

CURARE

by

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Based on *Sekretnoe sledstvie* [A Secret Investigation]

by A.A. Shkliarevskii (1876)

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CAST IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE

INVESTIGATOR: A Judicial Investigator, about 35.

ARKADY MOZHAREVSKY: Professor of Medicine; about 48.

GERSHKA KEBMEZAKH: A laboratory assistant; about 40.

AVDOTIA (DUNYA) KRIUKOVSKAYA: A medical student, about 26.

ZINAIDA (ZINA) MOZHAREVSKAYA: A medical student, about 21.

MIKHAILOVSKY: A doctor, about 40.

BYSTROV: The Investigator's cousin, about 35.

ATOMANICHENKOV: a former friend of Kebmezakh, about 40.

Cast members to play the following incidental roles:

Cabbie; Doorman; Photographer; Protestor; Maid.

THE SETTING IS ST PETERSBURG, 1879; THE IMPERIAL MEDICAL-SURGICAL  
ACADEMY.

SCENE 1.

A FRAGMENT OR TWO OF AN ARIA FROM  
DARGOMYZHISKY'S *THE STONE GUEST* IS  
PLAYED, AS IF ON A SCRATCHY  
PHONOGRAPH. MUSIC FADES OUT TO  
NOTHING BY THE WORDS 'MARINSKY  
THEATRE'.

INVESTIGATOR:

It happened last year, during the White Nights. The summer of '79. That fortnight when the city roasts, and the sun never sets, and that pale blue light seeps into everything... It must have been - getting on for midnight? ... Well, like everyone else I was walking ... I'd walked all the way along Nevsky Prospekt... past the drunks on the bridges ... the priests ... the prostitutes. Ah, yes, my fellow Petersburgians! Half of them are lawyers, and half of them are spies, and all of them are lunatic insomniacs ... and I should know ... So I went past the Marinsky theatre ... It was still playing *The Stone Guest* – a rehashing of Pushkin, I heard. Hah! That old Revolutionary! Not that Revolution's in favour these days - reform's the word...

So, I ended up at the Imperial Medical-Surgical Academy. I knew one or two people there - and I'd gone to hear the famous Professor Mozharevsky speak -

MOZHAREVSKY:

I'd been speaking that evening about medical innovations. A class for the general public. I'd placed my assistant Kebmezakh inside the iron lung - the Spirophore - to show how it might breathe on his behalf.

After that the women students started to arrive for their night class... in? Obstetrics. They're Learned Obstetricians, you know, or at least they will be by the end.

So I then instructed Kebmezakh to wheel in the latest anatomical model - the *femme clastique complète* - the Complete, Dismemberable Woman! It arrives with 14 models of the uterus, which can be removed and changed, in all periods of gestation, with examples of ovarian and tubal pregnancy - and all these elements are detachable in order to facilitate the understanding ... But as I unpeeled the truth of the female form, lifting one filmy membrane from another, there was shouting on the street outside - demonstrators - rabble - unlawful -

WOMAN:

- No, no, we'd gathered perfectly legally, on behalf of the Russian Society for the Protection of Animals! Compassion Not Cruelty! Compassion Not Curare! Free the Dogs! ... We know what they're doing in there, those ... *doctors*!! They call it science, but we know the truth! ... We wanted to make our point, so we stood right next to the lecture theatre windows, and -

EVERY TIME KEBMEZAKH SPEAKS  
THROUGHOUT WE HEAR A STRANGE  
WOODEN CLANKING SOUND, AND A WHEEZE,  
LIKE BELLOWS. THIS SHOULD VARY IN  
VOLUME, INTERSPERSING HIS SPEECH. AT  
TIMES IT SHOULD FADE, AND IN THE MIDDLE  
SECTION BE QUITE UNOBTRUSIVE, AT THE  
END OF THE PLAY, IN THE FINAL SCENES, IT  
SHOULD BECOME MORE PRONOUNCED.

KEBMEZAKH:

Gershka Kebmezakh, says the Prof, waving the Eustachian Valve at me, while his other hand's still grasping the Ductus Arteriosus - oh, yes, you'd be surprised at what I know of anatomy - more than most who study here, even if I am just a lab assistant - shut that blessed window, will you, my good man? he says, in his patronizing way.

Truth be told I was happy to shut out those troublemakers ... not that the women sitting inside the lecture theatre are any better ... revolutionaries, half of them, chucked out of medical school in Zurich for stirring things up, running around with their short hair and blue eyeglasses and now they're back here in Petersburg and they've got special classes put on for them! Everyone knows the only reason they want to study medicine is so one woman can perform a termination on -

CABBIE:

- another woman. There was two of them. They hailed my cab from the square, just by the theatre. All laughing and jolly, they were. One red-haired and pretty, the other dark and a bit older. So, red hair gets in the cab, and the other one walks off. Where to, Miss? I says. Why, The Imperial Medical Academy, she says. Ah, she's one of those, I thought to myself - one of those women what are rushing off to study medicine. So off we goes. We're there in ten minutes flat. I pull up, and Pasha, the doorman, pulls open the carriage door with his customary flourish, and says -

DOORMAN:

What's this, Ivan? You've brought me a dead woman! Them's the very words I used. A! - Dead! - Woman! I look inside and there she is - the young lady - the very one

that's married to the Prof - Mrs Mozharevskaya! There she is, stiff as anything, her legs stretched out in front of her, her head thrown back, and that red hair spilling out in curls, so I - I calls out -

INVESTIGATOR: Police! Police! Come quick! There's been a murder! I heard the shouts from the entrance hall, and then the doors burst open, and in came the doorman, and a cabbie, and a woman - a woman with dark hair - and between the three of them they were carrying the body of a young woman.

I took command. I am the regional Judicial Investigator, I said, to whom the police report! The case is mine. Stand back now! Clear the room! You stay, Professor, and your assistant -

KEBMEZAKH: Kebmezakh, Mr Investigator, I said. As you well kn-

INVESTIGATOR: I don't know you, Miss -

KRIUKOVSKAYA: Kriukovskaya. Avdotia - Dunya Kriukovskaya, I said. I'm Zina's best friend. I acted distraught, of course. I told him how I'd only said goodbye to Zina - Zinaida - not ten minutes before - how I'd wanted some fresh air, to stretch my legs before our class, and how she'd complained of a headache. So she took a cab, I said, while I followed her on foot - and when I got there I saw a crowd around the cab, and then I saw Zina, and together we carefully -

INVESTIGATOR: carefully, carefully now! bring her in! I gave the orders, clearly, firmly. Move that model out of the way, put the young woman on the table, and call for the -

MOZHAREVSKY: lunatics! I thought, or perhaps some game, some student prank! That's what I thought when I saw that fool assistant of mine Kebmezakh step back from the door as a group carried something - someone in ... and then I saw that it was my Zina - her hair swept back so carelessly from that high, pale forehead, her little hands and feet -

INVESTIGATOR: his little hands - I'd noticed them before, when he was disarticulating the model, but now that he was waving them about so, I took him in, complete, and saw how very *a la mode* he was. Such dainty feet, too, encased in patent leather ankle boots ... White hair swept back in curls from that high, pale forehead, a small Greek nose, and deep blue eyes ... I saw at once that he was no judge of character, that a cunning intriguer could turn him as the wind whips round a flag, by touching on his -

PHOTOGRAPHER: Vanity? No, no! Vanity's not all that lies behind my art, sir! No - photography is as much science as art, and can be put to any use, whatever the occasion! My name? William Carrick at your service, or Vasily Andreev, if you prefer! Photographer to the Tsar, but I'll photograph whatever comes before my lens - sweeps, cabbies, hawkers, brush boys, horses, the dead, the dying ...

Oh, yes. They called me off the street. So there I was, my apparatus pointing straight at her, primed to go off... to take an arty set of cartes de visites post-mortem for the husband to distribute to his friends - or perhaps they want a set of scientific snaps from angles near and far for the police to scrutinize up close - it's all the same to me! I got the flash light ready, the ribbon of magnesium was in my hand, the aluminum powder, the sodium perchlorate, and

I stood there, thinking how I might compose

INVESTIGATOR: compose yourself, I said, to ... the Professor's ... assistant... I need you here, to hold a light up, with a steady hand! He scuttled over, glancing all the while at Kriukovskaya, who had turned her back to him, and seemed herself to be as if turned to stone - Professor! I said, examine her, confirm to us her death, and how she died! Tell us, is there indication of violence? No bruising? Vomiting? No sign of poison?

MOZHAREVSKY: I looked closely, but I could see nothing on her body - other than the tiniest scratch under her chin. A pin, I said, from her bonnet, perhaps ... But wait -

INVESTIGATOR: wait -

KEBMEZAKH: wait?

KRIUKOVSKAYA: wait?!

INVESTIGATOR: Her eye - a shade - a flash of light - I thought it moved, a fraction - I see ... I see -

PHOTOGRAPHER: the murderer! I whispered as I let the flash explode. It was so quick, so white a light I heard a gasp, and saw the players petrified around the body on the slab - the husband - the professor - with his head in hands; the policeman's frown; the woman's blue-black hair; the assistant, hunching down; and in between them all, the girl, her hair of fire ... Lady, gentlemen! I said. The retina is like the photographer's plate, and on it lies the



impression of the very last thing it sees - the guillotine!  
the flashing blade! The poison dart! The murderer's face,  
so small, but then, enlarged, it -

INVESTIGATOR: dilates! I cried. I see it, now! Her pupil, it dilates! and now contracts! Look, look!

MOZHAREVSKY: Look lively, Kebmezakh! The spiropore! Don't wait!

INVESTIGATOR: She lives! I said. Miss Mozharevskaya lives, her life hangs on a thread ...

KEBMEZAKH: A thread of breath ... she lives, I said. Zinaida ...

KRIUKOVSKAYA: Zinaida ... Zina is alive, I said, after all, when so much -

INVESTIGATOR: time had passed, I left. Zinaida Mozharevskaya was alive but could not speak. We took her to the hospital wing upstairs, where she could recover in peace. ... And then, as I walked through the long corridors of the Academy, I found myself passing by the lecture theatre again. Its shutters were now closed. I heard a noise and glanced inside. I saw a man move, in the dark. He had something in his hand. I saw some glint of light on glass - a vial, perhaps. On the table there was a woman's shape - the Complete Disarticulated Woman, I thought. And then the man pushed back a shutter, and I saw that he was Kebmezakh, and that I was mistaken about the model. A woman lay on the table, in her forties. She lay as Zinaida had lain; her head was thrown back, a grimace was on her face. I didn't

KEBMEZAKH: realize that the door was open, and the investigator was watching me, the interfering fool. What is it? I said. I put in my report last week - the women -

INVESTIGATOR: the woman -

KEBMEZAKH: It's no use, I said. She's -

INVESTIGATOR: dead? I said.

KEBMEZAKH: quite dead, I said. An alcoholic, brought in off the streets. I'm preparing her for the morgue. And so ...

INVESTIGATOR: ... I left him there. I stepped outside, into the sickly yellow light of dawn. There was still one woman there, with a flag, which read -

WOMAN: Stop Animal Testing! Free the Dogs! Let them -

INVESTIGATOR: go home, I told her. There's nothing going on in there - no dogs. No mice. Just honest working men of medicine -

WOMAN: women of medicine, I said, but it was as if he did not hear -

INVESTIGATOR: and as I spoke, I heard a scream, or howl, or something from within. She looked at me; I turned away, and then, I paced the city once again, unable to shake off the unease that crawled on spider legs behind me all the time.

THESE LAST LINES FADE OUT, WITH  
DISTORTION, AS IF A CRACKLING  
PHONOGRAPH RECORDING.