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THE BROWNING VERSION

A Play in One Act

by Terence Rattigan

|| SAMUEL FRENCH ||

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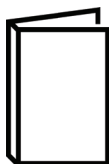
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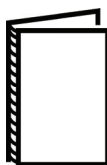


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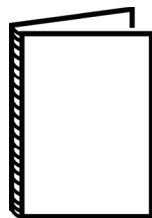
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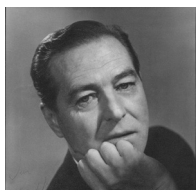
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Born in London on 10th June 1911, Terence Rattigan was educated at Harrow (Scholar) from 1925 to 1930 and Trinity College, Oxford (History Scholarship) BA to 1933. He served as a flight Lieutenant in the Central Command, RAF, from 1940 to 1945. In 1934 he had become a full-time playwright.

His many successful plays include *French Without Tears*, *After The Dance*, *Flare Path*, *Love in Idleness*, *While The Sun Shines*, *The Winslow Boy*, *The Browning Version*, *Harlequinade*, *Adventure Story*, *Who is Sylvia?*, *The Deep Blue Sea*, *The Sleeping Prince*, *Separate Tables*, *Variation on a Theme*, *Ross, Man and Boy*, *A Bequest to the Nation*, *In Praise to the Nation*, *Cause Célèbre*.

Terence Rattigan still holds the record of being the only playwright to have notched more than 1000 performances for two separate plays, namely, *French Without Tears* and *While The Sun Shines*.

During the war years, he had three plays running on Shaftesbury Avenue: *Flare Path* at the Apollo, *While The Sun Shines* at the Globe and *Love in Idleness* at the Lyric.

He wrote screenplays of *French Without Tears*, *The Way To The Stars*, *Journey Together*, *While The Sun Shines*, *The Winslow Boy*, *The Browning Version*, *The Prince and The Showgirl*, *Separate Tables*, *The Sound Barrier*, *The Man Who Loved Redheads*, *The Deep Blue Sea*, *The Final Test*, *The VIPs*, *The Yellow Rolls Royce*, *Goodbye Mr Chips*, *Conduct Unbecoming*, *A Bequest To The Nation* – and collaborated on *The Quiet Wedding*, *The Day Will Dawn*, *English Without Tears*, *Uncensored*, *Brighton Rock*, *Bond Street*. His television plays include: *Heart to Heart*, *Adventure Story*, *High Summer*. *After the Dance* was shown in the performance series on BBC 2 in 1993 and *The Deep Blue Sea* was recorded for the same series. In 1958 he was awarded

a CBE, and in 1971 he became Knight Bachelor. Sir Terence Rattigan died in 1977.

For further information on Terence Rattigan, visit

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THE BROWNING VERSION

Produced at the Phoenix Theatre, London, on September 8th, 1948, with the following cast of characters:

(in the order of their appearance)

JOHN TAPLOW	Peter Scott
FRANK HUNTER	Hector Ross
MILLIE CROCKER-HARRIS	Mary Ellis
ANDREW CROCKER-HARRIS	Eric Portman
DR FROBISHER	Campbell Cotts
PETER GILBERT	Anthony Oliver
MRS GILBERT	Henryetta Edwards

The play was produced by Peter Glenville

The Scene

The action passes in the sitting room of the Crocker-Harris's flat at a public school in the south of England

Time: About 6.30 p.m. of a day in July

SCENE – *The sitting room in the Crocker-Harrises' flat in a public school in the south of England. About 6.30 p.m. of a day in July.*

The building in which the flat is situated is large and Victorian, and at some fairly recent time has been converted into flats of varying size for masters, married and unmarried. The Crocker-Harrises have the ground floor and their sitting room is probably the biggest – and gloomiest – room in the house. It boasts, however, access (through a stained glass door left) to a small garden, and is furnished with chintzy and genteel cheerfulness. Another door, up right, leads into the hall and a third, up centre, to the rest of the flat. The hall door is partially concealed by a screen. There is a large bay window in the left wall below the garden door. Near the window is a flat-topped desk with a swivel chair behind it and an upright chair on the other side. The fireplace is down right. Below it is an easy chair and a small table with a telephone. A settee stands in front of the fireplace at right centre. There is an oval dining table with two chairs up centre right of the door; up centre is a sideboard; and against the wall left of the door up right is a hall stand, in which some walking sticks are kept. A small cupboard stands against the wall down right.

See the ground plan of the scene.

*When the curtain rises the room is empty. There are copies of The Times and the Tatler on the settee. We hear the front door opening and closing and immediately after there is a timorous knock on the door up right. After a pause the knock is repeated. The door opens and **JOHN TAPLOW** makes his appearance. He is a*

plain, moon-faced boy of about sixteen, with glasses. He carries a book and an exercise book. He is dressed in grey flannels, a dark blue coat and white scarf. He stands in doubt at the door for a moment, then goes back into the hall.

TAPLOW (*offstage; calling*) Sir! Sir!

After a pause he comes back into the room, crosses to the garden door up left and opens it.

(he calls) Sir!

*There is no reply. **TAPLOW**, standing in the bright sunshine at the door, emits a plaintive sigh, then closes it firmly and comes down right of the desk on which he places the book, the notebook and a pen. He sits in the chair right of the desk. He looks round the room. On the table centre is a small box of chocolates, probably the Crocker-Harrises' ration for the month. **TAPLOW** rises, moves above the table and opens the box. He counts the number inside, and removes two. One of these he eats and the other, after a second's struggle, either with his conscience or his judgment of what he might be able to get away with, virtuously replaces in the box. He puts back the box on the table, and moves up right to the hall stand. He selects a walking stick with a crooked handle, comes down centre, and makes a couple of golf-swings, with an air of great concentration. **FRANK HUNTER** enters up right and appears from behind the screen covering the door. He is a rugged young man – not perhaps quite as rugged as his deliberately cultivated manner of ruthless honesty makes him appear, but wrapped in all the self-confidence of the popular master. He watches **TAPLOW**, whose back is to the door, making his swing.*

FRANK (*coming down behind **TAPLOW***) Roll the wrists away from the ball. Don't break them like that.

*He puts his large hands over the abashed **TAPLOW**'s.*

Now swing.

TAPLOW, *guided by FRANK's evidently expert hands, succeeds in hitting the carpet with more effect than before.*

(he breaks away right of TAPLOW) Too quick. Slow back and stiff left arm. It's no good just whacking the ball as if you were the headmaster and the ball was you. It'll never go more than fifty yards if you do. Get a rhythm. A good golf swing is a matter of aesthetics, not of brute strength.

TAPLOW, *only half listening, is gazing at the carpet.*

FRANK What's the matter?

TAPLOW I think we've made a tear in the carpet, sir.

FRANK *examines the spot perfunctorily.*

FRANK *(taking the stick from TAPLOW)* Nonsense. That was there already. *(He crosses up right and puts the stick in the hallstand)* Do I know you? *(He comes down left of the settee to right of TAPLOW)*

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 yet if you've got your remove?

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

FRANK Why not?

TAPLOW Well, you know what he's like, sir.

FRANK (*moving away to the fireplace*) 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 any 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 (*moving above the desk*) Well, anyway, sir, it's a good deal more exciting than this muck. (*He indicates the book he put on the desk*)

FRANK What is this muck?

TAPLOW Aeschylus, sir. "The Agamemnon".

FRANK (*moving to the left end of the couch*) And your considered view is that "The Agamemnon" of Aeschylus is muck, is it?

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 having a lover 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. (*He moves into the window, upstage end*) 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 had 'flu – so here I am – and look at the weather, sir.

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

TAPLOW (*crossing to centre*) Well, I'm not so sure, sir. That would be true of the ordinary masters all right. They just wouldn't dare not give a chap a remove after his taking extra work – it would be such a bad advertisement for them. 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 (*mimicking 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 barely human. (*He breaks off quickly*) Sorry, sir. Have I gone too far?

FRANK (*sitting on the settee, left end, and picking up The Times*) Yes. Much too far.

TAPLOW Sorry, sir. I got sort of carried away.

FRANK Evidently. (*He opens The Times and reads*)

TAPLOW *moves to the chair right of the desk and sits.*

Er – Taplow.

TAPLOW Yes, sir?

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

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

FRANK *snorts, then looks stern.*

FRANK Not in the least like him. Read your nice Aeschylus and be quiet.

TAPLOW (*with weary disgust*) 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 get nine holes in before lock-up.

TAPLOW (*genuinely 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 his form. You all seem scared to death of him. What does he do – beat you all, or something?

TAPLOW (*rising and moving to the left end of the settee*) 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 dash it, sir, you're different. You're young – well comparatively anyway – and you're science and you canvassed for Labour in the last election. You must know what sadism is.

FRANK *stares for a moment at TAPLOW, then turns away.*

FRANK Good Lord! What are public schools coming to?

TAPLOW *(crossing to right of the desk, below the chair, and leaning against it)* 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 trade on that very foible.

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

FRANK *(making a feeble attempt at re-establishing the correct relationship)* 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 little classical jokes. Of course nobody laughed because nobody understood it, myself included. Still, I knew he'd meant it as funny, so I laughed. Not out of sucking-up, sir, I swear, but ordinary common politeness, and feeling a bit sorry for him having made a dud joke. *(He moves round below the desk to left of it)* Now I can't remember what the joke was – but let's say it was— *(Mimicking)* Benedictus, benedicatur, benedictine... Now, you laugh, sir.

FRANK *laughs formally.* **TAPLOW** *looks at him over an imaginary pair of spectacles, and then, very gently crooks his fore-finger to him in indication to approach the table.* **FRANK** *rises. He is genuinely interested in the incident.*

(in a gentle, throaty voice) Taplow – you laughed at my little pun, I noticed. I must confess I am flattered at the evident advance your Latinity has made that you should 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.*

Come along, Taplow.

FRANK *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. 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 centre and puts the basket on it.

MILLIE (to TAPLOW) Waiting for my husband?

TAPLOW (moving down left of the table centre) 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 And while you're there you might as well slip into
Stewart's and have an ice. Here. Catch. (*She takes a shilling from her bag and throws it to him*)

TAPLOW (turning and catching it) Thanks awfully. (*He signals to FRANK not to tell, and moves to the door up right*)

MILLIE Oh, Taplow. (*She crosses to him*)

TAPLOW (turning on the step) Yes, Mrs Crocker-Harris.

MILLIE I had a letter from my father today in which he says he
once had the pleasure of meeting your mother.

TAPLOW (uninterested but polite) Oh, really?

MILLIE Yes. It was at some fête or other in Bradford. My uncle
– that's Sir William Bartop, you know – made a speech and
so did your mother. My father met her afterwards at tea.

TAPLOW Oh really?

MILLIE He said he found her quite charming.

TAPLOW Yes, she's jolly good at those sort of functions. (*Becoming aware of his lack of tact*) I mean – I'm sure she found him charming, too. So long.

He goes out up right.

MILLIE (*coming down to the left end of the settee*) Thank you for coming round.

FRANK That's all right.

MILLIE You're staying for dinner?

FRANK If I may.

MILLIE If you may! (*She crosses below the settee to him*) Give me a cigarette.

FRANK *takes out his case and extends it to her*, **MILLIE** *takes a cigarette.*

(*indicating the case*) You haven't given it away yet, I see.

FRANK Do you think I would?

MILLIE Frankly, yes. Luckily it's a man's case. I don't suppose any of your girl friends would want it.

FRANK Don't be silly.

MILLIE Where have you been all this week?

FRANK (*sitting in the easy chair*) Correcting exam papers – making reports. You know what end of term is like.

MILLIE (*crossing below the settee and moving above the table centre*) I do know what end of term is like. But even Andrew has managed this last week to take a few hours off to say goodbye to people. (*She takes some packages out of the shopping basket*)

FRANK I really have been appallingly busy. Besides, I'm coming to stay with you in Bradford.

MILLIE Not for over a month. Andrew doesn't start his new job until September first. That's one of the things I had to tell you.

FRANK Oh. I had meant to be in Devonshire in September.

MILLIE (*quickly*) Who with?

FRANK My family.

MILLIE Surely you can go earlier, can't you? Go in August.

FRANK It'll be difficult.

MILLIE Then you'd better come to me in August.

FRANK But Andrew will still be there.

There is a pause. MILLIE crosses to left of the desk, opens a drawer and takes out some scissors.

FRANK I think I can manage September.

MILLIE (*shutting the drawer*) That'd be better – from every point of view. (*She moves below the table centre and puts down the scissors*) Except that it means I shan't see you for six weeks.

FRANK (*lightly*) You'll survive that, all right.

MILLIE Yes, I'll survive it— (*She moves to the left end of the settee*) but not as easily as you will.

FRANK *says nothing.*

I haven't much pride, have I? (*She crosses to FRANK and stands above the easy chair*) Frank, darling— (*She sits on the arm of the chair and kisses him*) I love you so much.

FRANK *kisses her on the mouth, but a trifle perfunctorily, and then rises and breaks quickly away, as if afraid someone had come into the room. He moves below the settee.*

(*she laughs*) You're very nervous.

FRANK I'm afraid of that screen arrangement. You can't see people coming in.

MILLIE Oh yes. (*She rises and stands by the fireplace*) That reminds me. What were you and Taplow up to when I came in just now? Making fun of my husband?

FRANK Afraid so. Yes.

MILLIE It sounded rather a good imitation. I must get him to do it for me sometime. It was very naughty of you to encourage him.

FRANK I know. It was.

MILLIE (*ironically*) Bad for discipline.

FRANK (*sitting on the settee*) Exactly. Currying favour with the boys, too. My God, how easy it is to be popular. I've only been a master three years, but I've already slipped into an act and a vernacular that I just can't get out of. Why can't anyone ever be natural with the little blighters?

MILLIE They probably wouldn't like it if you were. (*She crosses below the settee and moves above the table centre. She picks up the scissors and a packet of luggage labels and cuts the latter one by one from the packet*)

FRANK I don't see why not. No one seems to have tried it yet, anyway. I suppose the trouble is – we're all too scared of them. Either one gets forced into an attitude of false and hearty and jocular bonhomie like myself, or into the sort of petty, soulless tyranny which your husband uses to protect himself against the lower fifth.

MILLIE (*rather bored with this*) He'd never be popular – whatever he did.

FRANK Possibly not. He ought never to have become a schoolmaster really. Why did he?

MILLIE It was his vocation, he said. He was sure he'd make a big success of it, especially when he got his job here first go off. (*Bitterly*) Fine success he's made, hasn't he?

FRANK You should have stopped him.

MILLIE How was I to know? He talked about getting a house, then a headmastership.

FRANK (*rising*) The Crock a headmaster! That's a pretty thought.

MILLIE Yes, it's funny to think of now, all right. Still, he wasn't always the Crock, you know. He had a bit more gumption once. At least I thought he had. Don't let's talk any more about him— (*She comes right round the table to centre*) It's too depressing. (*She starts to move left*)

FRANK I'm sorry for him.

MILLIE (*stopping and turning; indifferently*) He's not sorry for himself, so why should you be? It's me you should be sorry for.

FRANK I am.

MILLIE (*moving in a few steps towards FRANK; smiling*) Then show me. (*She stretches out her arms to him*)

FRANK *moves to her and kisses her again quickly and lightly. She holds him hungrily. He has to free himself almost roughly.*

FRANK (*crossing to the fireplace*) What have you been doing all day?

MILLIE Calling on the other masters' wives – saying fond farewells. I've worked off twelve. I've another seven to do tomorrow.

FRANK You poor thing! I don't envy you.

MILLIE (*moving above the desk to left of it with some labels*) It's the housemasters' wives that are the worst. (*She picks up a pen and writes on the labels*) They're all so damn patronising. You should have heard Betty Carstairs. "My dear – it's such terrible bad luck on you both – that your husband should get this heart trouble just when, if only he'd stayed on, he'd have been bound to get a house. I mean, he's considerably

senior to my Arthur as it is, and they simply couldn't have gone on passing him over, could they?"

FRANK There's a word for Betty Carstairs, my dear, that I would hesitate to employ before a lady.

MILLIE She's got her eye on you, anyway.

FRANK Betty Carstairs? What utter rot!

MILLIE Oh yes, she has. I saw you at that concert. Don't think I didn't notice.

FRANK Millie, darling! Really! I detest the woman.

MILLIE Then what were you doing in her box at Lord's?

FRANK Carstairs invited me. I went there because it was a good place to see the match from.

MILLIE Yes, I'm sure it was. Much better than the grandstand, anyway.

FRANK (*remembering something suddenly*) Oh, my God!

MILLIE (*coming below the desk*) It's all right, my dear. Don't bother to apologise. We gave the seat away, as it happens.

FRANK I'm most terribly sorry.

MILLIE It's all right. (*She moves to right of the desk*) We couldn't afford a box, you see.

FRANK (*moving a few steps towards right centre*) It wasn't that. You know it wasn't that. It's just that I – well, I clean forgot.

MILLIE Funny you didn't forget the Carstairs invitation.

FRANK Millie – don't be a fool.

MILLIE It's you who are the fool. (*Appealingly*) Frank – have you never been in love? I know you're not in love with me – but haven't you ever been in love with anyone? Don't you realise what torture you inflict on someone who loves you when you do a thing like that?

FRANK I've told you I'm sorry – I don't know what more I can say.

WAIT, THERE'S MORE!

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