

Valentin Krasnogorov

A Cruel Lesson

Play in two acts

Translation by Valentin Krasnogorov

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Synopsis

The drama is about the social and psychological roots of cruelty, about the fine line between moral and immoral actions. The inspiration for the play was a real psychological experiment that received broad international attention. Two students guided by their professor torture a woman for scientific purposes. Participation in the experiment seriously affects the relationships among the characters. The hot-button plot keeps the audience on the edge of their seats. The play is especially popular among young people. These days, when violence is becoming a part of everyday life, the play proves to be especially timely. *2 male roles and 2 female roles.*

From reviews:

"At first glance the plot is very simple. The idea behind it is profoundly powerful. Turns out, every individual can potentially be cruel and sometimes even capable of murder. But what is the motivation? What triggers the mechanism of cruelty? Unraveling the complicated psychological tangle, the spectators, along with the characters, are looking at the less pleasant sides of the human soul, unwittingly putting themselves in the characters' shoes. It seems, the lesson is learned.

The surprising ending relieves the characters of the emotional tension they have been subjected to throughout the play. From start to finish, it keeps the spectators glued to their seats."

Julia Klimavichute, critic

CHARACTERS

DARTER – psychology professor

ALICE – his assistant

MICHAEL – student

MEGAN – student

The venue is one of the contemporary universities. The inspiration for the play was a real psychological experiment broadly resonated in the international media.

Act I

Professor Darter's laboratory. Table, several chairs and armchairs, panel screen, materials for psychological tests: tables, drawings, etc. Among other objects, an armchair placed next to the computer with a screen facing the audience. The armchair is fitted with electrical wiring.

Enter Megan and Michael – the university students. The interior of the laboratory does not spark much interest in them; one can tell it's not their first visit here.

MEGAN. Where is Professor Darter?

MICHAEL. Must be somewhere around here. The lab wasn't locked.

MEGAN. What time did he schedule this for?

MICHAEL. Two o'clock.

MEGAN. So he will be here in fifteen minutes.

MICHAEL. If he is not late.

MEGAN. The professor is never late.

Pause. Megan examines the wired armchair.

This chair didn't use to be here.

MICHAEL. I don't remember it, either. Looks like a dentist's chair.

MEGAN. More like an electric chair.

MICHAEL. It looks like both. Stop wandering around. Sit down.

Megan sits down on one of the chairs.

No, better sit here. You will be more comfortable.

Transfers Megan to a soft, comfortable chair with great care and sits down next to her.

MEGAN. I wonder what sort of experiment Professor Darter came up with this time?

MICHAEL. *(Amiably.)* Lately, you've got really fascinated with psychology.

MEGAN. *(With hardly noticeable challenge.)* Yes, I love my major. Is that bad?

MICHAEL. No, it's great.

MEGAN. To you, studying psychology is entertainment, but I am going to make a living off it.

I can't count on any source of income other than my skills.

MICHAEL. Here we go again: you are reproaching me. It's not my fault that my dad rakes in a lot of dough. *(Smiling.)* Or is it that big of a sin?

MEGAN. *(Smiling in return.)* No, Michael, a rich father is not your greatest flaw.

Pause.

MICHAEL. By the way, my future has now been decided. Once I graduate, I'll go right back to school.

MEGAN. What are you going to study?

MICHAEL. Business.

MEGAN. *(Without enthusiasm.)* Congratulations.

MICHAEL. That's what my father wants. He is going to involve me in managing his company.

MEGAN. That was obvious a long time ago. What about psychology? Are you really going to quit?

MICHAEL. What can I do... (*Smiling. He is clearly in a good mood today.*) But it's actually for the best. Two psychologists in one family – that's too many.

MEGAN. Who is the second one?

MICHAEL. Can't you guess?

MEGAN. (*Looking away.*) No.

MICHAEL. I think you understand everything perfectly, but I will explain, especially since I should have done so a long time ago.

Pause.

We've been friends for a year and a half...

MEGAN. Thank you for defining our relationship so delicately.

MICHAEL. I know it's been lingering for too long. I even think it's starting to weigh on you – perhaps because it was so uncertain and had no future... So... You know, my folks were strongly opposed to my marriage. In their opinion, it's too early.

MEGAN. Perhaps they just thought I wasn't good enough for you.

MICHAEL. Perhaps. But it doesn't matter any more. I wrote to them about everything and got a response yesterday. Long story short, they don't mind if you and I...

Megan is silent.

Do you understand me?

MEGAN. Yes.

MICHAEL. Truth is, I was weary of the old man, yet I had faith in him. He is even prepared to buy us not just an apartment, but a house in the suburbs. I am so darn happy they've agreed.

MEGAN. And if they were against it, would you break up with me?

MICHAEL. (*Smiling happily.*) That doesn't matter any more. What matters is, we are going to have an awesome life together. We will have a house, a garden, and a bunch of kids. I really love kids.

MEGAN. I know.

MICHAEL. And flowers.

MEGAN. I know.

MICHAEL. And you.

Pause. Michael walks over to Megan and embraces her.

Why aren't you saying, "I know"?

MEGAN. (*Can't help but smile.*) I know.

MICHAEL. So do you agree?

MEGAN. I don't know.

MICHAEL. What do you mean you don't know? Although come to think of it, you are right. I am not worthy of you. And I've been silent for too long. But now everything is behind, right? And don't you love me just a little bit?

MEGAN. I don't know.

MICHAEL. Please don't think I don't have any dreams beyond my little garden. I have big plans. I am a very persistent man, and I am used to always reaching my goals. (*Smiling.*) So don't miss your chance to become a wife of an outstanding person.

MEGAN. Or at least, an ambitious one.

Pause.

MICHAEL. Well, what do you say?

MEGAN. I don't know.

MICHAEL. (*Getting anxious.*) But you are not declining, are you?

MEGAN. I don't know.

MICHAEL. Why are you harping on the same string, "I don't know" and "I don't know"?

MEGAN. Is it okay if I think about it?

MICHAEL. But of course!

MEGAN. Don't be mad, okay?

MICHAEL. And you don't be mad at me for being silent for so long... And in general, try to be kinder and more patient.

MEGAN. I am what I am. If you don't like me the way I am...

MICHAEL. (*Interrupting.*) Here you go again, lunging and attacking.

MEGAN. You are right, I've become too mean. (*Kisses him on the cheek.* Let's not talk about it any more.

Pause.

Darter still not here.

MICHAEL. (*Glancing at his watch.*) Five to two.

MEGAN. Do you know who else will be participating in the experiment?

MICHAEL. I don't think anyone else will be.

MEGAN. So, from the whole class, Darter chose only you and me? I wonder why?

MICHAEL. (*Shrugging.*) How would I know?

MEGAN. Is that what he said – "Ask Megan to come here with you at two o'clock"?

MICHAEL. (*Evasively.*) I don't remember exactly... Don't dwell on it so much. It's just an ordinary lab project.

MEGAN. His experiments are always so unexpected. What is he up to this time?

MICHAEL. (*Yawning.*) We'll find out soon enough. I doubt it's anything interesting. Psychology is a purely academic field.

MEGAN. But every single publication by Darter always triggers off a real storm in the media. How many times has he been hounded and persecuted...

MICHAEL. Which only brings him more fame.

MEGAN. But that's not what Darter is after.

MICHAEL. He is good at what he does, I won't dispute that. Clear mind, impeccable reasoning... He is more like a computing machine than a man.

MEGAN. What don't you like about him?

MICHAEL. (*Shrugging.*) For some reason I think that to him people are just guinea pigs. He will skin them dispassionately if he needs it for his research.

MEGAN. Nonsense.

MICHAEL. And he is a bit of a bore.

MEGAN. That is so not true. Professor Darter is always excited, always full of ideas...

MICHAEL. (*Imitating her.*) And also quite young, elegant, famous, and single.

MEGAN. Are you jealous?

MICHAEL. (*Laughing.*) No. I appreciate the difference between the student's admiration for her professor and a woman's love for a man. Although truth be told, I am jealous. Just a little.

MEGAN. You shouldn't be.

MICHAEL. What can I do...

MEGAN. You have nothing to worry about.

MICHAEL. I know. If only because he already has a sweetheart.

MEGAN. Really?

MICHAEL. Didn't you know?

MEGAN. I am not interested in that. (*After a momentary silence.*) Is she pretty?

MICHAEL. You don't think the professor has a bad taste, do you?

Megan is not responding.

He travels with her all over the place... Even took her abroad...

MEGAN. Is she young?

MICHAEL. Not a spring chicken, but not an old lady either. In a word, just right. She's got that vibe. So you are interested after all?

MEGAN. No. I am just letting you enjoy yourself by teasing me with your gossip.

MICHAEL. It's not gossip. She is listed as his assistant. I saw her myself. Very intriguing.

There is something about her... (*Makes an uncertain gesture.*)

MEGAN. That I lack?

MICHAEL. (*Laughing.*) You are a different story. (*Tries to hug Megan, but she dodges.*) What is the matter, baby? Are you jealous?

MEGAN. Yes, I am jealous of you and that ugly redhead.

MICHAEL. (*Laughing.*) But she is not a redhead! What makes you think she is?

MEGAN. (*Stubbornly.*) Yes, she is.

MICHAEL. Why?

MEGAN. Because I don't like redheads.

MICHAEL. (*Roaring with laughter.*) But this does not make any sense! You are so mean.

Come on, let me kiss you!

Tries to embrace Megan. Enter Darter and Alice. The students get serious. Darter, noticing them, stops in his tracks.

DARTER. Good afternoon.

MEGAN. Good afternoon.

MICHAEL. Hello, Professor Darter.

DARTER. (*Introducing his companion.*) Ms. Alice Lyons, my assistant.

ALICE. (*Smiling friendly, extends her hand to Michael.*) We've already met yesterday.

MICHAEL. (*Shaking her hand.*) But we didn't get introduced. My name is Michael.

DARTER. I am sorry, Megan, but why are you here? Did you need to see me?

MEGAN. (*Surprised.*) Me?.. I... Didn't you ask me to come?

DARTER. You? Why?

MEGAN. To participate in your experiment.

DARTER. Michael, what is going on? Why did you bring Megan? Didn't I ask you to bring Ashley Sanders?

MICHAEL. (*Embarrassed.*) You certainly did. But I thought you wouldn't care... One student or another - what difference does it make? So I decided...

DARTER. You shouldn't have decided. Megan, I am very sorry, but your assistance will not be needed today. You may go.

Alice is watching the dialog with great interest. Megan gives her an annoyed look.

MICHAEL. But what is wrong with Megan? She is a good student, no worse than Ashley by any means...

DARTER. Thank you Michael, I am aware of Megan's accomplishments. But for this particular experiment, her candidacy is unacceptable.

MICHAEL. Why?

DARTER. It would take too long to explain.

MEGAN. Please, don't send me off. I am curious.

DARTER. (*Firmly.*) Nobody is sending you off. But I invited Ashley Sanders today and was absolutely not planning on meeting with you. Take care. I am sorry. (*Turning away from Megan.*) Alice, please get ready for work.

Alice walks away, takes off her raincoat and fixes her hair. Megan bites her lip, humiliated and insulted.

MICHAEL. Is Ms. Lyons also going to participate in the experiment?

DARTER. Yes.

MEGAN. Then how come some people are allowed to, but I am not?

MICHAEL. Yeah, what is wrong with my fiancée?

DARTER. Your fiancée? (*Shifts his gaze to Megan.*) I am sorry, I didn't know. When did you two get engaged?

Megan is silent.

MICHAEL. Today.

DARTER. Congratulations.

MICHAEL. Thank you.

DARTER. Time to start. (*Puts on his lab coat, takes a notebook.*)

MEGAN. But what about me?

DARTER. (*Curtly.*) Stop by some other time. I am busy right now.

Megan heads toward the exit, not looking at anyone.

On second thought, wait.

Megan stops.

You are right, what difference does it make? You may stay, if you really want to. (*Softer.*) Don't be angry, Megan. Trust me, I have very good reasons not to let you participate. But that said... So, you are getting married?

MICHAEL. (*Answering for Megan.*) Yes.

DARTER. (*Smiling.*) If you'd like, I can perform a psychological compatibility test for you to warm up. (*Quickly.*) Come on, stand face to face!

The students do.

A little farther away from each other! Now, imagine you are walking on a very, very narrow bridge that can only fit one person. There is a cliff under the bridge, so you can't fall or jump. Go!

Michael and Megan walk towards each other and, reaching each other, stop.

Now, each of you must get to the other side. What are you going to do?

Long pause.

MICHAEL. What would you recommend?

DARTER. Think for yourself. There are so many options!

MICHAEL. Such as?

DARTER. You can use force, caress, scolding, or trickery. You may persevere or yield - you name it!

Pause. Megan and Michael look at each other.

MICHAEL. But really, what would you advise?

DARTER. (*Shrugging.*) Give the right of way to the lady.

Michael gives Megan his hand and leads her across the bridge.

MEGAN. Professor Darter, is that what you would have done, too?

DARTER. (*Smiling.*) No. If I were your fiancé, I would have taken you in my arms and said: "Megan, honey, my joy, my sweetheart, where shall I take you, to which side of the bridge, mine or yours?" (*Carelessly.*) Or something like that.

MEGAN. And I would have replied: “What does it matter, honey? Both sides are ours now!”

MICHAEL. And yet where would you have taken her?

DARTER. I won't tell. That would be a test for Megan and me, and not for you.

MICHAEL. So what did our test show?

DARTER. That's a secret. Anyway, it wasn't really a test, it was more like a joke. I have no right to intrude in your private lives.

MEGAN. Is that what today's experiment is all about?

DARTER. No, of course not. (*Becoming serious.*) Ms. Lyons, are you ready?

ALICE. Almost. (*To Darter.*) May I borrow you for a minute?

Alice and Darter exit the room.

MEGAN. I don't understand, Michael, why did you bring me here if Darter needed Ashley Sanders?

MICHAEL. (*Guiltily.*) I really thought he wouldn't care. I don't understand why he was so stubborn. As to me, I like being around you a lot more.

MEGAN. (*Angrily.*) Thanks.

MICHAEL. And I needed to talk to you.

MEGAN. By the way, it was not necessary to call me your fiancée in front of everybody. I haven't agreed yet.

MICHAEL. Sorry, it slipped out by accident.

MEGAN. No, it didn't. I know you. Speaking of you, you know what the test on the “bridge” showed me? That you always listen to other people's advice. You should've called your daddy - to ask him what to do.

MICHAEL. (*Evading sensitive subject.*) How did you like Ms. Lyons?

MEGAN. (*Reservedly.*) A nice lady.

MICHAEL. (*Genuinely.*) Very.

MEGAN. I think I've seen her somewhere before.

MICHAEL. I doubt it. Darter brought her here very recently. I think the two of them are very close.

Alice and Darter return.

DARTER. Sorry about the delay. Let's get started. Everyone take a seat, please.

Everyone except Darter sits down.

For centuries, or perhaps even millennia, people have been debating whether or not corporal punishment is beneficial in the upbringing and education. Even today, many people still believe that a good whipping does a child no harm. Or an adult. Oddly enough, there is still no consensus on the subject among psychologists and educators. Some believe that punishment encourages the learning process, others that it hinders it.

MICHAEL. And what do you believe?

DARTER. I don't believe anything. Rather, I think the answer to the issue should be based on a strictly scientific foundation. That is why we are doing this experiment.

MEGAN. So what is it about, anyway?

DARTER. You, Megan and you, Michael, will be playing the role of "teachers" today. Your goal is to ensure that the "student" learns her lesson as quickly as possible and as best she can. For example, an excerpt from Shakespeare twenty-line long. Ms. Lyons has selflessly agreed to take on the "student's" role. The role, let's face it, quite unpleasant. Alice, go ahead.

Alice sits down in the wired chair.

Now, the most important thing: for every mistake the student makes, you must – I repeat, *must* – punish her with an electric shock of increasing voltage.

MICHAEL. (*Shaking his head.*) Quite a cruel lesson.

DARTER. What can we do? The search for truth is not always filled with joy.

MEGAN. Don't you think that such an educational method, regardless of its outcome, traumatizes the student's soul?

DARTER. (*Drily.*) The student's soul is not of interest to me in this particular experiment. My goal is only to establish whether or not the fear of punishment stimulates learning. The effect of the punishment on the student's psychological wellbeing is a different problem entirely.

MICHAEL. Tell me, these electric shocks... are they painful?

DARTER. Of course. Especially at higher voltages. Otherwise it wouldn't be a punishment. Here, take a look.

Steers students to the remote control next to the wired chair and presses a button. The computer screen shows the number "20".

With every subsequent touch of the button, the voltage automatically increases by twenty volts. See?

Presses the button several times. The computer screen displays the numbers 40, 60, 80, etc.

The shock of up to eighty or a hundred volts is relatively easy to tolerate, but subsequently they become very unpleasant.

MICHAEL. You explain it so cold-bloodedly... It makes me uncomfortable.

DARTER. I am just trying to be very clear.

MEGAN. Is there a limit to the voltage?

DARTER. Yes. Three hundred volts.

MICHAEL. Isn't it life-threatening?

DARTER. Three hundred volts – that is more than just serious. Luckily, so far everything worked out well, and besides, Ms. Lyons has regular check-ups. (*To Alice*) Speaking of which, when was the last time you saw a doctor?

ALICE. (*With some hesitation.*) The doctor? Quite recently.

DARTER. And what did he think about your heart?

ALICE. (*Still hesitating.*) It's fine.

DARTER. Have you brought a note from him?

ALICE. No... I didn't know you would request it.

DARTER. (*Frowning.*) Technically, that's a violation of the guidelines... Oh well, let's just hope everything will be okay this time around.

MICHAEL. (*Happily.*) Don't worry, Ms. Lyons. Personally, I am not going to cause you any trouble.

DARTER. No, my friends. Your duty is to carry out the lesson all the way through, that is, to teach the student the entire excerpt. And you need to do it as quickly as possible. The faster the student memorizes the text, the more points you will get for your teaching skills. Is that clear?

MICHAEL. Yes.

DARTER. I admit, I will be evaluating your professional skills and the strength of your character based on how you carry out this lesson. I need active, thoughtful, strong-willed students, not some spineless pseudo-do-gooders.

MICHAEL. We'll do our best.

MEGAN. May I ask Ms. Lyons a personal question?

Darter looks at Alice quizzically.

ALICE. Go ahead. By the way, you may call me Alice.

MEGAN. Tell me, what made you agree to sit in this chair? After all, it is unpleasant and even painful.

ALICE. (*Evasively.*) Science calls for sacrifice.

MEGAN. And you've agreed to sacrifice yourself for the sake of science? Or... or to help Professor Darter?

DARTER. To satisfy your curiosity, Megan, let me tell you that for her less than pleasant work Ms. Lyons gets a hefty compensation.

MICHAEL. But isn't it immoral to make a person do such work, even if they are compensated for it? The time of the gladiators has long since passed.

ALICE. No one made me do this. I was offered, and I agreed.

DARTER. (*Drily.*) Enough talking. Everyone earns money any way they please or are able to. Any more questions?

Pause.

MICHAEL. (*Trying to ease the tension with a smile.*) Everything is clear.

DARTER. I would like to add that your participation in this experiment is completely voluntary. But, once you started the lesson, you must take it very seriously. Let me remind you: the experiment is very important for the research.

Pause.

Megan, did you change your mind?

MEGAN. I rely on your authority.

DARTER. I am flattered to hear that, but in a case like this you have to make decisions yourself. Both the science and the society need this research, but if you don't like it, it's not too late to back out. I can always find other volunteers. By the way, I invited Natasha, not you.

MEGAN. I am staying.

DARTER. What about you, Michael?

MICHAEL. To be honest, I was expecting something more interesting than just an ordinary lesson, but I am in.

DARTER. Excellent. One last thing: for your participation in the experiment, each of you will get paid. It's not much, but still a compensation. Please, take it. And sign right here.

Gives money to the students.

MICHAEL. You don't have to... Why...? Since it's necessary, I am prepared to work for free. Voluntarily...

DARTER. If you would like, you can donate this money to our university later. But for now, just take it. These are the terms of the experiment.

Michael reluctantly takes the money. Megan also puts her money in her purse. Darter cheerfully continues.

So, our contract is sealed! Michael, let's attach the electrodes.

Baring the assistant's arms up to her elbows, Darter with the help of the students attaches electrodes to her skin.

Outstanding. And now, please help me tie the assistant to the chair.

MICHAEL. *(Surprised.)* Tie her? Why?

DARTER. You will understand it later. Just don't tighten the belts too much... There, that'll do it...

Michael reluctantly helps Darter to tie Alice to the chair.

Alright. *(To students.)* Well, who wants to be first?

MICHAEL. Ladies first.

DARTER. Very good. Megan, go ahead and start. Here is a book of Shakespeare's plays, browse through it and pick any twenty-line excerpt to your liking. *(To Michael.)* And you please wait in the room next door. Don't let anyone in, and don't come in, either.

MICHAEL. Can't I watch?

DARTER. *(Firmly.)* No.

MICHAEL. All right then, I'll wait. *(Leaving, addresses Megan.)* Good luck!
Exit Michael. Megan leafs through the book.

MEGAN. Ms. Lyons...

ALICE. I told you, call me Alice. I am your student, after all.

MEGAN. Okay. I just wanted to ask you – have we met before?

ALICE. It's possible. I don't remember. Perhaps at Andrew's place?

MEGAN. I've never been to Professor Darter's. But your face looks familiar.

ALICE. Because it's ordinary. You see faces like mine everywhere.

DARTER. Megan, let's get down to business.

MEGAN. (*Leafing through the book.*) I haven't found the right excerpt yet... Oh, here we go.

DARTER. Alright then, I am starting the timer. (*Turns on the electronic clock.*)

MEGAN. (*Reading, seemingly addressing Darter rather than the "student".*)

You see me, Lord Bassanio, where I stand,

Such as I am. Though for myself alone

I would not be ambitious in my wish

To wish myself much better, yet for you,

I would be trebled twenty times myself,

A thousand times more fair, ten thousand times more rich,

That only to stand high in your account,

I might in virtues, beauties, livings, friends,

Exceed account. But the full sum of me

Is sum of something; which, to term in gross,

Is an unlesson'd girl, unschool'd, unpractic'd,

Happy in this, she is not yet so old

But she may learn; happier than this,

She is not bred so dull but she can learn;

Happiest of all, is that her gentle spirit

Commits itself to yours to be directed,

As from her lord, her governor, her king.

Myself, and what is mine, to you and yours

Is now converted. But now I was the lord

Of this fair mansion, master of my servants,

Queen o'er myself; and even now, but now,

This house, these servants, and this same myself

Are yours. ^[1]

Puts the book down.

Twenty lines exactly.

DARTER. (*After a pause.*) Very good. Go on.

MEGAN. (*To Alice.*) Listen carefully.

You see me, Lord Bassanio, where I stand,

Such as I am.

ALICE. (*With an unexpectedly sonorous and emphatic voice.*)

You see me, Lord Bassanio, where I stand,

Such as I am.

MEGAN. (*With a hostile surprise.*) You are really good at reciting poems.

 Though for myself alone

I would not be ambitious in my wish

To wish myself much better, yet for you,

I would be trebled twenty times myself...

ALICE. (*Her voice has lost some of its confidence.*)

 Though for myself alone

I would not be ambitious in my wish... in my wish...

For you I would...

MEGAN. (*With satisfaction.*) You made a mistake, Alice. Please focus.

Presses the button with a triumphant smile. The computer screen displays the number "20".

Alice does not react to the punishment.

 Let's repeat these lines.

Though for myself alone

I would not be ambitious in my wish

To wish myself much better, yet for you,

I would be trebled twenty times myself...

ALICE. (*Repeating.*)

 Yet for you,

I would be trebled twenty times myself...

MEGAN.

A thousand times more fair, ten thousand times more rich,

That only to stand high in your account,

I might in virtue, beauties, livings, friends,

Exceed account.

ALICE.

A thousand times more fair, ten thousand times more rich,

To stand... a thousand times higher in your account.

MEGAN. Not "a thousand times higher," but "to stand high". "That only to stand high in your account".

Presses the button. Computer screen shows 40 volts. Alice cringes.

 Does it hurt?

ALICE. That's okay. I can handle it.

Pause.

DARTER. Megan, why did you stop? Please continue.

MEGAN. (*Becoming serious and focused.*) Alice, I am begging you – please pay attention. The text is not so difficult, and it shouldn't be that hard to memorize it. (*Reads slowly and articulately.*)

But the full sum of me

Is sum of something; which, to term in gross,

Is an unlesson'd girl, unschool'd, unpractic'd...

ALICE.

The full sum of me... But the full sum of me...

Is sum of something; which, to summarize...

Is an unlesson'd girl...

After some hesitation, Megan presses the button. Alice startles. So does Megan. Computer screen shows "60".

MEGAN. (*After a pause, guiltily.*) Professor Darter, may I... stop the experiment?

DARTER. Why?

MEGAN. I don't like it.

DARTER. That's not a good reason, Megan. There are many things we may not like about our life, or work, or school, but we still do all that, because we have to! I, for instance, give you boring lectures, and you study them, and Ms. Lyons sits in that chair – we all do our job!

MEGAN. And yet I don't like this experiment.

DARTER. Megan, do you consider me a competent researcher?

MEGAN. Absolutely.

DARTER. Do you think I am capable of performing an experiment unnecessary from the scientific standpoint?

MEGAN. No.

DARTER. Then trust me and stop hesitating.

Megan, sighing, takes the book, but then sets it aside again.

Why did you stop?

MEGAN. Your assistant is in pain.

DARTER. Ignore it. She agreed to do this absolutely voluntarily.

MEGAN. How may I ignore her suffering?

DARTER. Megan, millions, if not billions, of children all over the world are subjected to cruel corporal punishments. Our responsibility is to find out if these punishments are beneficial at all. Just compare – millions against one Alice. How can we think about one person's

inconveniences and your feelings, if we can relieve the sufferings of many, all the while benefiting the science and the society? (*Firmly.*) Go on with the experiment.

MEGAN. (*Unwillingly continues reading.*)

Is an unlesson'd girl, unschool'd, unpractic'd,
Happy in this, she is not yet so old
But she may learn; happier than this,
She is not bred so dull but she can learn...

Repeat.

ALICE.

Is an unlesson'd girl, unschool'd, unpractic'd,
Happy in this, she is not yet so old
But she may learn... happier...
But happier, that she can learn...

Megan presses the button. Alice cries out quietly. The screen shows "80". Megan closes the book.

DARTER. What is it now, Megan?

The girl doesn't respond.

Please, continue.

MEGAN. (*Lowering your head.*) I can't.

DARTER. In the course of my class you studied, among other subjects, the psychology of education. Now would be good time to show me your high professional skills. This is an exam of a sort, a test of your qualifications. I hope you understand, don't you?

MEGAN. Yes.

DARTER. Then continue.

Megan is silent.

Oh well, Megan, don't be so sensitive. We must be above our emotions. We are researchers.

MEGAN. But not butchers.

DARTER. (*Drily.*) Let's not throw such loud but empty words around. People accused Pavlov and Pasteur of cruelty when they experimented on animals, but it was these researchers, and not those who denounced them, who worked for the benefit of the humankind.

MEGAN. I am sorry, perhaps my choice of words was too harsh.

DARTER. Not just harsh, but unfortunate. Please, don't hide your professional incompetence behind your preaching on morality. A test pilot doesn't just feel a slight pain, but sometimes even sacrifices his life when testing all sorts of flying coffins, yet no one - do you hear me? - no one considers the existence of this profession immoral. The jobs of a

soldier, or a gravedigger, or a butcher may be unpleasant, but they're essential, and, therefore, moral. Any activities needed by the society are justified, including my assistant's responsibilities.

MEGAN. I don't like my responsibilities, not hers. Why do I have to press the button if I don't want to?

DARTER. So you believe it would be more moral to transfer that responsibility to someone else?

MEGAN. I don't believe anything.

DARTER. Megan, I thought you were a hard-working and able student. Unfortunately, you've disappointed me.

MEGAN. (*Barely audible.*) And you've disappointed me.

Darter turns pale.

DARTER. As you may remember, I objected to your participation in the experiment, but you insisted. What am I supposed to think about your conduct now?

Pause.

MEGAN. If this experiment is so important to you, let me swap places with Ms. Lyons.

DARTER. (*Surprised.*) What do you mean?

MEGAN. Well, I'll sit in the chair and let her press the button.

Darter and Alice exchange looks.

DARTER. No, that is absolutely out of the question.

MEGAN. Why not?

DARTER. Among other things, you don't have doctor's authorization.

MEGAN. Neither does Alice.

DARTER. I am not going to continue this discussion right now. Go on with the lesson, Megan, you have wasted a lot of time already.

After long hesitations, Megan opens the book and slowly looks for the right page.

MEGAN.

Happiest of all, is that her gentle spirit
Commits itself to yours to be directed,
As from her lord, her governor, her king.
Myself, and what is mine, to you and yours
Is now converted. But now I was the lord...

Her voice gets increasingly softer until she goes completely silent.

DARTER. What is going on?

Megan silently closes the book.

What is wrong, Megan?

MEGAN. (*Guiltily.*) I can't do it.

DARTER. (*Drily.*) Too bad. You will be graduating soon. I was going to recommend you for the most interesting job at a first-rate company, but now I see that you lack the can-do attitude and self-discipline. I am afraid you won't get the job.

Megan is silent.

I believe you've been receiving a scholarship from the university?

MEGAN. Yes. Since last year.

DARTER. And how did you support yourself before?

MEGAN. I worked part-time as a waitress.

DARTER. I can't guarantee the scholarship from now on.

Megan is silent.

So are you going to continue the experiment?

Megan is silent.

Okay. You may go.

Megan dodders toward the exit.

Not there. Please use the other exit. You shouldn't have contact with the next participant.

Megan starts heading to the other exit, but suddenly Michael bursts into the room. He is excited.

MICHAEL. Professor Darter!

DARTER. (*Harshly, almost rudely.*) What is the matter, Michael? I strictly forbade you to come in here!

MICHAEL. I am sorry, but...

DARTER. No "buts". Please leave the lab.

MICHAEL. I just wanted to let you know there are journalists outside...

DARTER. Who called them?

MICHAEL. Didn't you?

DARTER. (*Thinks for a moment.*) Go on.

MICHAEL. Why didn't you tell Megan and me that the university administration banned this experiment?

DARTER. Did the journalists tell you that?

MICHAEL. Yes. Are they wrong?

DARTER. No. But the ban pertains to me, not to you. For you, participation in experiments will have no administrative consequences.

MICHAEL. Are you sure?

DARTER. Absolutely. After all, you had no clue about the ban or even about the experiment itself.

MICHAEL. But we do now.

DARTER. I repeat... *(Interrupting himself.)* Well, if you are concerned about anything, it's not too late to back out. Just return the money, and you are free to go.

MICHAEL. *(After some hesitation.)* Please don't think I am such a chicken heart. And really, I have nothing to fear. After all, I am just following my professor's instructions.

DARTER. Excellent.

ALICE. Did the reporters ask you anything?

MICHAEL. Yes. I told them about the essence of the experiment. *(Smiling.)* Couldn't resist the temptation of giving my very first interview ever. *(Noticing that Darter has frowned, nervously asks.)* Did I do anything wrong?

DARTER. No, no. Everything is fine, Michael. Usually I never speak to the press about unfinished work, but it's no big deal. Go, my friend, and continue to entertain the reporters. Tomorrow, you will be a hero of the day. *(Walks Michael to the door.)* I will invite you in soon.

Exit Michael. Darter locks the door behind him.

MEGAN. I wonder who called the reporters? The school administration?

DARTER. Most likely. Perhaps under the pressure from above.

MEGAN. What is their purpose?

ALICE. To obstruct, to scare off – what does it matter, Megan? As far as you are concerned, the experiment is over.

MEGAN. What will happen to you?

DARTER. Nothing terrible. At worst, they will fire me.

MEGAN. So are you still going to conduct the experiment with Michael?

DARTER. Of course.

MEGAN. Wasn't the lesson with me enough?

DARTER. You ask too many questions, Megan. Have a good day.

MEGAN. May I stay and watch?

DARTER. Why?

MEGAN. Perhaps I misunderstood something and, by watching Michael's lesson, I will be able to understand my mistake?

DARTER. Your presence is absolutely out of the question.

MEGAN. Why?

DARTER. You will embarrass Michael and distract him.

MEGAN. I can sit behind the screen.

DARTER. To be honest, you will be distracting me, too.

MEGAN. How? I will sit quietly.

DARTER. I don't understand your stubbornness.

MEGAN. You see, I didn't live up to your expectations...

DARTER. And?

MEGAN. And I would like to know how others conduct the experiment.

DARTER. It's unethical towards Michael. How would you feel if you found out that he was eavesdropping behind a screen while you were having an intimate conversation with your doctor?

MEGAN. That's totally different. He won't be talking about himself, but just conducting a lesson. I am curious how he will do it.

DARTER. That's right, he is your fiancé... *(After some reflection.)* Okay, you may stay. But under one condition: you must promise me not to interfere with the experiment.

MEGAN. Of course.

DARTER. Sit down here. Michael won't notice you here, but you will see and hear everything.

MEGAN. *(Sitting down behind the screen.)* Thank you.

DARTER. But remember – you are not here. Promise?

MEGAN. I give you my word.

DARTER. Alright. You promised...

ALICE. *(Tiredly.)* Andrew, hand me my purse, please.

Darter gives her the purse. Alice takes out a pill and swallows it with some water.

DARTER. *(Concerned.)* You don't look well... Shall we call it a day?

ALICE. I am fine.

DARTER. Honestly?

ALICE. *(Smiling.)* Honestly.

DARTER. Then at least let's take a short break.

Unbuckles the belts and takes off the electrodes, freeing Alice. She gets up, makes a few steps, then sits back down.

Listen, how about we cancel the experiment?

ALICE. No, let's finish it. That is the last one, isn't it?

DARTER. It is. The very last one.

ALICE. That's good. I will just rest a little.

DARTER. Then let's take a break.

End of Act I

During intermission, the actors don't need to leave the stage: Darter is calmly talking with Alice. Megan sits in her corner.

Act II

DARTER. *(To Alice.)* Did you get enough rest? Ready to start?

Alice reluctantly sits down in the “electric chair”. Darter ties her down, attaches the electrodes, resets the computer to “0”, looks around the room, notices Megan’s forgotten purse and gives it to her.

Let me remind you again – if you break your promise...

MEGAN. That won’t happen.

DARTER. Very well. *(Walks to the door and invites Michael.)* Come in!

MICHAEL. *(Entering, looks around the room.)* Where is Megan?

DARTER. She has left.

MICHAEL. Didn't even wait for me? How did her lesson go?

DARTER. *(Curtly.)* Great.

MICHAEL. I had no doubt. Megan is a natural educator. I should know – she helps me study for exams. *(Happily.)* Well, Alice, I hope you were a straight A student?

DARTER. Get to the task at hand, Michael.

MICHAEL. I am ready.

DARTER. You are already familiar with the terms of the experiment. Here is a book by Shakespeare. Pick an excerpt and start rehearsing. Remember: it is of utmost importance for you that the excerpt is learned well and fast. Apply all your skills to the task.

MICHAEL. I hope I won't let you down. *(Leafing through the book, to Alice.)* Well, what shall we pick? *(Winking.)* Perhaps you remember something from school? Whisper it to me...

ALICE. Unfortunately, I don't. We only studied Hamlet’s monologue, and all I remember is the infamous “to be or not to be” line, and not a word more.

MICHAEL. In this case I will just open it at random. Do you mind?

ALICE. It's up to you.

MICHAEL. *(Opening the book at random.)* Here we go... ready?

ALICE. Yes.

MICHAEL. Listen and repeat after me.

DARTER. I am turning on the clock.

MICHAEL. *(Reading.)*

That’s not my fear, my meed hath got me fame: ^[2]

I have not stopp’d mine ears to their demands...

ALICE. *(Repeating.)*

That’s not my fear, my meed hath got me fame:

I have not stopp’d mine ears to their demands...

MICHAEL. *(Cheerfully.)* Awesome! Let’s go on.

Nor posted off their suits with slow delays;

My pity hath been balm to heal their wounds.

ALICE.

Nor posted off their suits with slow delays;

My pity hath been healing their wounds.

Michael presses the button. The computer screen show "20". Alice's only reaction to the weak shock is to correct her mistake.

I am sorry. "My pity hath been balm..."

MICHAEL. "...to heal their wounds".

ALICE. "My pity hath been balm to heal their wounds."

MICHAEL. Please repeat the last two lines.

ALICE.

Nor posted off their suits with slow delays;

My pity hath been healing their wounds.

Electric shock. 40 volts. Alice cringes.

Did I make a mistake?

MICHAEL. (*Slightly annoyed.*) *Hath been balm to heal, not hath been healing.* Am I reading too fast or not articulating enough?

ALICE. No, you are reading well. I guess I just can't focus.

MICHAEL. How about we nail down the last four lines before going any further? Then we will only have sixteen left.

ALICE. I guess that would be good.

MICHAEL. Have you memorized them?

ALICE. I think so.

That's not my fear, my meed hath got me fame:

I have not stopp'd mine ears to their demands...

Gets silent, then says guiltily.

The third line slipped my mind.

MICHAEL. Try to recall it. I don't want to punish such a beautiful woman.

DARTER. Michael, punishing the student for her mistakes is *mandatory*, whether or not you want to do it. Ms. Lyons stumbled, so you *must* punish her.

Michael, after some hesitation, presses the button. Alice startles. The computer screen shows "60". Darter continues.

Also, quit the side conversations. They distract the student and complicate the learning process. Meanwhile, the clock is ticking; you may not be able to finish in time.

MICHAEL. (*Becoming serious.*) I will read you the text again, starting from the third line.

Nor posted off their suits with slow delays;
My pity hath been balm to heal their wounds.

ALICE.

Nor posted off their suits with slow delays;
My pity hath been balm to cure their wounds.

Electric shock. Alice shrieks.

MICHAEL. I am sorry... This is so very unpleasant for me... But you mixed up “heal” and “cure”.

ALICE. Don’t apologize, that is your responsibility. It is my fault I was so absentminded.

MICHAEL. Shall we repeat these lines again?

ALICE. Let's move on.

MICHAEL.

My mildness hath allay’d their swelling griefs,
My mercy dried their water-flowing tears.

ALICE.

My mildness hath allay’d their swelling griefs,
My mercy dried their... flower-watering tears.

Shock. 100 volts. Alice twitches and cries out loudly.

MICHAEL. (*Perplexed.*) Professor Darter, I don’t know if I may continue the experiment. She is a woman, after all...

DARTER. (*Abruptly.*) She is not a woman, but my paid assistant, hired to do this job in accordance with the contract for a large amount of money. You better focus on the quality of your teaching. You've always been a diligent student. Show it. Make your student focus. I can't believe you don't know how.

MICHAEL. (*To Alice, anxiously.*) I am reading it again.

My mildness hath allay’d their swelling griefs,
My mercy dried their water-flowing tears.

ALICE.

My mildness hath allay’d their swelling griefs,
My mercy dried...

Goes silent, but, recalling the right words with an effort, finishes the line.

... their water-flowing tears.

MICHAEL. (*Relieved.*) Good job, Alice. We are six lines in. Just four more lines, and we are halfway there.

I have not been desirous of their wealth,

Nor much oppress'd them with great subsidies.

ALICE.

I have not been desirous of their wealth,

Nor have oppress'd them much...

Button. 120 volts. Alice moans loudly.

MICHAEL. (*Repeating with annoyance.*)

I have not been desirous of their wealth,

Nor much oppress'd them – do you get it, Alice? “*nor much oppress'd them, not nor have oppress'd them much*, – oppress'd them with great subsidies.

Is it really that hard to memorize two lines?

ALICE.

Nor much oppress'd them...

MICHAEL. No, start with the previous line.

ALICE.

I have desired... I have not desired...

I have not been...

(*Pleadingly.*) I am confused.

Electric shock. 140 volts. Alice screams, trying to break free.

MICHAEL. I have not been desirous of their wealth...

(*Annoyed.*) Well, go ahead and repeat!

ALICE. (*Shaking with her entire body.*) I have not been...

I can't recall anything. Please stop the lesson.

MICHAEL. Why?

ALICE. I am afraid.

MICHAEL. (*Quietly, to the professor.*) Should we really stop?

DARTER. Without having learned even ten lines? Frankly, I expected more from you.

MICHAEL. But she is uncomfortable.

DARTER. So you admit your failure?

MICHAEL. How come it is *my* failure? She is the one that wants to stop it, not me.

DARTER. (*Conspiratorially.*) Don't listen to her.

MICHAEL. What do you mean?

DARTER. Don't you know students and their little tricks? They are always trying to intenerate their teacher's heart. But you have to be tough, you have to learn to subjugate them to your will. Do you have a strong will?

MICHAEL. I do have a strong will, but...

DARTER. Then carry out the lesson to the end. It is necessary for science, for the society, for you personally. And besides, Michael, you simply don't have a choice. Your father, I believe, is a businessman?

MICHAEL. Yes, but what does that have to do with...

DARTER. And you, I assume, will be following in his footsteps?

MICHAEL. Most likely.

DARTER. Then I don't need to tell you what is an agreement or a contract. We have made an agreement, right? You received payment for your participation in the experiment.

MICHAEL. I can return it.

DARTER. No, my friend, that is not how it works. An agreement is worth more than money. Otherwise you risk your reputation. You know it well. Now get back to your lesson, you are getting distracted way too much. I am certain, as we are speaking, your student has already forgotten what little you've taught her. Get back to work, Michael! Let's roll. I am not asking for needless cruelty – just carry out the lesson to the end, that is all! You don't want to graduate last in your class, do you?

MICHAEL. (*Returning to the wired chair.*) By the way... You said Megan was able to rehearse text with Alice, right?

DARTER. Of course.

MICHAEL. And how quickly?

DARTER. Don't think about others right now, think of yourself.

MICHAEL. (*Sitting down next to the chair, to Alice.*) I am sorry. Professor Darter says the experiment can't be stopped.

Alice is silent. Michael opens the book.

Where did we leave off?

ALICE. Let's start from the beginning.

MICHAEL. (*Glancing at the clock.*) I am afraid, this way we will never finish.

ALICE. Still, it is better to repeat it. You were speaking with the professor so long... I think I forgot everything.

MICHAEL. (*Displeased.*) Okay, fine. (*Reads.*)

That's not my fear...

Alice is silent. Michael repeats.

That's not my fear...

Well?

That's not my fear...!

ALICE. (*Taking control of herself, continues.*)

...my meed hath got me fame:

I have not stopp'd mine ears to their demands... (*Stops.*)

MICHAEL.

Nor posted off their suits with slow delays;
 My pity hath been balm to heal their wounds,
 ALICE.

Nor posted off their suits with slow delays;
 My pity hath been balm to cure their wounds.

Michael extends his hand to the button.

Don't press it! Please, I beg you, don't press it! *(Tries to remember.)*

My pity hath been... *(Stops.)*

MICHAEL. Is it really that hard to memorize one simple word?

ALICE. Forgive me... I can only think about the button... Don't press it!

MICHAEL. You are disrupting my lesson with your idle talk and absentmindedness. Get a grip already! If not for your own sake, then for me! I don't want to look like a mediocre teacher!

ALICE. *(Not taking her eyes off Michael's hand, resting on the button.)* "My pity hath been balm..." I beg you, please don't!

MICHAEL. Alice, I beg you too – no side talk, just recite the text!

ALICE.

My pity... hath been balm... for their wounds.

Michael presses the button. 160 volts. Alice, yelping loudly, tries to escape from the chair.

MICHAEL.

My pity hath been balm *to heal* their wounds.

ALICE. *(Barely audible, obediently.)* "To heal..."

MICHAEL.

I have not been desirous of their wealth,

Nor much oppress'd them with great subsidies...

Noticing that Alice is not listening.

Hey, are you listening?

ALICE. I am sorry. Can you please repeat that?

MICHAEL. *(Gritting his teeth.)* Are you mocking me? I've repeated it ten times already!

ALICE. If I am at fault, punish me.

Michael extends his hand toward the button.

Don't! *(Collecting herself.)*

I have not been desirous of their wealth,

Nor much oppress'd them...

I beg you – please stop the lesson. I can't do this anymore.

MICHAEL. No. We started this together and we will carry it out all the way to the end.

Presses the button. 180 volts. Alice screams for a long time and thrashes in the chair. Michael repeats stubbornly.

Nor forward of revenge, though they much err'd.

ALICE.

Nor forward of revenge... while they much err'd.

MICHAEL. I don't get it – are you doing this on purpose?

Presses the button. 200 volts. Alice is shivering as if in a seizure.

ALICE. Let me go! Don't you see – I can't... I have a weak heart!

MICHAEL. You are easily saying a lot of unnecessary words, but for some odd reason you just wouldn't repeat what I ask you to repeat. But I will break your stubbornness!

Presses the button. 220 volts. Alice groans.

And now, listen and repeat after me:

Nor forward of revenge, though they much err'd.

ALICE. *(Breathing heavily and not taking her eyes off the button.)*

Nor forward of revenge... Nor forward of revenge...

(Screaming loudly.) Ouch!

MICHAEL. *(Harshly.)* Why are you yelling? I haven't even pressed the button yet!

ALICE. *(Out of breath.)* But you... you were reaching towards it.

Michael. Fine. I will take my hand off it. Go ahead.

ALICE. Nor forward of revenge, though they much err'd.

MICHAEL. Finally.

My mercy dried their water-flowing tears,

My mildness hath allay'd their swelling griefs.

ALICE. My mercy dried their flower-watering tears...

MICHAEL. *(Beside himself.)* Not again with the “flower-watering”! “Water-flowing, water-flowing”!

ALICE. *(Frightened.)* Don't!

MICHAEL. *(Maliciously.)* Oh yes, I will.

Button. 240 volts. Alice is writhing in agony. Megan, pale, horrified and in tears, is watching the lesson.

So? Are we ever going to learn some discipline?

My mercy dried their water-flowing tears.

Well?

Alice mournfully howls. Michael presses the button. Alice trembles all over and screams loudly and hysterically.

MEGAN. *(Leaping from behind the screen.)* Stop it! Stop it right now!

Michael reacts to Megan's presence with little interest. He is completely absorbed in his failing lesson.

MICHAEL. Wait, Megan... Wait a little... *(To Alice.)* Are we ever going to get a grip or are we just going to whine endlessly? Come on, repeat:

My mildness hath allay'd their swelling griefs.

(In a rage.) Repeat, do you hear me? Now!

Presses the button. 280 volts. Alice screams, howls, twitches.

MEGAN. Michael, you've lost your mind! Stop it!

MICHAEL. *(Stubbornly.)* Repeat after me:

My mercy dried their water-flowing tears.

MEGAN. Professor Darter, stop him! Can't you see he is out of his mind?

DARTER. Don't interfere! You promised!

MICHAEL.

My mildness hath allay'd their swelling griefs.

MEGAN. But this is not an experiment, it's a torture! Michael, come to your senses! That is a defenseless, tied up person in front of you! A woman!

MICHAEL. *(Curtly.)* Back off, Megan! *(To Alice.)* I am going to ask you nicely one last time, repeat –

My mercy dried their water-flowing tears.

MEGAN. Professor Darter!

DARTER. Get out of here!

MEGAN. Professor Darter, which one of you is out of his mind – him, you? Or me? Stop this nightmare now!

DARTER. I can't. The experiment is still in progress.

MEGAN. Then I will do it.

Megan darts at Michael, whose hand is about to press the button again, and tries to pull him away from the remote control. Michael brusquely pushes her away. Megan falls to the floor. Darter's first impulse is to rush to help her up, but he stops. Megan looks at the men, horrified.

What are you – animals?

MICHAEL. *(To Alice.)*

My mercy dried their water-flowing tears.

MEGAN. Professor Darter, I used to respect you! I used to... admire you! You were my role model, you were... What happened to you?

Darter wants to say something, but remains silent. Megan continues.

She is your... girlfriend. Doesn't even that stop you? Is your research really that important to you? Or are you counting on becoming famous in such an original way? This is so disgusting! You want to experiment? Get in the chair yourself!

MICHAEL. *(To Alice.)* My mercy dried their water-flowing tears.

Alice groans. Michael extends his hand toward the button. Megan tries to leap at him again, but Darter blocks her way.

MEGAN. Let me go! Let me go, I said! Michael, get away from the chair! You are a sadist! *(To Darter.)* And you... you are even worse.

MICHAEL. *(Gets red in the face, his eyes become bloodshot, his voice is hoarse.)* "My mercy..." Won't do it? Then take this!

Presses the button over and over again. The computer screen repeatedly flashes the same number "300" on and off. Alice screams loudly, groans, squiggles, and thrashes in belts. Here, take that... And that... And that...

MEGAN. *(With renewed vigor tries to escape Darter's hold.)* Let me go! He is going to kill her! Help! Somebody please! Help!

Alice stops yelling and goes limp, dangling off the belts flaccidly. Michael, after mechanically pressing the button several more times, stops and looks at Alice, flustered. The sudden silence seems especially eerie.

MICHAEL. Hey, what is wrong with you?

Alice doesn't respond.

Alice!

Everyone is quiet. Michael looks around the room in a daze, trying to figure out where he is and what is going on. Darter lets Megan go. Silence. Michael looks at his supervisor alarmingly.

Professor Darter, what is wrong with her?

DARTER. I don't know.

Walks over to Alice, trying to feel her pulse, lets go of her hand; the hand drops limply.

MICHAEL. Is there a pulse?

Darter shakes his head.

MEGAN. *(In horror.)* Michael, did you kill her?

MICHAEL. I didn't mean to...

MEGAN. What difference does it make if you meant to or not! Murderer! *(Rushes to the wired chair and attempts to bring Alice back to her senses.)*

MICHAEL. Megan, it's not my fault...

DARTER. But you are the one who pressed the button.

MICHAEL. How was I supposed to know that this would happen? You didn't warn me.

DARTER. I couldn't foresee everything, either.

MICHAEL. After all, I was just following your instructions.

DARTER. I had nothing to do with this.

MICHAEL. What do you mean? You are the one who started it all!

DARTER. Don't try to shift guilt to me.

MICHAEL. And you don't try to impute blame to me. This is all your fault, and your only!

DARTER. I didn't torture anyone.

MICHAEL. You made me do it.

DARTER. Not at all. You agreed to participate in the experiment voluntarily and willfully.

MICHAEL. (*Stubbornly.*) No, I was forced.

DARTER. And you think it exonerates you from responsibility?

MEGAN. (*Putting a damp towel on Alice's face and temples.*) Stop arguing! You are both murderers! And so am I! Why are you just standing there? Get a doctor! Where is the phone? Quickly!

Michael looks at his victim in a stupor. Darter doesn't move either. Megan rushes towards the exit, but is stopped by Alice's calm voice.

ALICE. Megan, wait.

Megan turns and, to her surprise, sees Alice – well-groomed and peppy, without any visible signs of her unconsciousness or bodily injuries. Michael is also stunned by her sudden transformation.

MEGAN. You... Are you feeling better?

ALICE. Calm down, my dear, I was never hurt. (*To Darter.*) I am sorry, Andrew, that I've stepped out of my role, but continuing this would be too cruel. Especially since this experiment is the last one.

MEGAN. How about I still call a doctor?

ALICE. Megan, darling, there is no need. As you see, I am perfectly fine. Just untie me. The experiment is over.

MICHAEL. But just now you were... I thought... God, did you scare me! Do people really get over electrocution so quickly?

ALICE. There was no electrocution.

MICHAEL. (*Dumbfounded.*) Then what was it?

ALICE. Nothing. The button is only connected to the computer.

MICHAEL. And there were no electric shocks?

ALICE. No.

MICHAEL. No way. You were screaming, shuddering... You got pale...

ALICE. If you don't believe me, press the button.

Michael, looking at Alice in disbelief, slowly extends his finger towards the button.

Don't be afraid!

MICHAEL. No, I am done. (*Takes his hand back.*)

Megan walks over to the remote control and resolutely presses the button. The computer screen displays the number "300".

ALICE. (*Smiling.*) See? Michael, untie me please.

MICHAEL. (*With relief.*) So all that was just a game?

ALICE. You may say that.

Michael unties Alice. Megan abruptly turns to Darter.

MEGAN. What does it all mean?

DARTER. *(Coughing uncomfortably.)* You see... *(Goes silent.)*

ALICE. *(Getting up from the chair.)* Megan, my dear girl, don't give Andrew... I mean, Professor Darter, such a fierce look. He didn't do anything wrong.

MEGAN. *(Shifting her hostile gaze to Alice.)* Excuse me, but who are you anyway? Or is that a tactless question? Are you really the professor's assistant?

ALICE. Not quite.

MEGAN. Then who are you?

ALICE. *(Grinning slyly.)* Who am I?

...an unlesson'd girl, unschool'd, unpractic'd,
Happy in this, she is not yet so old
But she may learn; happier than this,
She is not bred so dull but she can learn...

Shakespeare, Merchant of Venice, Act III, Scene II.

MEGAN. *(Pale with anger.)* Now I remember where I've seen you before. You are an actress.

MICHAEL. An actress?!

MEGAN. I can't believe I didn't recognize you earlier.

ALICE. I guess I look much better on stage.

MEGAN. Absolutely. Here you look atrocious.

DARTER. Megan, don't lose your cool. Alice is an old friend of mine.

MEGAN. Congratulations on that. The two of you together played a cruel and stupid joke on us. I can only imagine how much fun you had!

DARTER. Let me assure you, Megan, it was very far from being fun.

MICHAEL. Everything worked out so well, and you are so upset. As if you are disappointed that the electric shocks were not real.

MEGAN. If I were you Michael, I would sit quietly in the corner and try hard to be invisible. You've shown your true colors today.

ALICE. Megan, please forgive us.

MEGAN. I don't need your apologies. I am leaving, but I would like to say before I leave that I hate you, I hate your voice, I hate your smirk and every motion of yours. You are a pathetic clown, a phony comedian, there is nothing sacred for you, you... can celebrate now!

Instead of leaving, Megan sits down on a chair and breaks out in tears.

MICHAEL. *(Walks to Megan uncertainly and puts his hand on her shoulder.)* Come on... It's okay. Let's go.

MEGAN. Leave me alone, I hate you!

MICHAEL. You hate everyone right now. Calm down.

DARTER. *(To Alice.)* What do we do now?

ALICE. Tell them everything.

DARTER. You think so?

ALICE. *(To Michael.)* Leave her alone. *(Gets a glass of water for Megan, pats her on the head.)* Megan, darling...

MEGAN. *(Through her tears.)* I've said a lot of stupid things... Please forgive me.

ALICE. It's okay. Drink some water while I tell you a secret.

MEGAN. What secret?

ALICE. First drink.

Megan drinks the water.

Now listen. Some time earlier, you said something to poor Darter that was meant as a rebuke, but I took it as a compliment. But *(leans over and whispers in Megan's ear.)* I am not Andrew's girlfriend, never have been, and, apparently, never will be.

MEGAN. Why are you telling this to me all of a sudden?

ALICE. He and I are just old friends. And I completely approve your choice.

MEGAN. *(Shyly.)* What choice?

ALICE. Come on, Megan... don't play cunning with me. When it comes to this kind of psychology, I am more of an expert than your professor. *(Loudly.)* And now, Andrew, explain the experiment to your students.

DARTER. Well, first of all, I must apologize for not revealing the real meaning of those lessons to you. But I couldn't have done it differently.

MICHAEL. Wasn't the point of the experiment to explore the educational methods?

DARTER. Of course not.

MEGAN. What then?

DARTER. There is no short answer to that question. So let me step back and start from the beginning. Please be patient. *(Motions to the chairs.)* Please sit down.

Everyone sits down.

Barbarism and cruelty have always existed, but lately they have expanded in mass proportions. Meaningless wars, terrorism, executions of hostages, religious conflicts, ethnic enmity, genocide, torture, violence, murder – we all see and experience it every day. The world has become a hotspot. Psychologists ought to try and figure out what is going on.

MICHAEL. Now I get it. Your experiment is an exploration of cruelty.

DARTER. Not quite.

MICHAEL. Then what is it?

DARTER. Don't get ahead of yourself... So the question is – what kind of people perpetrate all these crimes? Who plants bombs in cars and airplanes, destroys buses full of children, executes women, aims a gun at a politician?

MICHAEL. Sadists, maniacs, and thugs.

DARTER. Not at all. In most cases these are good citizens, honest, law-abiding, and gentle.

They often love their wives and children, take care of their pets, believe in God and listen to Mozart.

MEGAN. But how can it all co-exist?

DARTER. Easily. It gets worse: these criminals feel no compunction. They were, you see, just following orders – that is their excuse. So I designed a series of experiments that I called “The Obedience Test”.

MEGAN. “Obedience”? Why “Obedience” and not “Cruelty”?

DARTER. The real goal of the experiment is to explore how far a person would go hurting an innocent victim on the orders from his supervisor, or at what stage, if at all, the person would refuse to proceed.

MICHAEL. So that is what it was...

MEGAN. So your purpose was not just to observe the experiment, but to also participate in it?

DARTER. Unfortunately.

MEGAN. (*Sighing.*) You were doing it quite vigorously.

DARTER. That was the point. My methods of pressure were chosen and calculated before the experiment.

MICHAEL. I can't believe even that had to be thought through beforehand!

DARTER. But of course. I selected typical, so to speak, classic methods that society utilizes to influence an individual. First of all, it is the direct use of authority, a call for obedience and discipline. Secondly, it is the arguments that these immoral actions – in our case, torturing an innocent woman – would benefit science, society, the party, the humanity, and so forth. Then I evoke your sense of responsibility, remind you about our agreement, the payment you received for your work and other such things. Finally, I promise to reward your obedience with success in your future professional career or troubles in the case of disobedience. As you see, the game plan is quite simple.

MICHAEL. (*Grimly.*) And very effective.

DARTER. In most cases, I didn't have to use all of these methods. My presence and a few words, spoken in a compelling voice, were sufficient for the participants to relieve themselves of any responsibility.

MICHAEL. Well... I guess I didn't show myself in the best light.

DARTER. Frankly speaking - no, you did not. But you can take comfort in knowing that the vast majority of people acted the same way. It turns out, almost every one of us is capable of committing acts of boundless cruelty.

MEGAN. You are kidding!

DARTER. Alice and I have conducted hundreds of tests. And not just in this country, but abroad as well. Two thirds of the participants impassively tortured a bound up person.

MEGAN. Two thirds?!

DARTER. And in some countries, the number of absolutely obedient people was even higher – eighty five percent!

MEGAN. That can't be!

ALICE. Yes, Megan, it can! So often, they would press the button with such an indifferent submission, and at times with pleasure! It is a scary memory!

Michael lowers his head.

DARTER. The results are just scandalous. The authorities are very unhappy. That is why the university administration banned this experiment.

MEGAN. Why then did you violate the ban?

DARTER. At first I wasn't going to involve my students in this work. Why complicate my relationships with them?

ALICE. And you were right.

DARTER. But once I learned about the ban, I decided out of principle not to yield to any pressure and run the experiment with at least two students of mine.

MICHAEL. Is research so important to you?

DARTER. *(Suddenly bursting out.)* Not research, darn it! Don't you see how we are being literally swamped by the cruelty and by our enslavement to the authority? Someone has to stand up against it. Or the world will go to hell in a hand basket!

ALICE. It is already going down that path.

Pause.

MICHAEL. But why did you invite us to participate in this experiment, specifically, Megan and me?

DARTER. You mean, Ashley and you? There was no particular reason behind it. I just wanted to pick students from happy families, in good health, with no drug addictions, no mental illnesses, no criminal history, etc.

MEGAN. So in your opinion, I don't satisfy these requirements?

DARTER. *(Protesting.)* Megan...

MEGAN. Then why were you so adamantly opposing my participation?

DARTER. *(After a short silence.)* I had good reasons.

MICHAEL. What, then, does your experiment prove? That cruelty is in human nature?

DARTER. No. The issue is not cruelty, but rather the effortless with which we submit to the management or the authority figures. When the participants taught the lesson by themselves, at my absence, they rarely degraded to sadism. But as soon as a person to whom they could transfer their moral responsibility, like myself, would show up, the executioners were instantly becoming indifferent to the desperate screams of their victims! Moreover, I interviewed these "teachers" several days after the experiment, when they'd had time to come to their senses and reflect on their actions. Do you think any of them

show any remorse? Repentance? Almost no one! They did their job “in the name of science”, got paid and forgot about it!

MEGAN. That is impossible! I can't wrap my brain around it.

DARTER. Why not? We've been taught obedience from early childhood. At home, in school, in the army, at work – everywhere we are being lectured about the heaven-sent benefits of the discipline and obedience to our elders, our management, and the government.

MICHAEL. Are you against discipline?

DARTER. Of course not. It is essential for the society. But why aren't we taught as vigorously that our actions must always be humane and that we and we only are responsible for them?

MICHAEL. So, if I go and serve in the army or some such place, I can also... become... an executioner?

DARTER. As can any one of us.

MICHAEL. I don't believe it. At any rate, it is good that I got this cruel lesson. If I am sent to fight, I will know what to beware of.

DARTER. That is great, Michael, but you have to be on guard not only in such extreme situations as serving in the army or at a concentration camp. It is a lot harder to preserve your own self in your everyday life. Don't we reassure ourselves almost daily with notions such as, “I am only doing what I am told to do” or “I have no control over this, anyway”? If you truly want to learn your lesson from this, start by analyzing your everyday actions.

MEGAN. Not a bad piece of advice for an obedient son.

MICHAEL. I don't like your accusatory tone. I would like to know at what point you stopped the lesson?

Megan doesn't respond.

What, you don't want to confess?

DARTER. I think Megan is silent because she doesn't want to mortify you. She stopped at 80 volts.

MICHAEL. That's it?

DARTER. That's it.

MICHAEL. Perhaps you didn't push her very hard.

DARTER. Actually, I was very insistent with Megan, especially because I had lots of ways to coerce her, while with you I had very few.

MICHAEL. I wonder, what is the difference between us? We are both students from the same class...

DARTER. (*Interrupting briskly.*) What is the difference? Let me tell you. Megan has no money other than her scholarship, while you are provided for. Megan really values her future diploma, while to you it will be just a wall decoration; Megan cares about her career, while you will join your father's business; Megan loves her major, while you don't care about research, even though you are ambitious and an okay student. Yet Megan was defiant.

ALICE. Andrew, perhaps you are not aware of the main reason why Megan should have obeyed you.

DARTER. What is that?

ALICE. I will tell you later.

DARTER. Anyway, it was really hard for Megan, yet she disobeyed me – and twice, at that: by aborting her lesson and attempting to stop yours. And you... In fact, I didn't even have to order. I said – “do it,” and you vigorously sprang into action.

MICHAEL. (*Blushing.*) That is not true! I also wanted to stop twice.

DARTER. So what was standing in your way?

MICHAEL. You! I felt attraction for Alice right away, but you confused me. How could I but obey you?

DARTER. How could you but disobey me? Regardless of what I said, you couldn't help but realize the simple truth that you were tormenting a woman.

MICHAEL. But you yourself said that she is not a woman, but a paid assistant!

DARTER. And that made her insensitive to suffering?

MICHAEL. (*Agitated.*) You are trying to present me as some kind of sadist, but it won't work.

DARTER. I am not trying to do anything of the kind.

MICHAEL. I am not like that at all. I am not cruel... I love my mom, my little sister... I've never even hurt a cat in my life. Megan, tell them...

Megan is silent.

DARTER. Calm down, Michael. No one here questions your kindness.

ALICE. Least of all me.

MICHAEL. Okay, so you caught and entrapped me and you can laugh at me now. But I am really kind! I am kind, do you hear me?

Everyone is silent. Michael is flustered.

Megan, let's get out of here.

Megan doesn't react. Michael repeats, pleadingly.

Megan!

Silence. Turning abruptly, Michael exits.

DARTER. (*Addressing Megan.*) Perhaps you should go, calm him down?

MEGAN. No.

Pause.

DARTER. Well then... thank you, Megan. I am not holding you up any longer.

MEGAN. May I ask you a few more questions?

Alice gets up. One can tell she is very tired.

ALICE. *(With a barely noticeable friendly grin.)* I won't interfere with your scientific discussions. *(Opens her purse and takes out the pills.)*

DARTER. Are you leaving?

ALICE. It's time. Would you please give me some water?

Darter hands Alice a glass, she washes a pill down with water.

DARTER. Not feeling well again?

ALICE. No biggie. I am so happy the experiment is finally over.

MEGAN. Tired?

ALICE. You might find it hard to believe, but even acting as a torture victim is very hard.

Especially when you do it for many months, hundreds of times in a row. But now, thank God, it is all behind. Andrew, when your book comes out, don't forget to send me a copy. *(Shakes Megan's hand.)* I wish you all the best.

MEGAN. Please forgive me.

ALICE. Megan, darling, for the way you conducted your lesson, I've already forgiven all your past and future sins.

DARTER. Wait, I will see you out.

ALICE. *(Smiling.)* No need.

DARTER. I ruthlessly exploited you. I am sorry.

ALICE. Don't be silly. Good bye. *(Exits.)*

DARTER. I am so thankful to her. Her job was hard, just terrible, and, to be honest, I had nothing to pay her with. Alice declined lucrative offers from the theatre and instead spent half a year in this chair... What did you want to ask?

MEGAN. Tell me... Why didn't you want me to participate in the experiment?

DARTER. Why do you want to know?

MEGAN. You mentioned something about "having good reasons"...

DARTER. There are at least two...

MEGAN. Then tell me at least one.

DARTER. In this experiment, I play an unflattering role of a heartless man, and I did not want you to see me that way...

MEGAN. Is my opinion really so important to you?

DARTER. Yes.

MEGAN. Why?

DARTER. Because.

MEGAN. Then what about the second reason?

DARTER. The second reason... *(Goes silent.)*

MEGAN. Why did you stop?

DARTER. You are seventeen years junior, you are young and kind... I would never in a million years tell you the second reason, had it not been for those words you uttered in the heat of the moment ... well... about... remember?

MEGAN. That I adm...

DARTER. Yes... As an educator, I understand, of course... And yet your words give me the courage to confess why I didn't want you to conduct the darned lesson... *(Goes silent again.)*

MEGAN. So why then?

DARTER. *(Takes her hand.)* Because I find it inconceivable to test a girl in whose moral virtues I am absolutely certain and whom I... whom I...

Michael bursts into the room. He is very agitated. Finding Megan and Darter completely absorbed in one another, he stops, totally perplexed.

What is wrong, Michael?

MICHAEL. I am not here for you. Megan... *(In faltering voice.)* Megan...

MEGAN. Michael, what is going on with you?

MICHAEL. Nothing. I am sorry I came back. The reporters won't let me leave. They surrounded me and pestered me with questions...

MEGAN. And you?

MICHAEL. What can I tell them? That I can be pressured into any villainy, even murder? I just yelled to them, "Leave me alone! Leave me alone!" Then I ran to you, but you... but you two...

DARTER. Calm down, Michael.

MICHAEL. Look who is talking! You provoked me to commit a vile deed, and now you are advising me to calm down? Should I just forget it? As if nothing happened?

DARTER. No, quite the contrary, my advice would be...

MICHAEL. *(Furiously.)* I don't need your advice! Why don't you think about yourself instead! Remember how you were admiring yourself? A seasoned professor tricked an inexperienced student in such a sophisticated way – what a great scientific achievement!

DARTER. Michael!

MICHAEL. *(Not listening.)* Yes, I am a sadist, but who drove me to this place? You did! Is it okay to savage other people's souls for the sake of an experiment? You ruined my confidence, you destroyed me in Megan's eyes. You are a provoker, a phony celebrity, and a seducer of hysterical students – I hate you! *(Grabs a chair and takes a swing at Darter.)*

MEGAN. Are you nuts? Stop it! *(Tries to hold Michael back.)*

MICHAEL. Don't touch me!

DARTER. *(Harshly.)* Michael, get a grip.

Michael, going limp, puts the chair down. Tears are streaming down his face. Megan pats him on the head.

MICHAEL. Megan, how are we supposed to live now? How do I live with myself?

MEGAN. We will talk about it later, but for now, stop beating yourself up, don't think about it... Everything will be okay...

MICHAEL. How can I not think about it? This morning, my world was calm, stable, and comfortable... And now all of a sudden everything has collapsed. How can I live with it?

End of Act II

End

^[1]William Shakespeare, "The Merchant of Venice," in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1974), 270.

^[2]William Shakespeare, "The Third Part of Henry the Sixth," in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1974), 698.