

In the Penal Colony

by Franz Kafka, stage adapted by Cat Hearth

Characters:

Officer

Explorer

Condemned Man

Note: First produced as a one-man show, using dummies for the characters of Condemned Man and Explorer.

Scene: A desert island. The “Machine” (described in the script) dominates the set. The Condemned Man, Stage Right, is naked and in chains. Stage Left is a stack of chairs; the Explorer stands near the machine. Behind the machine is a ladder which the Officer uses to access the “Designer.”

Officer [*Standing on ladder behind machine, not seen.*]: It’s a remarkable piece of apparatus. [*Descends ladder and comes out from behind the machine to Stage Left.*] Ready now.

Explorer: These Uniforms are too heavy for the tropics, surely.

Officer: [*Washing hands in a bucket.*] Of course, but they mean home to us; we don’t want to forget about home. [*Dries hands.*] Now just have a look at this machine. Up till now a few things still had to be set by hand, but from this moment it works all by itself. The machinery should go on working continuously for 12 hours. But if anything does go wrong it will only be some small matter that can be set right at once. [*Pulls out a chair.*] Won’t you take a seat? I don’t know if the Commandant has already explained this apparatus to you. [*Explorer sits.*] This apparatus was invented by our former Commandant. I assisted at the very earliest experiments and had a share in all the work until its completion. But the credit of inventing it belongs to him alone. Have you ever heard of our former Commandant? No? Well, it isn’t saying too much if I tell you that the organization of the whole penal colony is his work. We who were his friends knew even before he died that the organization of the colony was so perfect that his successor, even with a thousand new schemes in his head, would find it impossible to alter anything, at least for many years to come. And our prophecy has come true; the new Commandant has had to acknowledge its truth. A pity you never met the old Commandant! - But I am rambling on, and here stands his apparatus before us. It consists, as you see, of three parts. The lower one is the “Bed,” the upper one the “Designer,” and this one here in the middle that moves up and down is called the “Harrow.”

Explorer: The Harrow?

Officer: Yes, the Harrow. The needles are set in like the teeth of a harrow and the whole thing works something like a harrow, although its action is limited to one place and contrived with much more artistic skill. The bed is covered with a layer of cotton wool. On this the condemned man is laid, face down, quite naked, of course; here are

straps for the hands, here for the feet, and here for the neck, to bind him fast. Here at the head of the Bed is this little gag of felt. It is meant to keep him from screaming and biting his tongue. [*Gag, on end of a wire, resembles a penis.*]

Explorer: Is that cotton wool?

Officer: Yes, certainly, feel it for yourself. It's specially prepared cotton wool, that's why it looks so different.

Explorer: Well, the man lies down.

Officer: Yes. Now listen! The Bed and the Designer each have an electric battery; the Bed for itself, the Designer for the Harrow. As soon as the man is strapped down, the bed is set in motion. It quivers in minute, very rapid vibrations, side to side and up and down. The movements are all precisely calculated, they have to correspond exactly to the movements of the harrow. And the harrow is the instrument for the actual execution of the sentence.

Explorer: And how does the sentence run?

Officer: You don't know that either? Forgive me if my explanations seem rather incoherent. I do beg your pardon. You see, the Commandant always used to do the explaining, but the new Commandant shirks this duty; yet that such an important visitor should not even be told about the kind of sentence we pass is a new development, which - I was not informed, it is not my fault. In any case, I am certainly the best person to explain our procedure, since I have here the relevant drawings made by our former Commandant.

Explorer: The commandant's own drawings? Did he combine everything in himself, then? Was he soldier, judge, mechanic, chemist and draughtsman?

Officer: Indeed he was. [*Inspects hands, washes them, takes out a case.*] Our sentence does not sound severe. Whatever commandment the prisoner has disobeyed is written upon his body by the Harrow. This prisoner, for instance, will have written on his body: HONOR THY SUPERIORS!

Explorer: Does he know his sentence?

Officer: No. There would be no point in telling him. He'll learn it on his body.

Explorer: But surely he knows that he has been sentenced?

Officer: Not that either.

Explorer: No. Then he can't know either whether his defence was effective?

Officer: He has had no chance of putting up a defence.

Explorer: But he must have had some chance of defending himself.

Officer: This is how the matter stands. I have been appointed judge in this penal colony. Despite my youth. For I was the former commandant's assistant in all penal matters and know more about the apparatus than anyone. My guiding principle is this: guilt is never to be doubted. The case is quite simple, like all of them. A captain reported to me this morning that this man, who had been assigned to him as a servant and sleeps before his door, had been asleep on duty. It is his duty, you see, to get up every time the hour strikes and salute the captain's door. Not an exacting duty, and very necessary, since he has to be a sentry as well as a servant, and must be alert in both functions. Last night the captain wanted to see if the man was doing his duty. He opened the door as the clock struck two and there was his man curled up asleep. He took his riding whip and lashed him across the face. Instead of getting up and begging pardon, the man caught hold of his master's legs, shook him and cried, "Throw that whip away or I'll eat you alive!" That's the evidence. The captain came to me an hour ago; I wrote down his statement and appended the sentence to it. Then I had the man put in chains. That was all quite simple. If I had first called the man before me and interrogated him, things would have got into a confused tangle. He would have told lies, and had I exposed these lies he would have backed them up with more lies, and so on and so forth. As it is, I've got him and I won't let him go. Is that quite clear now? But we're wasting time, the execution should be beginning and I haven't finished explaining the apparatus yet. As you see, the shape of the Harrow corresponds to the human form: here is the harrow for the torso; here are the harrows for the legs. For the head there is only this one small spike. Is that quite clear?

Explorer: Will the Commandant attend the execution?

Officer: It is not certain. That is just why we have to lose no time. But of course tomorrow, when the apparatus has been cleaned - its one drawback is that it gets so messy - I can recapitulate all the details. For the present, then, only the essentials. When the man lies down on the Bed and it begins to vibrate, the Harrow is lowered onto his body. It regulates itself automatically so that the needles barely touch his skin; once contact is made the steel ribbon stiffens immediately into a rigid band. And then the performance begins. As the Harrow quivers, its points pierce the skin of the body which is itself quivering from the vibration of the Bed. So that the actual progress of the sentence can be watched, the Harrow is made of glass. Anyone can look through the glass and watch the inscription taking form on the body. There are two kinds of needles arranged in multiple patterns. The long needle does the writing, and the short needle sprays a jet of water to wash away the blood and keep the inscription clear. Blood and water are then conducted through small runnels into this main runnel and down a waste pipe into the pit.

Explorer: Now I know all about it.

Officer: All except the most important thing. In the Designer are all the cogwheels that control the movements of the Harrow, and this machinery is regulated according to the inscription demanded by the sentence. I am still using the guiding plans drawn by the former Commandant. Here they are, but I'm sorry - I can't let you handle them; they are my most precious possessions. Just take a seat and I'll hold them in front of you. Read it.

Explorer: I can't.

Officer: Yet it's clear enough.

Explorer: It's very ingenious but I can't make it out.

Officer: Yes. It's no calligraphy for school children. Of course the script can't be a simple one; it's not supposed to kill a man straight off, but only after an interval of, on an average, 12 hours; the turning point is reckoned to come at the sixth hour. So there have to be lots and lots of flourishes around the actual script; the script itself runs round the body only in a narrow girdle; the rest of the body is reserved for the embellishments. Just watch it! [*Climbs up the ladder, turns a wheel.*] Look out, keep to one side! [*Machine starts. Officer climbs down. A gear squeaks, he shakes his fist at it.*] The Harrow is beginning to write. When it finishes the first draft of the inscription on the man's back, the layer of cotton wool begins to roll and slowly turns the body over, to give the Harrow fresh space for writing. Meanwhile the raw part that has been written on lies on the cotton wool, which is specially prepared to staunch the bleeding and so makes all ready for a new deepening of the script. Then these teeth at the edge of the Harrow, as the body turns further around, tear the cotton wool away from the wounds, throw it into the pit, and there is more work for the Harrow. So it keeps on writing deeper and deeper for the whole twelve hours. The first six hours the condemned man stays alive almost as before, he suffers only pain. After two hours the felt gag is taken away, for he has no longer strength to scream. Here, into this electrically heated basin at the head of the bed, some warm rice pap is poured, from which the man, if he feels like it, can take as much as his tongue can lap. Not one of them ever misses the chance. I can remember none, and my experience is extensive. Only about the sixth hour does the man lose all desire to eat. I usually kneel down here at that moment and observe what happens. The man rarely swallows his last mouthful, he only rolls it round his mouth and spits it out into the pit. I have to duck just then or he would spit it in my face. But how quiet he grows at just about the sixth hour! Enlightenment comes to the most dull-witted. It begins around the eyes. From there it radiates. A moment that might tempt one to get under the Harrow oneself. The man begins to understand the inscription. You have seen how difficult it is to decipher the script with one's eyes, but our man deciphers it with his wounds. To be sure, that is a hard task; he needs six hours to accomplish it. By that time the Harrow has pierced him quite through and casts him into the pit, where he pitches down upon the blood and water and the cotton wool. Then the judgement has been fulfilled, and we, the soldier and I, bury him.

Officer [*Stops machine; removes chains and lays Condemned Man under the harrow. He fastens straps. The right wrist strap breaks.*]: I shall simply use a chain; the delicacy of the vibrations for the right arm will of course be a little impaired. The resources for maintaining the machine are now very much reduced. Under the former Commandant I had free access to a sum of money set aside entirely for this purpose. There was a store, too, in which spare parts were kept for repairs of all kinds. I confess I have been almost prodigal with them, I mean in the past, not now as the new Commandant pretends, always looking for an excuse to attack our old way of doing things. Now he has taken charge of the machine money himself, and if I send for a new strap they ask for the broken old strap as evidence, and the new strap takes ten days to appear and

then is of shoddy material and not much good. But how I am supposed to work the machine without a strap, that's something nobody bothers about.

Officer [*Forces the gag into the Condemned Man's mouth; he vomits. Officer cries out in rage.*] It's all the fault of that Commandant! The machine is befouled like a pigsty. Have I not tried for hours at a time to get him to understand that the prisoner must fast for a whole day before the execution? But our new, mild doctrine thinks otherwise. The Commandant's ladies stuff the man with sugar candy before he's led off. He has lived on stinking fish his whole life long and now he has to eat sugar candy! But it could still be possible, I should have nothing to say against it, but why won't they get me a new felt gag, which I have been begging for the last three months? How should a man not feel sick when he takes a felt gag into his mouth which more than a hundred men have already slobbered and gnawed in their dying moments? I should like to exchange a few words with you in confidence. May I?

Explorer: Of course.

Officer: This procedure and method of execution, which you are now having the opportunity to admire, has at the moment no longer any open adherents in our colony. I am its sole advocate, and at the same time the sole advocate of the old Commandant's tradition. I can no longer reckon on any further extension of the method, it takes all my energy to maintain it as it is. During the old Commandant's lifetime the colony was full of his adherents, his strength of conviction I still have in some measure, but not an atom of his power; consequently the adherents have skulked out of sight, there are still many of them but none of them will admit it. If you were to go into the teahouse today, on execution day, you would perhaps hear only ambiguous remarks. These would all be made by adherents, but under the present Commandant and his present doctrines they are of no use to me. And now I ask you: because of this Commandant and the women who influence him, is such a piece of work, the work of a lifetime, to perish? Ought one to let that happen? Even if one has only come as a stranger to our island for a few days? But there's no time to lose, an attack of some kind is impending on my function as judge; conferences are already being held in the commandant's office from which I am excluded; even your coming here today seems to me a significant move; they are cowards and use you as a screen, you, a stranger.

How different an execution was in the old days! A whole day before the ceremony the valley was packed with people; early in the morning the Commandant appeared with his ladies; fanfares roused the whole camp; I reported that everything was in readiness; the assembled company - no high official dared to absent himself - arranged itself round the machine; this pile of cane chairs is a miserable survival from that epoch. The machine was freshly cleaned and glittering, I got new spare parts for almost every execution. Before hundreds of spectators - all of them standing on tiptoe as far as the heights there - the condemned man was laid under the Harrow by the Commandant himself. What is left today for a common soldier to do was then my task, the task of the presiding judge, and was a honour for me. And then the execution began! No discordant noise spoilt the working of the machine. Many did not care to watch it but lay with closed eyes in the sand; they all knew: now justice is being done. In the silence one heard nothing but the condemned man's sighs, half muffled by the felt gag. Nowadays the machine can no longer wring from anyone a sigh louder than

the felt gag can stifle, but in those days the writing needles let drop an acid fluid, which we're no longer permitted to use. Well, and then came the sixth hour! It was impossible to grant all the requests to be allowed to watch it from near by. The Commandant in his wisdom ordained that the children should have the preference, I, of course, because of my office had the privilege of always being at hand; often enough I would be squatting there with a small child in either arm. How we all absorbed the look of transfiguration on the face of the sufferer, how we bathed our cheeks in the radiance of that justice achieved at last and fading so quickly! What times these were, my comrade! [*Embraces the Explorer and lays head on his shoulder.*] Anyhow the machine is still working and is still effective in itself, even though it stands alone in this valley. And the corpse still falls at the last into the pit with an incomprehensibly gentle wafting motion, even though there are no hundreds of people swarming round like flies as formerly. In those days we had to put a strong fence round the pit. [*Seizes explorer by the hands.*] Do you realize the shame of it? You feel yourself a kind of outsider but your influence cannot be rated too highly. I was simply delighted when I heard that you were to attend the execution all by yourself. The Commandant arranged it to aim a blow at me, but I shall turn it to my advantage. You have heard my explanations, seen the machine and are now in course of watching the execution. And now I make this request to you: help me against the Commandant!

Explorer: How could I do that, it's quite impossible. I can neither help nor hinder you.

Officer: Yes, you can. Yes, you can. I have a plan that is bound to succeed. Unless you are asked a direct question you must say nothing at all; but what you do say must be brief and general. I don't ask you to tell any lies; you should only give curt answers, such as: "Yes, I saw the execution, or "Yes, I had it explained to me." Tomorrow in the Commandant's office there is to be a large conference of all the high administrative officials, the Commandant presiding. Now, whatever happens, you will certainly be invited to this conference. So tomorrow you're sitting in the Commandant's box with the ladies. After various trivial and ridiculous matters, brought in merely to impress the audience- mostly harbour works, nothing but harbour works!- our judicial procedure comes up for discussion too. I'll stand up and report that today's execution has taken place. The Commandant thanks me, as always, with an amiable smile. "It has just been reported that an execution has taken place. Should we not now ask the famous explorer to give us his verdict on our traditional mode of execution and the procedure that leads up to it?" Of course there is loud applause, general agreement. And now you advance to the front of the box. Lay your hands where everyone can see them, or the ladies will catch them and press your fingers. Publish the truth aloud, lean over the front of the box, shout, yes indeed, shout your verdict, your unshakable conviction, at the Commandant. Yet perhaps you wouldn't care to do that, it's not in keeping with your character, in your country perhaps people do these things differently. Don't even stand up; just say a few words, even in a whisper. You don't even need to mention the lack of public support for the execution, the creaking wheel, the broken strap, the filthy gag of felt, no, I'll take all that upon me, and believe me, if my indictment doesn't drive him out of the conference hall, it will force him to his knees to make the acknowledgment: Old Commandant, I humble myself before you. That is my plan, will you help me to carry it out? But of course you are willing, what is more, you must.

Explorer: No. I do not approve of your procedure. I shall tell the Commandant what I think of the procedure, but only in private. I am going away early tomorrow morning.

Officer: So you did not find the procedure convincing. Then the time has come.

Explorer: The time for what?

Officer [To the Condemned Man]: You are free. Yes, you are set free. [*Condemned Man struggles.*] You'll burst my straps. Lie still! We'll soon loosen them. [*Draws him out. Shows explorer another paper.*] Read it.

Explorer: I can't. I told you before that I can't make out these scripts.

Officer: Try taking a close look at it. [*He spells it out.*] BE JUST is what is written there, surely you can read it now. BE JUST is what is written there.

Explorer: Maybe. I am prepared to believe you.

Officer: Well then. [*Climbs up ladder and adjusts machine. Comes down, takes off clothes, throws them into pit, breaks sword & throws it into pit with belt and scabbard. Gets on Bed, takes gag into mouth. Machine starts up. Officer screams.*]

The end.

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