

6 *The Browning Version*

Terence Rattigan

**Notice these expressions in the text.
Infer their meaning from the context.**

- | | | |
|------------|--------------------|-----------------|
| ◆ remove | ◆ kept in | ◆ sadist |
| ◆ slackers | ◆ got carried away | ◆ shrivelled up |
| ◆ muck | ◆ cut | |

This is an excerpt from The Browning Version. The scene is set in a school. Frank is young and Crocker-Harris, middle-aged. Both are masters. Taplow is a boy of sixteen who has come in to do extra work for Crocker-Harris. But the latter has not yet arrived, and Frank finds Taplow waiting.*

FRANK: Do I know you?

TAPLOW: No, sir.

FRANK: What's your name?

TAPLOW: Taplow.

FRANK: Taplow! No, I don't. You're not a scientist I gather?

TAPLOW: No, sir, I'm still in the lower fifth. I can't specialise until next term — that's to say, if I've got my **remove** all right.

FRANK: Don't you know if you've got your remove?

TAPLOW: No sir, Mr Crocker-Harris doesn't tell us the results like the other masters.

* The reference within the play of Robert Browning's translation of the Greek tragedy, *Agamemnon*

- FRANK: Why not?
- TAPLOW: Well, you know what he's like, sir.
- FRANK: I believe there is a rule that form results should only be announced by the headmaster on the last day of term.
- TAPLOW: Yes — but who else pays attention to it — except Mr Crocker-Harris?
- FRANK: I don't, I admit — but that's no criterion. So you've got to wait until tomorrow to know your fate, have you?
- TAPLOW: Yes, sir.
- FRANK: Supposing the answer is favourable — what then?
- TAPLOW: Oh — science, sir, of course.
- FRANK: (*sadly*) Yes. We get all the **slackers**.
- TAPLOW: (*protestingly*) I'm extremely interested in science, sir.
- FRANK: Are you? I'm not. Not, at least, in the science I have to teach.
- TAPLOW: Well, anyway, sir, it's a good deal more exciting than this **muck** (*indicating his book*).
- FRANK: What is this muck?
- TAPLOW: Aeschylus, sir. *The Agamemnon*.
- FRANK: And your considered view is that the *Agamemnon* is muck?
- TAPLOW: Well, no, sir. I don't think the play is muck — exactly. I suppose, in a way, it's rather a good plot, really, a wife murdering her husband and all that. I only meant the way it's taught to us — just a lot of Greek words strung together and fifty lines if you get them wrong.
- FRANK: You sound a little bitter, Taplow.
- TAPLOW: I am rather, sir.
- FRANK: **Kept in**, eh?
- TAPLOW: No, sir. Extra work.
- FRANK: Extra work — on the last day of school?

TAPLOW: Yes, sir, and I might be playing golf. You'd think he'd have enough to do anyway himself, considering he's leaving tomorrow for good — but oh no, I missed a day last week when I was ill — so here I am — and look at the weather, sir.

FRANK: Bad luck. Still there's one comfort. You're pretty well certain to get your remove tomorrow for being a good boy in taking extra work.

TAPLOW: Well, I'm not so sure, sir. That would be true of the ordinary masters, all right. They just wouldn't dare not to give a chap a remove after his taking extra work. But those sort of rules don't apply to the Crock — Mr Crocker-Harris. I asked him yesterday outright if he'd given me a remove and do you know what he said, sir?

FRANK: No. What?

TAPLOW: *(imitating a very gentle, rather throaty voice)* "My dear Taplow, I have given you exactly what you deserve. No less; and certainly no more." Do you know sir, I think he may have marked me down, rather than up, for taking extra work. I mean, the man's hardly human. *(He breaks off quickly.)* Sorry, sir. Have I gone too far?

FRANK: Yes. Much too far.

TAPLOW: Sorry, sir. I **got carried away**.

FRANK: Evidently. *(He picks up a newspaper and opens it)* — Er Taplow.

TAPLOW: Yes, sir?

FRANK: What was that Crocker-Harris said to you? Just — er — repeat it, would you?

TAPLOW: *(imitating again)* "My dear Taplow, I have given you exactly what you deserve. No less; and certainly no more."

FRANK: *(looking severe)* Not in the least like him. Read your nice Aeschylus and be quiet.

TAPLOW: *(with dislike)* Aeschylus.

- FRANK: Look, what time did Mr Crocker-Harris tell you to be here?
- TAPLOW: Six-thirty, sir.
- FRANK: Well, he's ten minutes late. Why don't you **cut**? You could still play golf before lock-up.
- TAPLOW: (*really shocked*) Oh, no, I couldn't cut. Cut the Crock — Mr Crocker-Harris? I shouldn't think it's ever been done in the whole time he's been here. God knows what would happen if I did. He'd probably follow me home, or something ...
- FRANK: I must admit I envy him the effect he seems to have on you boys in the form. You all seem scared to death of him. What does he do — beat you all, or something?
- TAPLOW: Good Lord, no. He's not a **sadist**, like one or two of the others.
- FRANK: I beg your pardon?
- TAPLOW: A sadist, sir, is someone who gets pleasure out of giving pain.
- FRANK: Indeed? But I think you went on to say that some other masters ...
- TAPLOW: Well, of course, they are, sir. I won't mention names, but you know them as well as I do. Of course I know most masters think we boys don't understand a thing — but, sir, you're different. You're young — well, comparatively, anyway — and you're science. You must know what sadism is.
- FRANK: (*after a pause*) Good Lord! What are our schools coming to?
- TAPLOW: Anyway, the Crock isn't a sadist. That's what I'm saying. He wouldn't be so frightening if he were — because at least it would show he had some feelings. But he hasn't. He's all **shrivelled up** inside like a nut and he seems to hate people to like him. It's funny, that. I don't know any other master who doesn't like being liked —

FRANK: And I don't know any boy who doesn't use that for his own purposes.

TAPLOW: Well, it's natural sir. But not with the Crock —

FRANK: Mr Crocker-Harris.

TAPLOW: Mr Crocker-Harris. The funny thing is that in spite of everything, I do rather like him. I can't help it. And sometimes I think he sees it and that seems to shrivel him up even more —

FRANK: I'm sure you're exaggerating.

TAPLOW: No, sir. I'm not. In form the other day he made one of his classical jokes. Of course nobody laughed because nobody understood it, myself included. Still, I knew he'd meant it as funny, so I laughed. Out of ordinary common politeness, and feeling a bit sorry for him for having made a poor joke. Now I can't remember what the joke was, but suppose I make it. Now you laugh, sir. *(Frank laughs.)*

TAPLOW: *(in a gentle, throaty voice)* "Taplow — you laughed at my little joke, I noticed. I must confess that I am pleased at the advance your Latin has made since you so readily have understood what the rest of the form did not. Perhaps, now, you would be good enough to explain it to them, so that they too can share your pleasure".

The door up right is pushed open and Millie Crocker-Harris enters. She is a thin woman in her late thirties, rather more smartly dressed than the general run of schoolmasters' wives. She is wearing a cape and carries a shopping basket. She closes the door and then stands by the screen watching Taplow and Frank. It is a few seconds before they notice her.

FRANK: Come along, Taplow *(moves slowly above the desk)*. Do not be so selfish as to keep a good joke to yourself. Tell the others... *(He breaks off suddenly, noticing Millie.)* Oh Lord!

Frank turns quickly, and seems infinitely relieved at seeing Millie.

FRANK: Oh, hullo.

MILLIE: *(without expression)* Hullo. *(She comes down to the sideboard and puts her basket on it.)*

TAPLOW: *(moving up to left of Frank; whispering frantically)* Do you think she heard?

FRANK: *(shakes his head comfortingly. Millie takes off her cape and hangs it on the hall-stand.)* I think she did. She was standing there quite a time.

TAPLOW: If she did and she tells him, there goes my remove.

FRANK: Nonsense. *(He crosses to the fireplace.)*

Millie takes the basket from the sideboard, moves above the table and puts the basket on it.

MILLIE: *(to Taplow)* Waiting for my husband?

TAPLOW: *(moving down left of the table)* Er-yes.

MILLIE: He's at the Bursar's and might be there quite a time. If I were you I'd go.

TAPLOW: *(doubtfully)* He said most particularly I was to come.

MILLIE: Well, why don't you run away for a quarter of an hour and come back? *(She unpacks some things from the basket.)*

TAPLOW: Supposing he gets here before me?

MILLIE: *(smiling)* I'll take the blame. *(She takes a prescription out of the basket.)* I tell you what — you can do a job for him. Take this prescription to the chemist and get it made up.

TAPLOW: All right, Mrs Crocker-Harris. *(He crosses towards the door up right.)*

Understanding the text ■

1. Comment on the attitude shown by Taplow towards Crocker-Harris.
2. Does Frank seem to encourage Taplow's comments on Crocker-Harris?
3. What do you gather about Crocker-Harris from the play?

Talking about the text ■

Discuss with your partners

1. Talking about teachers among friends.
2. The manner you adopt when you talk about a teacher to other teachers.
3. Reading plays is more interesting than studying science.

Working with words ■

A sadist is a person who gets pleasure out of giving pain to others.

Given below are some dictionary definitions of certain kinds of persons. Find out the words that fit these descriptions.

1. A person who considers it very important that things should be correct or genuine e.g. in the use of language or in the arts: P...
2. A person who believes that war and violence are wrong and will not fight in a war: P...
3. A person who believes that nothing really exists: N...
4. A person who is always hopeful and expects the best in all things: O...
5. A person who follows generally accepted norms of behaviour: C...
6. A person who believes that material possessions are all that matter in life: M...

Things to do ■

Based on the text enact your own version of the play. Work in pairs.

Notes

After the students have read the play silently by themselves, ask them to take on the roles of the three characters and read their parts aloud.

Understanding the text ■

Global comprehension

Talking about the text ■

- Speaking to each other about something that most students do: commenting on their teachers (To teachers — take this in a spirit of good humour)
- Reflecting on how we talk about others in their absence
- Science and Literature: the dichotomy

Working with words ■

Common terms used for people with particular behaviour patterns or beliefs, taking off from the text with the word 'sadist'.

Things to do ■

Instead of conventional role-play involving reading out or enacting the original text, students are encouraged to make their own versions of the play based on the same content (creativity, fun and authenticity).