

Ch. 6 - The Browning Version

Introduction of the Lesson

This chapter is a short extract from the play ‘The Browning Version’ written by Terence Rattigan. It is a one-act play set in a school, there are three characters in the play – Taplow, Frank, and Mr. Crocker – Harris. Taplow is sixteen years old student, Frank is a young teacher and Mr. Crocker-Harris is a middle-aged schoolmaster. Taplow has arrived in the school to do extra work for Mr. Crocker Harris. He meets Frank and they both engage in a conversation while Taplow waits for Mr. Harris. Later, enters Millie, Mrs.Crocker-Harris who talks to Taplow.

The Browning Version: Summary

The scene is set in a school where Taplow arrives to do extra work on the last day for Mr. Crocker-Harris as he missed a day before. He finds Frank, a science teacher in the school. Frank asked him his name and the reason he is there that day. Taplow studies in the lower fifth standard and is about to get his result from his teacher Mr. Harris. Mr. Crocker-Harris usually reveals the result on the last day of school and unlike every other teacher, he follows the rules and regulations strictly.

They both started having a conversation where Frank asked him several questions. We don’t see Mr. Crocker-Harris in the whole chapter but we get to know a lot about him.

Taplow wants to take science as a remove because he finds the subject extremely interesting. Frank, on the other hand, doesn’t like what he teaches in the school. Mr. Crocker-Harris is ‘hardly human’ as he never shrivels up. He told Taplow that he will get what he deserves. Nothing less and nothing more and this makes him tensed. Taplow further imitates Mr. Harris twice in front of Frank.

Franks admits that he envies Mr. Crocker-Harris because of the effect he has on them. Taplow told him that he never shows his emotions like other teachers and never beats them up like other masters. He is not a sadist.

As they were deeply engaged in a conversation, Millie enters and comes with a shopping bag. She asked Taplow to go out and come back in a quarter of an hour as Mr. Crocker-Harris will be late. If her husband arrives earlier, she will take the blame. She further gives him a prescription and instructs him to purchase medicines for her from the chemist. Taplow follows and goes away to do the job.

Text and Explanation

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.

Excerpt – a short extract from writing, movie or music

Latter – denoting the second-mentioned person of the two people

Remove – a division in British schools

The scene is a short extract from the play 'The Browning Version'. Taplow is a boy aged sixteen who arrives at the school to do extra work for Mr. Crocker-Harris, his teacher. He meets another teacher Frank and engages in a conversation with him while waiting for Mr. Harris. Frank is another teacher in that school who is young in age. Mr. Crocker Harris is middle-aged.

Frank saw Taplow and asked his name and in which class he studies. Taplow answers him and tells him that he studies in the lower fifth standard and he cannot specialize until he gets his division (remove). Frank asked him whether he got the remove or not and Taplow replied that his master (Mr. Crocker – Harris) doesn't reveal the information like other masters.

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.

Criterion – a standard by which something is judged

Frank asked if Mr. Crocker-Harris doesn't reveal the result earlier like other masters. Taplow tells him that he already knows how Mr. Harris is. Frank supposes that there is a rule that the result should be revealed on the last day of the term. Taplow agrees and told him that Mr. Harris follows it very seriously. Frank shares that he doesn't follow it but still Taplow should wait until tomorrow to know his result to which he agrees.

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.

Slackers – lazy students who are not motivated

Muck – useless; which is of no good or use

Aeschylus – he was an ancient Greek tragedian who is referred to as 'Father of Tragedy'

Agamemnon – he was the king of Mycenae in Greek mythology

Strung together – to combine two different things into something useful

Frank asks Taplow about what subject he is interested to take further and he replies Science. Frank tells him that they have some lazy students in science to which Taplow clarifies that he is interested in the subject that is why he wants to take it. Frank tells him that he is not interested in Science which he has to teach in the school. Taplow thinks that the subject that Frank teaches is still a good deal better than the book he is currently reading. Upon asking about the book, Taplow tells him about the name of the author and the book – Aeschylus (Author) and The Agamemnon (Book). Taplow further shares his view about 'The Agamemnon'. He thinks the plot is good but the way those Greek words are taught to them combined together is useless.

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?

Kept in – to make someone stay in a place, especially in school as a punishment

Chap – a man who you know and like

On criticizing the book, Frank tells him that you are sounding a little bitter about Mr. Crocker – Harris. Further, Frank asks him if he is staying in school as a punishment to which Taplow replies that he is in the school on the last day of the term due to extra work. He was ill last week due to which he was absent for a day, for which he is compensating now by doing extra work. He further says that he feels that Mr. Harris also has extra work himself because he is leaving tomorrow for good. Harris didn't have any extra work and yet with such a good weather, he has to come to school. He also adds that he wanted to play golf at that moment.

Frank comforts him by saying that he will get his remove tomorrow due to the extra work he is doing for Mr. Harris. Taplow is unsure of this and tells him that this might work for other teachers but Mr. Harris is different. He doesn't give a student a remove for doing extra work. Taplow also asked Mr. Harris about his remove to which the master gave an astonishing answer.

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.

Got carried away – to become overly excited or to take things too far

Imitating – copying

Frank asks him what Mr. Harris told him upon being asked about his remove. Taplow imitates Mr. Crocker-Harris and told him exactly what his master answered him. Mr. Harris told him that he will get what he deserves, nothing less and nothing more. Taplow feels that he might have marked him down for taking extra work because he doesn't have human feelings. Then, he realizes that he has said too much therefore he apologizes to Frank. Frank asked him to repeat what he just said about Mr. Harris and he starts imitating him again. Frank tells him that his imitation is not close to Mr. Harris's way of saying things and he told him to read his book.

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 ...

Cut – stop doing something undesirable

Envy – Jealousy

Sadist – a person who derives pleasure by giving pain or humiliation to others

Pardon - the action of being forgiven for error or offense; forgiveness

Indeed - Truly

Frank asks him at what time did Mr. Harris asked him to come to school. Taplow told him six-thirty. Frank suggests him to go and play golf for a little while as he would be ten minutes late. Taplow refuses as he is afraid of what would happen if he shows up in his absence and he might follow him home. Frank tells him that he is a little jealous of Mr. Harris because of the effect he has on all the boys in the form. He asks him if Harris beat students to which Taplow says that no, he is not someone who derives pain by hurting others, there are one or two other teachers like that. Frank asked him to be more specific and he explains to him the meaning of sadist. Frank asked him what he was saying about 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 Crocker 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 Crocker —

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.

Shrivelled up – having no feelings

Exaggerating – represent something as being worse than it really is

Taplow explains to him that there are many teachers in the school whose names he will not take but they are a sadists. They think that the boys don't understand a thing. But Frank is different from them, as he is young and he is from a science background and must know about sadism.

Frank in a surprising tone exclaims about the condition of schools. Taplow goes on ranting about Mr. Harris. He shares that Mr. Crocker- Harris is not a sadist and yet he has no feelings. He is a type of a person who might hate it when people like him. He further says he doesn't know about any master there who doesn't like being liked. Frank mocks him and says he hasn't seen any student using this quality for his own purpose. Taplow agrees and calls Mr. Harris 'Crocker' again to which Frank corrects him by saying his full name.

Taplow corrects himself and admits that he still likes him and he cannot help it. Sometimes Mr. Harris sees it and he wrinkles even more to which Frank replied that he must be 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.

Taplow shares further that one day, Mr. Crocker- Harris cracked one of his classic jokes to which no one laughed. He understood that the joke was meant to be funny and laughed anyway because he wanted to be polite and to feel sorry for him making such poor jokes. He doesn't remember what the joke was and asked Frank to suppose he cracked a joke right away and asked him to laugh.

He imitated his teacher again and told Frank what his reaction was when he laughed at his joke. Mr. Crocker-Harris asked him to explain the joke to the rest of the form as he was the only one laughing in the class.

As he was saying this, the door of the classroom opened and Millie, the wife of Mr. Crocker-Harris entered the class. She was a thin woman who dresses smarter than the rest of the women who are wives of Schoolmasters. She was wearing a cape and was carrying a shopping basket. She closed the door as she entered and stood next to the screen watching both of them talking. They noticed her after a few seconds.

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.)

Infinitely – to a great extent

Frantically – desperately

As Frank was joking about telling the joke to others, he saw Millie and stopped talking. He turned around and was relieved by seeing her there and wished her hello. She replied hello without any expressions on her face and put her basket on the sideboard. Taplow asked Frank in a desperate tone if she had heard any of their conversation. Frank thought that she did because she was standing there for quite some time. Millie took her cape off and hung it on hall-stand.

Taplow in a worrying tone says if she did hear them, then he will not get his remove and Frank tells him not to think too much. Frank crosses 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.)

Millie picks up the basket from the sideboard and puts it on the table. She asks Taplow if he is waiting for his husband to which he replies yes. She tells him he is at the Bursar's and it might take some time. If she was in his place, she might have left. Taplow replies that he said he will come. As Millie unpacks the things from the basket, she suggests him to go for a quarter of an hour and then come back to check on him. Taplow asks her if Mr. Harris comes back before him then what will happen. Millie assured him that she will take the blame for this and takes out a prescription from the basket. She hands it over to him and asks him to bring medicines for her from the chemist. He agrees and crosses the door upright.

Question and Answers

Understanding the text

1. Comment on the attitude shown by Taplow towards Crocker-Harris.

Ans: Taplow is a student of Mr. Crocker-Harris. Taplow is called for extra work by him on his last day of school because of the day he missed previously. Mr. Crocker-Harris is a disciplinarian who works hard and follows the rules seriously. He is not a sadist and doesn't believe in showing feelings to his students. Taplow likes him anyway and wants him to give his remove. Mr. Crocker-Harris is not biased as he said he will give Taplow what he deserves, nothing less and nothing more.

2. Does Frank seem to encourage Taplow's comments on Crocker-Harris?

Ans: Frank surely encourages him to comment on Crocker-Harris as he asked him many questions about him. He also asked him to repeat when he was imitating his teacher.

3. What do you gather about Crocker-Harris from the play?

Ans: Mr. Crocker-Harris is a middle-aged schoolmaster who is a disciplinarian. He is not biased with his students and is a strict person. He follows all the rules and never shrivels up in front of his students. He takes his job seriously as he called Taplow on the last day of school to make up for his missed day previously.

Talking about the text

1. Discuss - Talking about teachers among friends.

Ans: Students often discuss teachers among their friends. They sometimes make fun of them behind their back or gives them a name like Taplow did in the play – Crock. This is not the right thing to do as a student must understand that a teacher will never do anything to hurt them. They want to see them successful and sometimes being strict is what they have to do at that moment.

2. Discuss - The manner you adopt when you talk about a teacher to other teachers.

Ans: One must respectfully address any teacher in front of other teachers. Whatever you think about them, never disrespect them. Students tend to get very frank in front of their teachers and starts saying things they should not have. It can backfire.

3. Discuss - Reading plays is more interesting than studying science.

Ans: Yes, reading plays is more interesting than studying science. Reading plays makes us more imaginative and is interesting to do. It also helps in building our linguistic skills. We can learn about the language more and we can learn so much about humans and their behavior.

Science, on the other hand, provides us knowledge and gives us a modern approach. It gives us practical knowledge in laboratories and teaches us many things about our daily life.

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...

Ans:

1. Perfectionist
2. Pacifist
3. Nihilist
4. Optimist
5. Conventionalist
6. Materialist
