

How Much is Your Iron?

(1939)

by Bertolt Brecht



*Liberated from
capitalist control
to educate the masses
by
Socialist Stories*

Characters:

SVENDSON

THE CUSTOMER

MR AUSTRIAN, *a tobacconist*

MRS CZECH, *owner of a shoe shop*

THE GENTLEMAN

THE LADY

PROLOGUE

An Englishman, dear friends, not long ago
Spun a story which we'd like to show.
With two young Swedes he'd met near the Old Vic
He downed a few, and talked of politics;
But though they quaffed much brandy, ale, and rye
He and the Swedes could not see eye to eye.
Next day, the Englishman took pen in hand
And wrote a parable that all could understand.
This fable made his point both sharp and clear –
For your diversion, now, we'll show it here.
The scene: a shop with iron bars for sale.
You'll recognise the merchant without fail.
The shoe-shop lady and tobacconist
Are figures that can't easily be missed.
And by our playlet's end – if not before –
You'll know which fellow's grabbing all the ore.
Even a simpleton, we dare to say
Will get the point: so now let's start the play!

An iron dealer's shop. A wooden door and a wooden table.

I

On the table lie iron bars. The shopkeeper is polishing them with a cloth. On an easel an enormous calendar showing the date: 1938. A tobacconist comes in with cigar boxes under his arm.

MR AUSTRIAN: Good morning, Mr Svendson. How are you for smokes? I've got some fine cigars here, thirty cents apiece, genuine Austrillos.

SVENDSON: Good morning, Mr Austrian. Let's have a look! What an aroma. You know how crazy I am about your cigars. Unfortunately my business hasn't been doing very well. I'll have to cut down on my smoking. No, I can't take any today. I can't see my way clear. No hard feelings, Mr Austrian. Maybe next time.

MR AUSTRIAN: This is a bit of a disappointment. But of course I understand. *He packs up his wares.*

SVENDSON: Been having a pleasant round, Mr Austrian?

MR AUSTRIAN: Not very pleasant, Mr Svendson. I'm afraid your store is rather out of the way.

SVENDSON: Out of the way? Nobody ever told me that before.

MR AUSTRIAN: I'd never thought of it before myself. The fact is, we all live pretty far from each other. But today I met a man on the way here and I've had a funny feeling ever since.

SVENDSON: How come? Was he rude to you?

MR AUSTRIAN: Far from it. He spoke to me like an old friend. He called me by my first name and said we were related. News to me, I told him. What, he says, you didn't know? And he glares at me like I was a bad penny. And then he starts explaining exactly how we're related and the longer he talks the more related we are.

SVENDSON: Is that so bad?

MR AUSTRIAN: No, but he said he'd be coming to see me soon.

SVENDSON: You make it sound like a threat.

MR AUSTRIAN: There was nothing unusual about his words. He said that maybe he had one weakness, an over-developed family sense. When he discovers he's even remotely related to someone he just can't live without them.

SVENDSON: That's not such a bad thing to say.

MR AUSTRIAN: No, but he shouted so when he said it.

SVENDSON: And that frightened you?

MR AUSTRIAN: To tell you the truth, it did.

SVENDSON: Good Lord, you're shaking. Like a leaf.

MR AUSTRIAN: Because I can't get him out of my head.

SVENDSON: Nerves. You ought to live up here, in this pure air.

MR AUSTRIAN: Maybe. The one good thing is that he didn't seem to be armed. If he were, I might be really worried. Oh, well, we all have our headaches, and no one can have them for us.

SVENDSON: No.

MR AUSTRIAN: Another thing that struck me as odd was that before he let me go he suggested we sign an agreement never to say anything detrimental about each other.

SVENDSON: That sounds fair enough. A mutual agreement.

MR AUSTRIAN: Think so?

Pause.

MR AUSTRIAN: Maybe I ought to have some kind of weapon.

SVENDSON: Yes. It might come in handy.

MR AUSTRIAN: Unfortunately weapons are expensive.

SVENDSON: That's a fact.

MR AUSTRIAN: Well, goodbye, Mr Svendson.

SVENDSON: Goodbye, Mr Austrian.

Mr Austrian goes out. Svendson stands up and does Swedish exercises with his iron bars, in time to monotonous music. A customer in an ill-fitting suit enters.

THE CUSTOMER *in a hoarse voice*: How much is your iron?

SVENDSON: A crown a bar.

THE CUSTOMER: Expensive.

SVENDSON: I've got to earn my living.

THE CUSTOMER: I see.

SVENDSON: Your face looks familiar.

THE CUSTOMER: You knew my brother. He often came here.

SVENDSON: How's he getting along?

THE CUSTOMER: Dead. He left me the business.

SVENDSON: I'm sorry to hear it.

THE CUSTOMER *menacingly*: Really?

SVENDSON: I didn't mean about your having the business, I meant about his being dead.

THE CUSTOMER: You seem to have been very close friends with him.

SVENDSON: Not really. But he was a good customer.

THE CUSTOMER: And now I'm your customer.

SVENDSON: At your service. I suppose you want two bars, same as your brother?

THE CUSTOMER: Four.

SVENDSON: That will be four crowns.

THE CUSTOMER *pulls some notes out of his pocket. Hesitantly:* They've got a few spots on them. Coffee stains. Do you mind?

SVENDSON *examining the notes:* This isn't coffee.

THE CUSTOMER: What is it then?

SVENDSON: It's reddish.

THE CUSTOMER: Then it must be blood. *Pause.* I cut my finger. *Pause.* Do you want the money or not?

SVENDSON: I don't think I'll have any trouble getting rid of it.

THE CUSTOMER: No. I'm sure you won't.

SVENDSON: Very well. *He puts the notes in the cash drawer while the customer takes his bars under his arm. Casually:* Oh, by the way. My old friend the tobacconist dropped in a little while ago. He complained of being stopped and molested by a stranger on the way here. Has anybody molested you?

THE CUSTOMER: No. No one has molested me. No one even spoke to me, which rather surprised me, I must say. Your friend seems to be a liar of the worst kind.

SVENDSON *taking offence:* You have no right to say that.

THE CUSTOMER: The world is full of liars, thieves, and murderers.

SVENDSON: I don't subscribe to that. My friend seemed really worried. I was even thinking of giving him one of my iron bars to defend himself with if necessary.

THE CUSTOMER: I wouldn't advise you to do that. It would make for bad blood in the neighbourhood if you started arming everybody free of charge. Take it from me, they're all a lot of thieves and murderers. And liars. Your best bet is to keep your nose clean and peacefully attend to your iron business. I'm speaking as a peace-loving individual. Just don't put any weapons into those people's hands! They don't know where the next meal is coming from. You put weapons into the hands of a hungry man and . . .

SVENDSON: I see what you mean.

THE CUSTOMER: Say, aren't we related?

SVENDSON *surprised*: What makes you think that?

THE CUSTOMER: I'm pretty sure. Through our great-grandfathers or something.

SVENDSON: I believe you're mistaken.

THE CUSTOMER: Really? Well, I'll be going now. Good iron you've got here. It's expensive, but I need it. What can I do if I need it? You think the price will come down?

SVENDSON: I doubt it.

The customer turns towards the door. A rumbling sound is heard.

SVENDSON: Did you say something?

THE CUSTOMER: Me? No, that's my stomach. I'd been eating too much fatty food for a while. Now I'm fasting.

SVENDSON *laughs*: Oh! Well, good day.

The customer goes out.

SVENDSON *picks up the phone*: Is that you, Dansen? Listen, that new man has just been here. – Oh, he's been at your place too? He bought some of my merchandise. – Oh, he's bought from you too? Well, as long as he pays he's good enough for me. – Of course he's good enough for you too as long as he pays.

The stage grows dark.

2

The calendar in the iron shop reads 1939. Mrs Czech comes in with some shoe-boxes under her arm.

MRS CZECH: Good morning, Mr Svendson. Can I interest you in some shoes? *She takes out a pair of large yellow shoes.* Good sturdy shoes, eleven crowns a pair, genuine Czech workmanship.

SVENDSON: Good morning, Mrs Czech. I'm always glad to see you. My business hasn't been doing very well lately, so I'm afraid I can't afford new shoes at the moment, but rest assured, I won't buy from anyone else. But you look rather upset, Mrs Czech.

MRS CZECH *looking around fearfully from time to time*: Does

that surprise you? Haven't you heard the terrible news about the tobacconist?

SVENDSON: What about him?

MRS CZECH: This tobacconist, a Mr Austrian, was attacked on the street. Robbed and murdered.

SVENDSON: You don't say so! Why, that's terrible.

MRS CZECH: The whole neighbourhood's talking about it. They want to organise a police force. We must all join up. You too, Mr Svendson.

SVENDSON *dismayed*: Me? No, that's impossible. I'm not cut out for police work, Mrs Czech, not in the least. I'm a peace-loving man. Besides, my iron business takes up all my time. I want to sell my iron in peace, that's enough for me.

MRS CZECH: The man who attacked the tobacconist must have been well armed. I want a weapon too, I'm frightened. Send me one of your iron bars, Mr Svendson.

SVENDSON: Glad to. With the greatest pleasure, Mrs Czech. One iron bar, that will be one crown.

MRS CZECH *fumbling in her purse*: There must be a crown in here somewhere.

SVENDSON: Why, your hands are trembling, Mrs Czech.

MRS CZECH: Here it is. *She has brought out the crown.* On my way here a man spoke to me. He offered me his protection. It scared me out of my wits.

SVENDSON: Why?

MRS CZECH: Well, you see, I haven't any enemies among the people I know. But this was somebody I didn't know. He wanted to come home with me to protect me, so he said. Isn't that creepy? Tell me: don't you feel threatened?

SVENDSON: Me? No. They all have to keep on good terms with me, because they all need my iron in these uncertain times. Even when they're at each other's throats, they've got to treat me with respect. Because they need my iron.

MRS CZECH: Yes, you're a lucky man. Good day, Mr Svendson. *She goes out.*

SVENDSON *calls after her*: Good day, Mrs Czech. I'll have your bar delivered. *He stands up and does Swedish gymnastics in time to the monotonous music. The customer comes in. He has something hidden under his coat.*

THE CUSTOMER: How much is your iron?

SVENDSON: A crown a bar.

THE CUSTOMER: Price hasn't come down yet? Let's have it.

SVENDSON: Four bars again?

THE CUSTOMER: No, eight.

SVENDSON: That will be eight crowns.

THE CUSTOMER *slowly*: I'd like to make you a proposition, in view of the fact that after all we're slightly related.

SVENDSON: Not that I know of, Mr . . .

THE CUSTOMER: You may not know it yet, but never mind. I'd like to suggest a new way of doing business: barter. I bet you smoke cigars. Well, I've got cigars. *He takes a box full of big cigars from under his coat.* I can let you have them cheap, because I got them for nothing. I inherited them from a relative. And I don't smoke.

SVENDSON: You don't smoke. You don't eat. You don't smoke. And these are Austrillos.

THE CUSTOMER: Ten cents apiece. That makes ten crowns for a box of a hundred. But between cousins I'll let you have it for eight, the price of your iron. Is it a deal?

SVENDSON: The tobacconist was a good friend of mine. How did he die?

THE CUSTOMER: Peacefully, my friend, very peacefully. Quietly and peacefully. A peace-loving man. He suddenly sent for me. And then a Higher Power sent for him. It all happened very quickly. He barely had time to say: Brother, don't let the tobacco dry out, and then he was gone. He'd hung a wreath on the door to welcome me. I laid it on his coffin. *He wipes a tear from his eye. As he does so, a revolver falls out of his sleeve. He puts it back hastily.* He has departed this cruel world. A world where everyone distrusts everyone else. A world of violence, where the streets aren't safe any more. I always carry a weapon nowadays. Unloaded, just as a deterrent. How about the cigars?

SVENDSON: I can't afford cigars. If I could buy anything, I'd buy myself a pair of shoes.

THE CUSTOMER: I haven't got any shoes. I have cigars. And I need the iron.

SVENDSON: What do you need so much iron for?

THE CUSTOMER: Oh, iron always comes in handy. *Again his stomach rumbles loudly.*

SVENDSON: Maybe you'd better buy some food instead?

THE CUSTOMER: All in good time. All in good time. I've got to go now, it looks like rain, and my suit is made out of synthetic wool, my own invention, it won't stand up under rain. Would you be interested in a bolt of this excellent material?

SVENDSON: All right, I'll take the Austrillos. My business isn't doing very well. *He takes the box.*

THE CUSTOMER *laughs scornfully and picks up his eight iron bars*: Good day, Mr Svendson.

SVENDSON *picks up the phone, voluptuously puffing on an Austrillo*: Is that you, Dansen? What do you say about the recent events? – Yes, that's what I say. I don't say anything. – Oh, you're not sticking your neck out? Right, I'm not sticking my neck out either. – Oh, you're still doing business with him? Right, I'm still doing business with him too. – So you're not worried? Fine, I'm not worried either. *The stage grows dark.*

3

The calendar in the iron store reads February 1939. Svendson sits smoking an Austrillo. A lady and a gentleman come in.

THE GENTLEMAN: My dear Mr Svendson, Mrs Gall and I would like a word with you if you can spare the time.

SVENDSON: Rest assured, Mr Britt, that I always have time for my best customer.

The lady and the gentleman sit down.

THE GENTLEMAN: We wished to speak to you about the dreadful assault on Mrs Czech.

SVENDSON: An assault on Mrs Czech?

THE GENTLEMAN: Last night our neighbour Mrs Czech was assaulted, robbed, and murdered by Whatsisname. He was armed to the teeth.

SVENDSON: What, Mrs Czech murdered? How can that be?

THE GENTLEMAN: How indeed? We're quite beside ourselves, we just don't understand. Mrs Gall was a special friend of hers. Last night Mrs Gall heard loud cries for help coming from her house. She rushed straight over to my place and we sat there for hours discussing what we could do. Then we went to the poor woman's house and found her engaged in a violent argument with that Whatsisname. He was asking for something that supposedly belonged to a relative of his, and we advised her to let him have it if he promised to leave her in peace. She consented and he promised. But later in the night it seems he came back and murdered the poor woman.

THE LADY: Of course we'd never have left if we hadn't trusted him to keep his promise.

THE GENTLEMAN: Now we've decided to form an organisation of all our neighbours to make sure such a thing never happens again. We've come to ask if you wish to join our law-enforcement organisation and add your name to our membership list. *He hands him the list.*

SVENDSON *takes it hesitantly. Uneasily:* But you see, I've only got a small iron business. I can't get mixed up in the quarrels of the big corporations. Some of my customers might take it amiss if I were to join this kind of organisation.

THE LADY: I see. You wish to sell your iron no matter what happens, to no matter whom?

SVENDSON: Not at all. How can you say such a thing? My conscience, it seems to me, is as sensitive as yours. But I'm just not the warlike type, don't you see. My business has nothing to do with it. Let's be a little more relaxed about all this. *To the gentleman:* Do you smoke?

THE GENTLEMAN *looks at the cigars:* Austrillos!

THE LADY: I'd appreciate it if the gentlemen didn't smoke.

SVENDSON *annoyed, puts away the box and his own cigar:* I beg your pardon.

THE GENTLEMAN: You were speaking of your conscience, Mr Svendson.

SVENDSON: Was I? Yes, of course. I can assure you that I abhor all violence. I haven't had a good night's sleep since

these dreadful things started happening. To tell you the truth, madame, it's only on account of my nerves that I've been smoking so much.

THE LADY: Then you have no basic objection to the idea of an organisation to combat violence?

SVENDSON: Basic or not, my motives are of the purest.

THE GENTLEMAN: We wouldn't think of questioning the purity of your motives. It's obvious that if you sell your iron to Whatsisname it's not because you approve of his conduct.

SVENDSON: Of course not. I abominate it.

THE GENTLEMAN: And you don't consider yourself related to him, as he is said to claim?

SVENDSON: Certainly not.

THE GENTLEMAN: You only sell because he pays and you'll only sell as long as he pays.

SVENDSON: That's right.

THE GENTLEMAN: And you think Whatsisname wouldn't need your iron any more if you were to join our peace league that would guarantee your security and everyone else's?

SVENDSON: Of course he needs my iron. I honestly don't know what he does with it . . .

THE LADY *amiably*: He makes machine-guns!

SVENDSON *ignoring her information*: As I've said, I don't know, but he'd probably have to buy it even then. Only, as I said before, it might make him angry, and, you see, I just happen to be the peaceful kind. To be perfectly frank, I'm expecting him now, and I'd rather he didn't find you in my shop. He's uncommonly sensitive and quick to take offence. So you'd be doing me a big favour if . . .

The customer comes in with a package under his arm.

THE CUSTOMER: How much is your iron?

SVENDSON: A crown a bar.

THE CUSTOMER: Ah, I see we have company. Friends of yours, Svendson?

SVENDSON: Hm. Yes. No. In a way. A business call.

THE GENTLEMAN: We've been talking about Mrs Czech, the lady you murdered, sir.

THE CUSTOMER: Me?

THE LADY: Yes.

THE CUSTOMER: Lies! Calumny! Slander!

THE GENTLEMAN: What, you deny that you murdered Mrs Czech?

THE CUSTOMER: Of course I deny it. Mrs Czech was recommended to me by some close relatives of mine who were lodgers in her house. She asked me for protection. When my relatives got down on their knees and begged me, I gave in, and yesterday I started protecting her. It was her last great joy on earth. A few minutes later she died peacefully of old age in my arms. That's the truth, and that's what you and certain other people choose to represent as murder! What's more, it was because of you that Mrs Czech came to me! You let her down and you'll let all your friends down. That ought to give you pause, Mr Svendson.

THE LADY: So you just took care of Mrs Czech?

THE CUSTOMER: Why would I have wanted to hurt her? *His stomach rumbles.*

THE GENTLEMAN: And you really mean to deny that you threaten everyone who lives anywhere near you?

THE CUSTOMER: Of course I deny it! I've come here to buy sixteen bars of iron, Mr Svendson. But I find an atmosphere of hostility. Obviously you can't be expected to sell iron to anyone who threatens you. So let me ask you a question; think carefully before you answer: Do you feel threatened by me?

SVENDSON: Me? How can you ask? How many bars did you say? Oh yes, sixteen. Do I feel threatened by you? Whatever put that into your head? Do you really want an answer?

THE GENTLEMAN, THE LADY *and* THE CUSTOMER: Yes.

SVENDSON *counting out the bars*: In that case I'll tell you: No. I don't feel threatened.

The lady and the gentleman leave in indignation.

THE CUSTOMER *while Svendson wipes off the bars with the membership list*: Splendid. There's a man who still has the

courage of his convictions. We must be related in some way, Svendson. Even if you deny it. People deny a lot of things. By the way, since we're both so passionately devoted to peace, couldn't we make a little pact entitling you to attack anyone you please with iron bars except me, and me to attack anyone but you?

SVENDSON *in a choked voice*: I wouldn't like to do that. My biggest customer . . .

THE CUSTOMER: But I need more iron, Svendson. People are plotting against me. They're planning to attack me. They all want to attack me. Because they can't bear to see how well I'm getting along. *His stomach rumbles again.* They accuse me of killing that woman! Lies! Lies! Lies! And do you know what I found in her house afterwards? An iron bar! She was going to attack me! You're right to keep out of these disgusting quarrels. You're an iron dealer, not a politician, Svendson. You sell your iron to anyone who can pay. And I buy from you because I like you and because I see that you have to make a living. Because you're not against me and don't let my enemies incite you against me – that's why I buy your iron. Why else would I buy it? You've no reason to make an enemy of me! Weren't you saying something about shoes? Here, I've brought you some shoes. *He takes out a pair of large yellow shoes.* Just what you need, Svendson. I can let you have them cheap. Do you know how much they cost me?

SVENDSON *feebly*: How much?

THE CUSTOMER: Nothing. See. And you get the benefit, Svendson. Oh yes, you and I are going to be great friends, especially when we've come to a perfect agreement about the price of iron. And we will, Svendson, we will. Give me a hand with these bars, Svendson.

Svendson helps him to pick up the bars. He takes six under each arm, loads the rest on his back, and thus heavily laden hobbles out.

SVENDSON: Good day.

THE CUSTOMER *turning with difficulty in the doorway. Smiling*: See you soon.

4

The calendar in the iron store now reads 19???. Svendson is strolling around, smoking an Austrillo and wearing Mrs Czech's shoes. Suddenly the sound of guns is heard. Very much upset, Svendson tries in vain to telephone. The telephone is dead. He turns on the radio. The radio is dead. He looks out the window and sees the glow of flames.

SVENDSON: War!

He hurries to the blackboard showing the price of iron, rubs out the figure 3 with a sponge and in feverish haste writes in a 4. The customer comes in with all sorts of things under his coat. His face is chalky-white.

SVENDSON listening: Do you know where that gunfire is coming from?

THE CUSTOMER: It's coming from my rumbling stomach. I'm on my way to get some food. But for that I need more iron. *He throws open his coat, uncovering two machine-guns at the ready.*

SVENDSON: Help! Help!

THE CUSTOMER: *How much is your iron?*

SVENDSON stammers: Nothing.