lost Trude. That finished Fritz. After that he began this hollerin' business. And now this here trouble--just when things was goin' half-ways decent for the first time. [*She pushes past him and goes to her ironing.*]

LANE. [*Shakes his head sympathetically and takes up his basket.*] A pound, you said?

MRS. BAUER. Yes.

LANE. All right. [*He starts off and then rushes back.*] Here's the boss comin', Mrs. Bauer. [*Rushes off again.*]

LANE'S VOICE. [*Cheerfully.*] Hello, there!

BAUER'S VOICE. [*Dull and strained.*] Hello!

[BAUER *comes in. His-naturally bright blue eyes are tired and lustreless; his strung frame seems to have lost all vigor and alertness; there in a look of utter despondency on his face.*

MRS. BAUER. [*Closing the door after him.*] They let you off?

BAUER. [*With a hard little laugh.*] Yes, they let me off--they let me off with a fine all right.

MRS. BAUER. [*Aghast.*] They think you did it then.

BAUER. [*Harshly.*] The judge fined me, I tell you.

MRS. BAUER. [*Unable to express her poignant sympathy.*] Fined you!... Oh, Fritz! [*She lays her hand on his shoulder.*

BAUER. [*Roughly, to keep himself from, going to pieces.*] That slop out there ain't cleaned up yet.

MRS. BAUER. I've been so worried.

BAUER. [*With sudden desperation.*] I can't stand it, I tell you.

MRS. BAUER. Well, it's all over now, Fritz.

BAUER. Yes, it's all over.... it's all up with me.

MRS. BAUER. Fritz!

BAUER. That's one sure thing.

MRS. BAUER. You oughtn't to give up like this.

BAUER. [*Pounding on the table.*] I tell you I can't hold up my head again.

MRS. BAUER. Why, Fritz?

BAUER. They've made me out guilty. The judge fined me. Fined me, Miene! How is that? Can a man stand for that? The woman said I told her myself--right out--that I did it.

MRS. BAUER. The woman that had you--[*he winces as she hesitates*] took?

BAUER. Damned----

MRS. BAUER. [*Putting her hand over his mouth.*] Hush, Fritz.

BAUER. Why will I hush, Miene? She said I was proud of the job. [*Passionately raising his voice.*] The damned interferin'----

MRS. BAUER. Don't holler, Fritz. It's your hollerin' that's made all this trouble.

BAUER. [*Penetrated by her words more and more.*] My hollerin'!....

[The telephone rings; she answers it.

MRS. BAUER. Yes, Mrs. Mohler, he's come in now.--Yes.--Won't after dinner do?--All right.--Thank you, Mrs. Mohler. [*She hangs up the receiver.*] Mrs. Mohler wants you to fix her sink right after dinner.

BAUER. I'm not goin' to do any more fixin' around here.

MRS. BAUER. You hold on to yourself, Fritz; that's no way to talk; Mrs. Mohler's a nice woman.

BAUER. I don't want to see no more nice women. [*After a pause.*] Hollerin'!--that's what's the matter with me--hollerin', eh? Well, I've took it all out in hollerin'.

MRS. BAUER. They hear you and they think you've got no feelings.

BAUER. [*In utter amazement at the irony of the situation.*] And I was goin' after the damned cat to take care of it.

MRS. BAUER. Why didn't you tell the judge all about it?

BAUER. They got me rattled among them. The lady was so soft and pleasant--"He must be made to understand, your honor," she said to the judge, "that dumb animals has feelin's, too, just as well as human beings"--*Me, Miene*--made to understand that! I couldn't say nothin'. My voice just stuck in my throat.

MRS. BAUER. What's the matter with you! You oughta spoke up and told the judge just how it all happened.

BAUER. I said to myself; I'll go home and put a bullet through my head--that's the best thing for me now.

MRS. BAUER. [*With impatient unbelief.*] Ach, Fritz, Fritz!

[*Clatter of feet.*]

CHORUS OF VOICES. [*At the outer door.*] Who killed the cat! Who killed the cat!

[*BAUER jumps up, pale and shaken with strange rage; she pushes him gently back into his chair, opens the door, steps out for a moment, then comes in and leaves the door open behind her.*]

BAUER. You see?... Even the kids ... I'm disgraced all over the place.

MRS. BAUER. So long as you didn't hurt the cat----

BAUER. What's the difference? Everybody believes it.

MRS. BAUER. No, they don't, Fritz.

BAUER. You can't fool me, Miene. I see it in their eyes. They looked away from me when I was comin' 'round the corner. Some of them kinder smiled like--[*passes his hand over his head*]. Even the cop says to me on the way over, yesterday: "Don't you put your foot in it any

more'n you have to." You see? He thought I did it all right. Everybody believes it.

MRS. BAUER. [*Putting towels away.*] Well, then *let* them believe it.... The agent don't believe it.

BAUER. I dunno. He'da paid my fine anyhow.

MRS. BAUER. He gave you a good name.

BAUER. [*With indignant derision.*] He gave me a good name!... Haven't I always kept this place all right since we been here? Afterward he said to me: "I'm surprised at this business, Bauer, very much surprised." That shows what he thinks. I told him it ain't true, I didn't mean to hurt it. I saw by his eyes he didn't believe me.

MRS. BAUER. Well, don't you worry any more now.

BAUER. [*To himself.*] Hollerin'!

MRS. BAUER. [*Shuts the door.*] Well, now, holler a little if it does you good.

BAUER. Nothin's goin' to do me good.

MRS. BAUER. You just put it out of your mind. [*The telephone rings. She answers it.*] Yes, but he can't come now, Mrs. McAllister. He'll be up this afternoon.

[*She hangs up the receiver.*]

BAUER. And I ain't goin' this afternoon--nowhere.

MRS. BAUER. It's Mrs. McAllister. Somethin's wrong with her refrigerator--the water won't run off, she says.

BAUER. They can clean out their own drain-pipes.

MRS. BAUER. You go to work and get your mind off this here business.

BAUER. [*Staring straight ahead of him.*] I ain't goin' 'round among the people in this house ... to have them lookin' at me ... disgraced like this.

MRS. BAUER. You want to hold up your head and act as if nothin's happened.

BAUER. Nobody spoke to me at the dumb-waiter when I took off the garbage and paper this morning. Mrs. Mohler always says something pleasant.

MRS. BAUER. You just think that because you're all upset. [*The telephone rings; she goes to it and listens.*] Yes, ma'am, I'll see. Fritz, have you any fine wire? Mrs. McAllister thinks she might try and fix the drain with it--till you come up.

BAUER. I got no wire.

MRS. BAUER. Mr. Bauer'll fix it--right after dinner, Mrs. McAllister. [*Impatiently.*] He can't find the wire this minute--soon's he eats his dinner.

BAUER. [*Doggedly.*] You'll see....

MRS. BAUER. [*Soothingly.*] Come now, Fritz, give me your hat. [*She takes his hat from him.*]

VOICES IN THE STREET. [*Receding from the front area.*] Who killed the cat! Who killed the cat!

[*BAUER rushes toward the window in a fury of excitement.*]

BAUER. [*Shouting at the top of his voice.*] *Verdammt* loafers! *Schweine!*

MRS. BAUER. [*Goes up to him.*] Fritz! Fritz!

BAUER. [*Collapses and drops into chair.*] You hear 'em.

MRS. BAUER. Don't pay no attention, then they'll get tired.

BAUER. Miene, we must go away. I can't stand it here no longer.

MRS. BAUER. But there's not such another good place, Fritz--and the movin'....

BAUER. I say I can't stand it.

MRS. BAUER. [*Desperately.*] It ... it would be just the same any other place.

BAUER. Just the same?

MRS. BAUER. Yes, something'd go wrong anyhow.

BAUER. You think I'm a regular Jonah.

[*He shakes his head repeatedly in the affirmative, as though wholly embracing her point of view.*]

MRS. BAUER. Folks don't get to know you. They hear you hollerin' 'round and they think you beat the children and kick the dogs and cats.

BAUER. Do I ever lick the children when they don't need it?

MRS. BAUER. Not Fritzi.

BAUER. You want to spoil Karl. I just touch him with the strap once, a little--like this [*illustrates with a gesture*] to scare him, and he howls like hell.

MRS. BAUER. Yes, and then he don't mind you no more because he knows you don't mean it.

BAUER. [*To himself.*] That's the way it goes ... a man's own wife and children ...

MRS. BAUER. [*Attending to the dinner. Irritably.*] Fritz, if you would clean that up out there--and Mrs. Carroll wants her waste-basket. You musta forgot to send it up again.

BAUER. All right.

[*He goes out and leaves the door open. She stands her flat-iron on the ledge of the range to cool and puts her ironing-board away, watching him at the dumb-waiter while he picks up the glass and cleans up the milk on the cement floor. He disappears for a moment, then he comes in again, goes to a drawer and takes out rags and a bottle of polish.*

MRS. BAUER. [*Pushing the clothes-basket out of the way.*] This ain't cleanin' day, Fritz.

BAUER. [*Dully, putting the polish back into the drawer.*] That's so.

MRS. BAUER. [*Comforting him.*] You've got to eat a good dinner and then go up-stairs and fix that sink for Mrs. Mohler and the drain for Mrs. McAllister.

BAUER. [*In a tense voice.*] I tell you I can't stand it.... I tell you, Miene....

MRS. BAUER. What now, Fritz?

BAUER. People laugh in my face. [*Nods in the direction of the street.*] Frazer's boy standin' on the stoop calls his dog away when it runs up to me like it always does.

MRS. BAUER. Dogs know better'n men who's good to them.

BAUER. He acted like he thought I'd kick it.

MRS. BAUER. You've got all kinds of foolishness in your head now.... You sent up Carroll's basket?

BAUER. No.

MRS. BAUER. Well---- [*She checks herself.*

BAUER. All right. [*He gets up.*]

MRS. BAUER. It's settin' right beside the other dumb-waiter, [*He goes out.*] Oh, Gott!--Oh, Gott!--Oh, Gott!

[*Enter KARL, and FRITZI. FRITZI is crying.*]

MRS. BAUER. [*Running to them.*] What's the matter?

[*She hushes them and carefully closes the door.*]

KARL. The boys make fun of us; they mock us.

FRITZI. They mock us--"Miau! Miau!" they cry, and then they go like this----

[*FRITZI imitates kicking and breaks out crying afresh.*]

MRS. BAUER. Hush, Fritzi, you mustn't let your father hear.

FRITZI. He'd make them shut up.

KARL. I don't want to go to school this afternoon.

[*He doubles his fists.*]

MRS. BAUER. [*Turning on him fiercely.*] Why not? [*In an undertone.*] You talk that way before your little brother.--Have you no sense?

FRITZI. [*Beginning to whimper.*] I d-d-d-on't want to go to school this afternoon.

MRS. BAUER. You just go 'long to school and mind your own business.

KARL and FRITZI. [*Together.*] But the boys....

MRS. BAUER. They ain't a-goin' to keep it up forever. Don't you answer them. Just go 'long together and pay no attention.

KARL. Then they get fresher and fresher.

FRITZI. [*Echoing KARL.*] Yes, then they get fresher and fresher.

[*MRS. BAUER begins to take up the dinner. The sound of footfalls just outside the door is heard.*]

MRS. BAUER. Go on now, hang up your caps and get ready for your dinners.

FRITZI. I'm going to tell my papa. [*Goes to inner door.*]

MRS. BAUER. For God's sake, Fritzi, shut up. You mustn't tell no one. Papa'd be disgraced all over.

KARL. [*Coming up to her.*] Disgraced?

MRS. BAUER. Hush!

KARL. Why disgraced?

MRS. BAUER. Because there's liars, low-down, snoopin' liars in the world.

KARL. Who's lied, mama?

MRS. BAUER. The janitress across the street.

KARL. Mrs. Nies?

FRITZI. [*Calling out.*] Henny Nies is a tough.

MRS. BAUER. [*Looking toward the outer door anxiously and shaking her head threateningly at FRITZI.*] I give you somethin' if you don't stop hollerin' out like that.

KARL. Who'd she lie to?

MRS. BAUER. Never mind. Go 'long now. It's time you begin to eat.

KARL. What'd she lie about?

MRS. BAUER. [*Warningly.*] S-s-sh! Papa'll be comin' in now in a minute.

KARL. It was Henny Nies set the gang on to us. I coulda licked them all if I hadn't had to take care of Fritz.

MRS. BAUER. You'll get a lickin' all right if you don't keep away from Henny Nies.

KARL. Well--if they call me names--and say *my* father's been to the station-house for killing a cat...?

FRITZI. Miaou! Miaou! Miaou!

MRS. BAUER. Hold your mouth.

FRITZI. [*Swaggering.*] My father never was in jail--was he, mama?

KARL. Course not.

MRS. BAUER. [*To FRITZI.*] Go, wash your hands, Fritz.

[*She steers him to the door of the inner room. He exits.*]

MRS. BAUER. [*Distressed.*] Karl ...

KARL. [*Turning to his mother.*] Was he, mama?

MRS. BAUER. Papa don't act like he used to. Sometimes I wonder what's come over him. Of course it's enough to ruin any man's temper, all the trouble we've had.

CHORUS OF VOICES. [*From the area by the window.*] Who killed the cat! Who killed the cat!

[Sound of feet clattering up the area steps. FRITZI rushes in, flourishing a revolver.]

FRITZI. I shoot them, mama.

MRS. BAUER. *[Grabbing the revolver.] Mein Gott! Fritzi! Papa's pistol! [She examines it carefully.]* You ever touch that again and I'll ... *[She menaces him.]*

FRITZI. *[Sulkily.]* I'll save up my money and buy me one.

MRS. BAUER. *[Smiling a little to herself.]* I see you buyin' one. *[Carries revolver into inner room.]*

FRITZI. *[In a loud, voice and as though shooting at KARL.]* Bang! Bang! Bang!

[KARL strikes at FRITZI; FRITZI dodges.]

KARL. *[To his mother as she re-enters.]* Trouble with Fritzi is he don't mind me any more.

MRS. BAUER. You wash your dirty hands and face this minute--d'you hear me, Fritzi!

FRITZI. *[Looking at his hands.]* That's ink-stains. I got the highest mark in spelling to-day. Capital H-e-n-n-y, capital N-i-e-s--Henny Nies, a bum.

[MRS. BAUER makes a rush at him, and he runs back into the inner room.]

KARL. *[Sitting down beside the table.]* Do we have to go to school this afternoon?

MRS. BAUER. You have to do what you always do.

KARL. Can't we stay home?...

MRS. BAUER. *[Fiercely.]* Why? Why?

KARL. [*Sheepishly.*] I ain't feelin' well.

MRS. BAUER. Karlchen!... *schäm dich!*

KARL. Till the boys forget....

MRS. BAUER. Papa'd know somethin' was wrong right away. That'd be the end. You mustn't act as if anything was different from always.

KARL. [*Indignantly.*] Sayin' *my* father's been to jail!

MRS. BAUER. Karl....

KARL. Papa'd make them stop.

MRS. BAUER. [*Panic-stricken.*] Karl, don't you tell papa nothing.

KARL. Not tell papa?

MRS. BAUER. No.

KARL. Why not tell papa?

MRS. BAUER. Because----

KARL. Yes, mama?

MRS. BAUER. Because he was arrested yesterday.

KARL. [*SHOCKED.*] What for, mama? Why was he----

MRS. BAUER. For nothing.... It was all a lie.

KARL. Well--what was it, mama?

MRS. BAUER. The cat got hurt in the dumb-waiter--papa didn't mean to--then they saw papa chasin' it--then it died.

KARL. Why did papa chase it?

MRS. BAUER. To see how it hurt itself.

KARL. Whose cat?

MRS. BAUER. The stray cat.

KARL. The little black cat? Is Blacky dead?

MRS. BAUER. Yes, he died on the sidewalk.

KARL. Where was we?

MRS. BAUER. You was at school.

KARL. Papa didn't want us to keep Blacky.

MRS. BAUER. So many cats and dogs around....

FRITZI. [*Wailing at the door.*] Blacky was my cat.

MRS. BAUER. S-s-h! What do you know about Blacky?

FRITZI. I was listening. Why did papa kill Blacky?

MRS. BAUER. Hush!

FRITZI. Why was papa took to jail?

MRS. BAUER. Fritzi! If papa was to hear....

[MRS. BAUER *goes out.*

FRITZI. [*Sidling up to KARL.*] Miau! Miau!

KARL. You shut up that. Didn't mama tell you?

FRITZI. When I'm a man I'm going to get arrested. I'll shoot Henny Nies.

KARL. [*Contemptuously.*] Yes, you'll do a lot of shooting.

[FRITZI *punches* KARL *in back.*

KARL. [*Striking at* FRITZI.] You're as big a tough as Henny Nies.

FRITZI. [*Proud of this alleged likeness.*] I'm going to be a man just like my father; I'll holler and make them stand around.

KARL. [*With conviction.*] What you need is a good licking.

[*Telephone rings; KARL goes to it.*

KARL. No, ma'am, we're just going to eat now.

FRITZI. [*Sits down beside the table.*] Blacky was a nice cat; she purred just like a steam-engine.

KARL. Mama told you not to bring her in.

FRITZI. Papa said I could.

[*There is the sound of footfalls. BAUER and his wife come in and close the door behind them.*

MRS. BAUER. [*Putting the dinner on the table.*] Come, children. [*To BAUER.*] Sit down, Fritz.

[*She serves the dinner. KARL pulls FRITZI out of his father's chair and pushes him into his own; then he takes his place next to his mother.*

MRS. BAUER. [*To BAUER, who sits looking at his food.*] Eat somethin', Friedrich. [*She sits down.*

BAUER. I can't eat nothin'. I'm full up to here.

[*He touches his throat.*

MRS. BAUER. If you haven't done nothin' wrong, why do you let it worry you so?

[Children are absorbed in eating.]

FRITZI. *[Suddenly.]* Gee, didn't Blacky like liver!

[MRS. BAUER and KARL look at him warningly.]

MRS. BAUER. *[Fiercely.]* You eat your dinner.

BAUER. *[Affectionately, laying his hand on FRITZI'S arm.]* Fritz.

FRITZI. *[Points toward the inner room.]* I'm going to have a gun, too, when I'm a man.

[BAUER follows FRITZI'S gesture and falls to musing. There is a look of brooding misery on his face. KARL nudges FRITZI warningly and watches his father furtively. BAUER sits motionless, staring straight ahead of him.]

MRS. BAUER. *[To BAUER.]* Now drink your coffee.

BAUER. Don't you see, Miene, don't you see?... Nothing makes it right now; no one believes me--no one believes--no one.

MRS. BAUER. What do you care, if you didn't do it?

BAUER. I care like hell.

MRS. BAUER. *[With a searching look at her husband.]* Fritz, when you go on like this, people won't believe you didn't do it. You ought to act like you don't care.... *[She fixes him with a beseeching glance.]* If you *didn't* do it.

[BAUER looks at his wife as though a hidden meaning to her words had suddenly bitten into his mind.]

BAUER. [*As though to himself.*] A man can't stand that. I've gone hungry ... I've been in the hospital ... I've worked when I couldn't stand up hardly....

MRS. BAUER. [*Coaxingly.*] Drink your coffee, drink it now, Fritz, while it's hot.

[*He tries to swallow a little coffee and then puts down the cup.*]

BAUER. I've never asked favors of no man.

MRS. BAUER. Well, an' if you did ...

BAUER. I've always kept my good name ...

MRS. BAUER. If a man hasn't done nothin' wrong it don't matter. Just go ahead like always--if----

BAUER. [*Muttering.*] If--if----

MRS. BAUER. [*To the boys.*] Get your caps now, it's time to go to school.

[*KARL gets up, passes behind his father and beckons to FRITZI to follow him.*]

FRITZI. [*Keeping his seat.*] Do we have to go to school?

BAUER. [*Suddenly alert.*] Why, what's the matter?

FRITZI. The boys----

MRS. BAUER. [*Breaking in.*] Fritz!

[*The boys go into the inner room. BAUER collapses again.*]

MRS. BAUER. [*Looking at him strangely.*] Fritz--if you didn't----

BAUER. I can't prove nothing--and no one believes me. [*A pause. She is silent under his gaze.*] No one! [*He waits for her to speak. She sits*

with averted face. He sinks into a dull misery. The expression in his eyes changes from beseeching to despair as her silence continues, and he cries out hoarsely.] No one! Even if you kill a cat--what's a cat against a man's life!

MRS. BAUER. [*Tensely, her eyes fastened on his.*] But you *didn't* kill it?

[*A pause.*]

MRS. BAUER. [*In a low, appealing voice.*] Did you? Fritz? Did you?

[*BAUER gets up slowly. He stands very still and stares at his wife.*]

KARL'S VOICE. Mama, Fritz's fooling with papa's gun.

[*Both children rush into the room.*]

KARL. You oughta lock it up.

MRS. BAUER. [*To FRITZI.*] Bad boy! [*To KARL.*] Fritz wants to kill himself--that's what. Go on to school.

[*Boys run past area.*]

VOICES. Who killed the cat! Who killed the cat!

[*At the sound of the voices the boys start back. Instinctively MRS. BAUER lays a protecting hand on each. She looks around at her husband with a sudden anxiety which she tries to conceal from the children, who whisper together. BAUER rises heavily to his feet and walks staggering toward the inner room.*]

MRS. BAUER. [*In a worried tone, as she pushes the children out.*] Go on to school.

[*At the threshold of the inner room BAUER stops, half turns back with distorted features, and then hurries in. The door slams behind him. MRS. BAUER closes the outer door, turns, takes a step as though to follow BAUER, hesitates, then crosses to the kitchen table*]

and starts to clear up the dishes. The report of a revolver sounds from the inner room. Terror-stricken, MRS. BAUER rushes in.

MRS. BAUER'S VOICE. Fritz! Fritz! Speak to me! Look at me, Fritz! You didn't do it, Fritz! I know you didn't do it!

[Sound of low sobbing.... After a few seconds the telephone bell.... It rings continuously while the Curtain slowly falls.]