

# The Three Sisters

AN AUTHENTICATIVE TEXT EDITION OF A GREAT PLAY

Anton Chekhov



**ANTON CHEKHOV** was born in Russia in 1860, the son of a small grocer, a former serf. His first ambition, which he realized, was to become a doctor. While a medical student at the University of Moscow, on a scholarship, he contracted tuberculosis, but he also began to write. His best-known plays were written between 1896 and 1904, and when these were produced by Stanislavsky's Moscow Art Theater, Chekhov's reputation became fully established. Such plays as **THE THREE SISTERS** were revolutionary in that they dealt primarily with the paradoxes of emotion, the contradiction of behavior, and the significance of environment. Chekhov died of tuberculosis in 1904.

**HENRY POPKIN** serves as a drama critic of *Vogue*, reviews New York theater for the *London Times*, and has contributed to the *New York Herald Tribune*, the *New York Times*, *Kenyon Review*, *Sewanee Review*, *Commentary*, *Tulane Drama Review*, *Theatre Arts*, *New Republic*, *New Leader* and other periodicals. He has recently edited *New British Drama*, a revised edition of Barrett H. Clark's *European Theories of the Drama*, and *The Concise Encyclopedia of Modern Drama*.



Anton Chekhov

# The Three Sisters

AN AUTHORITATIVE TEXT EDITION

Translated by Tyrone Guthrie  
and Leonid Kipnis

Critical Material Selected and  
Introduced by Henry Popkin



BARD BOOKS/PUBLISHED BY AVON

## AVON BOOKS

A division of  
The Hearst Corporation  
959 Eighth Avenue  
New York, N.Y. 10019

Introduction copyright © 1965 by Avon Book  
Division, The Hearst Corporation. Published by  
arrangement with the author.

"On a New Translation into English of  
*The Three Sisters*," copyright © 1965  
by Tyrone Guthrie.  
Published by arrangement with the author.

Copyright © 1965 Avon Book Division,  
The Hearst Corporation.  
All rights reserved.

First Printing, January, 1965  
Third Printing (Bard Edition), February, 1970

AVON TRADEMARK REG. U.S. PAT. OFF. AND  
FOREIGN COUNTRIES, REGISTERED TRADEMARK—  
MARCA REGISTRADA, HECHO EN CHICAGO, U.S.A.

Printed in the U.S.A.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

*The Three Sisters* copyright © 1963 by Tyrone  
Guthrie and Leonid Kipnis. All inquiries concern-  
ing performing rights (professional, amateur, and  
stock) should be addressed to the translators' rep-  
resentative: The Minnesota Theatre Company  
Foundation, 725 Vineland Place, Minneapolis,  
Minnesota 55403.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

(continued)

Material from Chekhov's *Letters on the Short Story, the Drama, and Other Literary Topics*, edited by Louis S. Friedland. Copyright 1964 by Benjamin Blom, Inc. Reprinted by permission of the publisher.

Material from Chekhov's *Letters to O. L. Knipper*, translated by Constance Garnett (1926). Reprinted by permission of Chatto and Windus Ltd. and A. P. Watt.

Material from Chekhov's *Notebooks*, translated by S. S. Kotliansky and Leonard Woolf (1921). Reprinted by permission of The Hogarth Press.

Material from *My Life in Art* by Constantin Stanislavski, Copyright 1924 by Little, Brown and Co., Copyright 1952 by Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood. Reprinted by permission of Theatre Arts Books, New York, and Geoffrey Bles Ltd.

Material from *My Life in the Russian Theatre* by Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko, Copyright 1937 by Little, Brown and Co. Reprinted by permission of Marjorie Barkentin and Geoffrey Bles Ltd.

Material from *Reminiscences of Tolstoy, Chekhov and Andreyev* by Maxim Gorky, published by The Hogarth Press (1934).

Material from *Anton Chekhov: A Critical Study* by William Gerhardi, Copyright 1923 by Duffield and Company. Reprinted by permission of Curtis Brown Ltd.

Material from *Chekhov the Dramatist* by David Magarshack. Copyright 1952 by David Magarshack. Reprinted by permission of Hill and Wang, Inc.

Material from *The Elements of Drama* by J. L. Styan, Copyright 1960, Cambridge University Press. Reprinted by permission of the publisher.



# Contents

|                                                                                   |     |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| Introduction                                                                      | 9   |
| <i>The Three Sisters</i>                                                          | 23  |
| On a New Translation into English of<br><i>The Three Sisters</i> : Tyrone Guthrie | 115 |
| From Chekhov's Letters                                                            | 119 |
| From Chekhov's Notebooks                                                          | 135 |
| Commentaries                                                                      | 137 |
| Konstantin Stanislavsky: from <i>My Life<br/>    in Art</i>                       | 137 |
| Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko: from <i>My<br/>    Life in the Russian Theatre</i> | 143 |
| Maxim Gorky: from <i>Recollections</i>                                            | 147 |
| William Gerhardi: from <i>Anton Chehov</i>                                        | 149 |
| David Magarshack: from <i>Chekhov the<br/>    Dramatist</i>                       | 159 |
| J. L. Styan: from <i>The Elements of Drama</i>                                    | 169 |
| Bibliography                                                                      | 176 |



## INTRODUCTION

If Anton Chekhov is, of all modern dramatists, the most difficult to characterize, that is probably because he is so complex, so truthful, so compassionate, and so accomplished. His success does not rest merely upon technical talent; his greatest skill is his talent for making use of life's complexity, dealing with it truthfully and compassionately. Like life itself, Chekhov's drama has been subject to a variety of interpretations.

Konstantin Stanislavsky's productions at the Moscow Art Theater made most of his plays seem gloomy; Chekhov complained that Stanislavsky had made "cry babies" of his characters. On the other hand, Stanislavsky regarded *The Three Sisters* as a comedy; recent writers on the subject, including David Magarshack, have disagreed, pointing out that Chekhov himself called the play "a drama." Whether or not Stanislavsky is responsible for setting the idea in motion, there is a popular belief that Chekhov is the most melancholy of dramatists. However, recent productions in the West, like Tyrone Guthrie's *The Three Sisters* in Minneapolis and the Royal Shakespeare Company's version of *The Cherry Orchard* in London have given full measure of the comic side of Chekhov.

Interpreters are equally in disagreement concerning Chekhov's politics. That he was, in general, liberal and progressive can not be doubted. He defended the innocence of Captain Dreyfus and quarreled bitterly

## 10 / Introduction

with his reactionary friends over this divisive issue. His humanitarian account of the prison colony at Sakhalin apparently had some effect on penal reform in Russia—but we do not need to root out scraps of evidence to prove his liberalism; everything we know about the man indicates his humane nature and his progressive inclinations. But, since Chekhov is a Russian dramatist, the question is whether he was a political revolutionary, whether he endorsed the optimism concerning the future voiced by such characters as Vershinin in *The Three Sisters* and Trofimov in *The Cherry Orchard*, and—a very crucial point—whether he would have recognized in Soviet Russia the fulfillment of his characters' optimistic prophecies. Not surprisingly, Soviet interpreters are persuaded of Chekhov's optimism. The entry (written under Soviet inspiration) on this author in *The Oxford Companion to the Theatre* describes Trofimov's saying "All Russia is our garden" as "an astonishingly and fiercely accurate prediction of the Revolution itself." Western criticism tends to find Chekhov more impersonal and to regard the optimistic elegies as speeches in character, not orations in behalf of the dramatist. The difference in interpretation is readily apparent in production. Trofimov is rather impressive and almost heroic in the Slovenian National Theater of Ljubljana and in the Moscow Art Theater, but his weaknesses are more evident when Jean Louis Barrault undertakes the role at the Théâtre de France.

What other paradoxes can we discover? Chekhov is considered by many to be caviar to the general, the playwright of the few, a dramatist who never brings in a penny at the box office. As if in illustration of this popular judgment, no one staged his plays on Broadway for twenty years, until the Actors' Studio put together a production of *The Three Sisters*, with some financial help from the Ford Foundation; the drama critic of *Variety* observed that this was not an ideal show for the tourist trade. And yet, Tyrone Guthrie's production of the same play was the popular hit of the 1963 sea-

son in Minneapolis, and Laurence Olivier's *Uncle Vanya* was for two, and possibly three, years the "hottest ticket," the hardest play to get to see in England. Even some of those dramatists who prospered in the years when the commercial theater neglected Chekhov warmly praised the Russian master and expressed gratitude for the lessons he taught them. The late John Van Druten, author of *Young Woodley* and *I Am a Camera*, once told how he patterned three characters in an early play after his mother and her two sisters. "Those were real women. I knew them well. But they did not, do not, seem as real to me as Olga, Masha, and Irina in the play that, I think, I would rather have been able to write than any play in the world. . . . Chekhov's *Three Sisters* are almost more real to me than my mother and my aunts. I know that I know them better."

A little effort will turn up still more paradoxical qualities in Chekhov. He is praised both for his ironic detachment and for his humanity. Some note the conciseness of his effects, and others observe a tendency to spin things out. I think the explanation is simple—or as nearly simple as any statement about Chekhov can be. In his plays, and in his stories as well, Chekhov created a small universe, a real world, populated by the real people that Van Druten knew better than his mother and his aunts. It is a sign of this world's authenticity that it has all the contradictions of that other world that we call "real." It is both comic and tragic, both political and nonpolitical, both popular and precious—in short, Chekhov contains multitudes.

The canceling out of opposites should not suggest that the world of Chekhov's creation is chaos and that no clear patterns are discernible. Everywhere in his writing is an ironic design of disappointment and frustration. No character manages to fulfill his intentions, or else intentions are fulfilled in such a way that their original value and meaning are lost. Fulfillments come out wrong, but they are more than merely wrong—

they are paradoxical, pathetic, pitiful, and most of all, ironic. Accordingly, in the story "Three Years," the blindly infatuated husband comes to lose his love for his wife, while the unloving wife gradually begins to feel for her husband a love that cannot be returned. In "Ward No. 6," the superintendent of a sanitarium is troubled by his staff's sadistic treatment of his patients, but he takes no action to alter matters; ultimately, he becomes a patient, the victim of his employees' viciousness and his own inactivity. The chief character of "Gooseberries" isolates himself and grows gooseberries, which are to be the symbol of his self-reliant accomplishment; but the gooseberries are sour, and their flavor pleases only their self-deluded grower.

This pattern of ironic fulfillment is everywhere in the plays. In *The Cherry Orchard*, Lopakhin labors desperately to help his aristocratic friends save their estate, but, at last, it is he who takes it from them. Uncle Vanya, in the play of that name, works to support a man of culture and intellect (as he thinks), Professor Serebryakov; he finds that the professor is a pedantic fool and that the only effect of his life's work has been to stifle his own culture and intellect. If Treplev, of *The Sea Gull*, fulfills his literary ambitions, he does so only to discover that success has no value for him. In *The Three Sisters*, the teacher whom Masha marries turns out, like the teacher whom Vanya maintains, to be a trivial nonentity and no intellectual. The rude, unpleasant Solyony has only one defender, the man whom he is to kill in a duel. Natasha begins as a clumsy, rather pitiful victim of the three sisters' social superiority, but she rapidly asserts her own superiority and drives the remaining sisters from their home.

These ironic designs involve always the loss of a happy dream or of some pleasant immediate reality, and such losses, in the plays especially, inspire nostalgic reverie. Reverie is a favorite mood in Chekhov's plays; it may be nostalgic, anticipatory, or merely fanciful. In *The Love of Four Colonels*, Peter Ustinov parodied

this mood, not unkindly, by permitting a Chekhovian character to lament, following a dance, "Now that it is over, I cannot look forward to it anymore." The people of the plays indulge themselves by looking forward and by looking back; their reveries constitute an ironically contrasting, counterpointed alternative to present reality. Everything was better in the past, when Gaev and Madame Ranevsky were children in their cherry orchard or when the three sisters lived in Moscow, but sometimes even the anguish of the past is worth remembering—the death of Madame Ranevsky's child or, in *The Sea Gull*, the death of Nina's child. In Chekhov the remembrance of things past is not primarily exposition, the retailing of necessary information concerning events that took place while the curtain was down; on the contrary, the remembrance of the past has an intrinsic value. The characters drink deep of nostalgia, anguish, reverie; if, incidentally, they convey some information, that is quite a secondary function.

We may note parenthetically that Chekhov, in his technique of exposition as in much else, is strikingly different from Ibsen and from the main stream of modern drama inspired by Ibsen. Where Ibsen ingeniously contrives circumstances that permit early, brisk exchanges of information for our benefit and then further revelations, briefer but more significant, Chekhov lets his characters express themselves in speeches that have no inspiration and no necessity but an emotional need. Such speeches may be addressed to the world in general, to no one at all, or to a particular person who may not even be listening. By way of illustrating the last possibility, Andrey, in *The Three Sisters*, is driven by inner need to unburden himself to the old porter Ferapont. Harried by a thousand troubles, Andrey needs to speak out his sorrows, but he cannot speak to his nagging wife or to the sisters whom he has wronged, and so he selects Ferapont as the ideal audience, precisely because Ferapont is deaf and cannot hear a word he says. But the characters are, equally,

talking to themselves when, in the opening lines of the play, Olga announces that it is one year since her father died and eleven years since his daughters left Moscow with him. Everyone within hearing distance is already in possession of these facts. Why, then, does Olga tell Masha and Irina what they already know? Primarily, I think, because she feels bound to dwell upon the sad, indeed fatal, changes in the circumstances of their life. Such speeches must seem natural, or they are worth nothing in their allied function of giving us the sisters' identity and their recent history. To transmit the same information, Ibsen would probably have invented a new arrival who needs to be told who the sisters are, or, at least, he would have contrived a meeting between old friends who have long been separated. Curiously, Chekhov does soon introduce a new arrival, Vershinin, but he has managed most of his exposition without him. In regard to the temperamental and technical differences between Ibsen and Chekhov, it should be added that Chekhov frequently expressed his low opinion of Ibsen's plays. On one occasion, however, he called Ibsen his "favorite author." I take that reference to be ironic.

So, then, the characters express themselves. They have their solos, their arias, their refrains; musical references are continually being employed to interpret Chekhov's technique. Critics speak of the symphonic effects of the plays or of their mood music, and for Rachmaninoff to have set the closing speech of *Uncle Vanya* to music seems a very natural procedure. Chekhov's plays are so often compared to music because the critics need some precedent that differs from the orderly, logical development of a plot. In these plays we seem not so much to be advancing from one crisis to another as from one mood to another. For example, in *Uncle Vanya* the plot seems for some time to make little progress of any conventional kind, while, in the first act, one character after another complains of his hard lot and of those to blame for it. But we are build-

ing a crescendo effect—what would Chekhov criticism do without its musical terms?—as we approach the ultimate speech of complaint, the one by Serebryakov, whom the others regard as the ideally happy source of their woe. *They* think *they* have troubles, he says, in effect—but he is the one whose troubles are infinitely worse because no one pities, loves, or understands him.

Certainly, the structure of Chekhov's plays can persuasively be interpreted as a succession of moods and emotions expressed in the heartfelt cries of sorrow, nostalgia, and ennui uttered by the various characters. Like any of the other plays, *The Three Sisters* can be analyzed as an elaborate pattern of refrains: Masha's melancholy lines of verse; Irina's aspirations and her recurrent thoughts of Moscow; Natasha's nagging quest for advantage; the contrasting notes struck by the optimistic Vershinin and the more complacent Tusenbach in their speculation about the future; the shallow cheerfulness of Kulygin; the insistent nastiness of Solyony; Chebutykin's good-natured admissions of his own ignorance and clumsiness. It is all quite symphonic, in fact, but Chekhov's plays have more in them than that.

These plays may move so effortlessly that they may disguise their motion, but they *do* move, and, beneath the richness of characterization and vocal music, they invariably possess a hard backbone of plot and conflict. Whatever incidental details it may contain, *The Sea Gull* has at its core two intense rivalries that are both personal and professional: side by side, the competition between an older and a younger actress, and that of an older and a younger writer; or, more generally, it concerns the conflict of age and youth. The contests in *Uncle Vanya* tend to be more personal, but they are composed of the efforts of the deprived characters who are doomed to live in the country to win some small measure of happiness from the privileged ones who have lived in the city. In *The Cherry Orchard*, the fate of the orchard holds the center of the stage.

In *The Three Sisters*, the question is not a matter of

finding a plot but of finding our way among a variety of actions. Currently, the favorite critical tendency is to regard Natasha's invasion of the Prozorov home and her gradual ousting of the sisters as the main pattern of the play. Of course, Natasha's share of the action is important, but to insist on its being primary is to do an injustice to the rest of what happens. At least two other threads of action have equal importance: Masha's unhappy romance with Vershinin, and Irina's job-hunting, followed by her desperate intention of marrying Tusenbach. All three of the main actions comprise defeats and frustrations for the sisters—Olga is driven out of her home, Masha returns to her insipid husband, and Irina faces a lonely, deprived life. With these defeats, and with the departure of the soldiers, this last rural outpost of urbanity and culture collapses. Attention is fairly evenly divided among the several actions and many characters—the three sisters, Natasha, Andrey, Vershinin, Tusenbach. This was always Chekhov's way, following *Ivanov* and beginning with *The Sea Gull*: he did not write leading roles for starring actors. Instead, he gave his sympathy and understanding to a complex human situation and to a number of characters. It has been said that Chekhov has no villains or that, if he has one, the only one, in all his drama, is Natasha. Chekhov goes to some pains to explain Solyony, to have Tusenbach tell us that it is his self-consciousness that makes him so hostile to the world. And even Natasha is given a sympathetic introduction in the first act, when the sisters laugh at her, criticize her costume, and so thoroughly embarrass her that they drive Andrey to a declaration of love for her. Late in the play, when Natasha criticizes the costume of one of the sisters, she is getting her own back, but, obviously, her vengeance far outstrips the original offense. Still, for all of Natasha's viciousness, the depth and breadth of Chekhov's sympathy are plain.

Chekhov was forever preoccupied with the plight of cultured people in the boorish countryside. The

issue is present in *The Sea Gull*, but isolation in the country is only a temporary annoyance to the characters, except for Sorin. The stultifying effect of rural life is critically important in *Ivanov*, *Uncle Vanya*, *The Three Sisters*, and *The Cherry Orchard*. Perhaps the situation is most poignant when the spotlight falls upon some intellectual, a potentially valuable person, who is being crushed by the dull daily routine of country life—such a person as Ivanov or Vanya. To a person of this kind, the intellectual who can find no useful function in his society, Russians of the nineteenth century applied the term “superfluous man.” Representative examples of this type are the protagonist of Lermontov’s novel *A Hero of Our Time* and Bazarov in Turgenev’s *Fathers and Sons*. Some critics boggle at including Ivanov and Vanya in this category, perhaps because their intellectuality may not be serious enough, but, still, some reflection of the general type is present. Roughly the same problem faces the less intellectual characters of the other plays; we may say also that Trofimov of *The Cherry Orchard* is a superfluous man in the making and that Andrey of *The Three Sisters* has avoided superfluity by abandoning intellectuality. The country makes Madame Ranevsky, of *The Cherry Orchard*, miss Paris all the more keenly, just as it makes the three sisters long for Moscow. In the longing that they memorably express, we evidently find an echo of Chekhov’s personal feeling at the time he wrote the play. His illness compelled him to remain in Yalta when he longed to be far to the North, in Moscow, the center of his literary and theatrical life. But, whether the autobiographical element is there or not in *The Three Sisters*, this general subject, the persistent inquietude of the city man in the country, is shared with the other plays.

A topic more peculiarly limited to *The Three Sisters* and *The Cherry Orchard* is the plight of the aristocracy in decline. The middle class takes over the orchard at last, and the old servant of the aristocratic family con-

siders it an offense that the bourgeoisie has been on the premises at all, even being invited to balls that in past years would have been attended by more distinguished guests. The sisters belong to that most precarious branch of the nobility, the military aristocracy, precarious because their place in the world depended upon their father, the general, whose death precedes the beginning of the play. For some reason the daughters of military aristocracy won the interest of three of the fathers of modern drama: Chekhov, Ibsen (in *Hedda Gabler*), and Strindberg (in *Miss Julie*). We may suppose that the dramatists' continuing interest has some connection with the precarious nature of a military tradition that is bequeathed to a daughter; it is an inheritance, and yet it is not an inheritance. The three sisters have learned the attitude and the values of aristocrats, but they have no secure basis for their way of life. A kind of modified class warfare takes place in the play when a daughter of the local bourgeoisie invades the home they love and forces them out. In the stultifying atmosphere of the provinces, even their personal culture withers and is forgotten.

No one can doubt that Chekhov preferred to tell sad stories, even though he lightened the sadness with comic touches and preferred to call some of his plays comedies. The sadness is never oppressively heavy, and for many reasons. For one thing, Chekhov does have those comic touches, even when the characters involved think themselves at the heights or depths of their personal tragedies: Trofimov, wrapping himself in his dignity, falls downstairs; Arkadina, striving relentlessly to win back the younger man whom she loves, praises his literary style; Vanya, trying to assassinate the chief architect of his misfortunes, suffers the humiliation of missing him at point-blank range; Masha, having said a last good-bye to her lover, must endure her fatuous husband's childish joking with a school-boy's false mustache and beard. And the speculations about a happier future—Astrov's, Vershinin's, Trofi-

mov's—quite apart from the question of how seriously or how politically they are to be taken, do serve to alleviate the gloom, for they remind us that it is still possible to hope. And, most of all, Chekhov's generosity helps, and his humanity, his tender sympathy and understanding, clear as crystal through the veil of his nominal objectivity. Every person is an object of interest and of curiosity and consequently a being of some intrinsic value.

Chekhov's own life story helps to explain that universal sympathy he possessed, for the dramatist rose out of painful beginnings, won literary recognition without expecting it, and was, in the last years of his short life, the resilient but helpless victim of disease. From the beginning he was well aware of the possibilities of human suffering. He was born at Taganrog, in the south of Russia, near the Crimea, January 17, 1860, the son of a grocer and the grandson of a serf. He later wrote of himself as "offering thanks for every mouthful of bread, often whipped, going to school without shoes." This unpleasant family routine ended abruptly in 1876, when his father fled to Moscow to avoid creditors and was followed by the rest of the family, except for Anton, who joined them only in 1879, when he came to Moscow to study medicine. While he was in Taganrog, his mother had written to him that, in the midst of their distress, he kept sending them letters "full of jokes." In Moscow he put his comic talent to practical use by selling humorous sketches and tales to various periodicals, generally using the pseudonym "Antosha Chekhonte." In effect he was the head of the family, which included two older brothers, two younger brothers, and a younger sister.

In 1884 he graduated from medical school and began to practice medicine. Near the end of that year, he had the first symptoms of tuberculosis, but he concealed the true nature of his malady from others and, perhaps to some degree, even from himself. By this time he was being urged to take his writing more seri-

ously and to abandon his pen names. His second book of stories, *Motley Tales* (1886), bore his real name; in the same year he began to write for a highly regarded but reactionary St. Petersburg daily, *New Times*, edited by A. V. Suvorin, who became an intimate friend. The award of the Pushkin Prize in 1888 left no doubt of his standing as a serious writer.

Two of his plays were produced in 1889—*Ivanov*, which was a success, and *The Wood Demon*, a failure. He had written plays before, including three works composed in Taganrog when he was eighteen. The earliest surviving play dates from 1881; it is the nameless work that is now known by such titles as *Platonov* and *Don Juan in the Russian Manner*. *Ivanov* was first staged in 1887, when it failed. All of these early dramas are crowded with incident, but they are not yet written in that effortless, objective, symphonic style that makes sense out of seeming chaos in Chekhov's later plays. In these early years Chekhov began to write his one-act farces, such works as *The Bear* and *The Proposal*, which have held the stage to this day.

1890 marked a watershed in Chekhov's life. To the surprise of his friends, he undertook a long journey to Sakhalin Island, off the coast of Siberia, with the intention of studying the lives of convicts there. After his return, his writing became more sober, and he became more frankly critical of social injustice. While he did not ally himself with any political faction, he forsook his past inclination to Tolstoyan passivity, and he began to write for a liberal periodical, *Russian Thought* (which published his account of Sakhalin). By 1892 he was sufficiently prosperous to buy a small estate at Melikhovo, not far from Moscow. He continued the practice of medicine but, he said, only because it gave him material for his writing.

He was still living at Melikhovo when he wrote the first of his four great plays, *The Sea Gull*, which was first acted in 1896 at St. Petersburg, with the brilliant young actress Vera Kommissarzhevskaya in the role of

Nina. It was a failure, and Chekhov resolved never to "give another play to the theater." The next year the signs of his illness became unmistakable, and he traveled in Western Europe for his health. He happened to be in France when Emile Zola was enlisting support for Captain Alfred Dreyfus, who had falsely been accused of treason; he came to believe in Dreyfus' innocence, and that conviction subsequently brought about his final break with Suvorin. His illness made it impossible for him to stay in the north of Russia, and so, on his return home, he changed his residence to Yalta, in the Crimea.

The management of a new theatrical organization, the Moscow Art Theater, asked permission to revive *The Sea Gull*; they included a literary friend of long standing, Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko, and an actor-director whose qualities Chekhov did not at first appreciate, Konstantin Stanislavsky. The young company suffered so many early failures that its very life depended upon the success of *The Sea Gull*, which opened December 17, 1898. It had the advantage of a sympathetic production, with Stanislavsky playing Trigorin, and it succeeded. Chekhov's link with his company became even stronger when, soon afterward, he became attached to one of its actresses, Olga Knipper, who had played Arkadina. Heartened by the encouragement and the example of the Moscow Art Theater, he rewrote *The Wood Demon* as *Uncle Vanya*. In 1899, with Stanislavsky playing Astrov and Olga Knipper as Elena, it marked another triumph for both the dramatist and the actors. The dramatist himself saw the two productions only in the following year, when the company visited the Crimea.

Chekhov next applied himself to writing *The Three Sisters*, an extremely complex play that apparently cost him more effort than the others. Perhaps it was its complexity that caused it to be notably less well received at its premiere in 1901 than the previous two plays. Stanislavsky played Vershinin, and Olga Knipper was Masha. Some years later a production directed

by Nemirovich-Danchenko was considered by many to have caught more of the nuances of this intricate drama.

After the opening, Chekhov married Olga Knipper on May 25, 1901. In the face of mounting illness and a political quarrel over Maxim Gorky's dismissal from the Academy of Sciences—once more Chekhov had taken a liberal position—he began to write *The Cherry Orchard*, which was an overwhelming success at the Moscow Art Theater at the beginning of 1904, with Stanislavsky as Gaev and Olga Knipper as Madame Ranevsky. Traveling abroad for his health, Chekhov died of tuberculosis in Badenweiler, Germany, July 2, 1904.

Henry Popkin

# *The Three Sisters*

*By Anton Chekhov*

*Translated by Tyrone Guthrie and Leonid Kipnis*

## LIST OF CHARACTERS

**Prozorov, Andrey Sergeievich**

**Natalia Ivanovna (Natasha),** his fiancée, later his wife

**Olga**

**Masha** } his sisters

**Irina**

**Kulygin, Fyodor Ilich,** Teacher at high school, husband of Masha

**Vershinin, Alexander Ignatievich,** Colonel, Battery Commander

**Tusenbach, Nicolai Lvovich,** Baron, First Lieutenant

**Solyony, Vasily Vasilievich,** Captain

**Chebutykin, Ivan Romanovych,** Military Doctor

**Fedotik, Aleksei Petrovych,** Second Lieutenant

**Rode, Vladimir Karlovych,** Second Lieutenant

**Ferapont,** Doorman of the City Council (old man)

**Anfisa (Nyanya),** an old woman of 80

*Action takes place in the capital city of a province of Russia.*

## ACT ONE

*Home of PROZOROV. A drawing room with columns, dining room beyond. Midday; outside it is light and sunny. In the dining room the table is being laid for lunch.*

OLGA, in the blue uniform of a girls' high school teacher, is correcting exercise books, standing and moving about. MASHA, in black, with a hat on her knees, sits reading. IRINA, in white, stands lost in thought.

**Olga.**

Exactly a year since Father died—the fifth of May, your birthday, Irina. It was very cold, snowing. I didn't think I could live through it; you had fainted away. But now—just a year later—we can look back at it quite calmly. You are in a white dress—radiant. (*Clock strikes twelve.*) The clock struck then, too. I remember when they carried Father out the band was playing, and at the cemetery they fired a volley. He was a general; he commanded a brigade, but there were very few people there. It was raining, though. Heavy rain and snow.

**Irina.**

Don't let's think of it.

(BARON TUSENBACH, CHEBUTYKIN and SOLYONY enter the dining room.)

**Olga.**

Today is warm. We can have the windows open, but the birch trees are not even in bud yet. Father got his brigade and left Moscow with us eleven years ago; and I remember as clearly as anything that, in Moscow, in the beginning of May, just at this time, it was warm and sunny and everything was bursting into flower. Eleven years have gone by but I remember everything as if we'd only left there yesterday. Oh, my goodness! I woke up this morning, the sun was blazing. I could feel that spring was here. And I did so long to be home again.

**Chebutykin.**

You've gone out of your mind.

**Tusenbach.**

It's all nonsense, of course.

(MASHA, engrossed in her book, quietly humming.)

**Olga.**

Masha. Don't hum. How can you! (*Pause.*) School all day, private lessons all evening, so I have headaches all the time. I'm beginning to feel quite old. Shall I tell you something? Every single day of the four years at the high school, minute by minute, I have felt my strength and my youth draining away. And only one dream kept growing stronger, and stronger.

**Irina.**

To go to Moscow! To sell the house, make an end of everything here, and . . . Moscow!

**Olga.**

Yes! Moscow. As soon as possible.

(CHEBUTYKIN and TUSENBACH laugh.)

**Irina.**

Brother will be a professor most likely, so he won't be staying here. The one thing in the way is poor Masha.

**Olga.**

Masha will spend the whole summer in Moscow every year.

(MASHA whistles.)

**Irina.**

It will all be arranged, if God wills. (*Looking out of the window.*) What a lovely day! I don't know why I'm so happy. This morning when I remembered it was my birthday I suddenly felt so happy—I remembered when I was little and mama was still alive. Such wonderful feelings—such feelings.

**Olga.**

You look lovely today—you look really beautiful. So does Masha. Andrey would be quite handsome if he hadn't got so plump—it's not becoming. As for me; I have got older and a lot thinner. It must be because I get so cross with the girls in school. (*Continuing.*) But today I'm free. I'm at home. No headache. I feel younger than yesterday. I'm only twenty-eight . . . Everything's for the best, everything comes from God, but I can't help thinking that it would be better still if I were married and stayed at home all day. I'd have loved my husband.

**Tusenbach.**

(*To SOLYONY.*) You talk nonsense, you are a bore. (*Coming into drawing room.*) I forgot to say, Colonel Vershinin, our new battery commander, is coming to see you today. (*He sits down at the piano.*)

**Olga.**

Good. We'll be glad to see him.

**Irina.**

Is he old?

**Tusenbach.**

Not really. Forty or forty-five at most. (*Plays softly.*) Seems to be a nice man. Certainly no fool. Talks a bit much.

**Irina.**

An interesting man?

**Tusenbach.**

Oh, yes, quite; only there is a wife, mother-in-law, and two girls. What's more, this is his second marriage. Everywhere he goes he keeps saying he has a wife and two girls. He'll say the same here. You'll see. His

wife isn't quite normal. Hair in long braids, looking like a child, jabbars away in a high-faluting style—philosophy and that—now and again tries to commit suicide to spite her husband apparently. I'd have left her long ago, but he puts up with it—not, however, without letting everyone know.

**Solyony.**

(*Entering with CHEBUTYKIN.*) With one hand I can lift fifty pounds; but with both hands I can lift 150 or even 175 pounds. This leads me to the conclusion that two men aren't just twice as strong as one, but three times and even more.

**Chebutykin.**

(*Reading newspaper as he walks.*) For falling hair . . . two ounces of naphthalene to half a bottle of alcohol . . . dissolve and use daily. (*Writes in a notebook.*) This I must write down. (*To SOLYONY.*) So let me tell you, you put a cork into the bottle, into the cork you insert a glass tube, then you take a pinch of the simplest, most ordinary crystals . . .

**Irina.**

Doctor, darling Doctor . . .

**Chebutykin.**

What is it, my own little sweetheart?

**Irina.**

Tell me, why am I so happy today? As if I were at the sea with an endless blue sky and great white birds sailing above me. Why is this? Why?

**Chebutykin.**

(*Holding her hands.*) You are my white bird.

**Irina.**

When I woke this morning, got up and washed my face, everything in this world suddenly seemed clear to me. I know how one has to live. Doctor, darling, I know everything. People must work in the sweat of their brow—whoever they may be. And only in *this* is the meaning and the goal of their existence, their happiness, their fulfillment. How good to be a workman who gets up at daybreak, breaks stones in

the street; or a shepherd; or a teacher who teaches children; or an engine driver. My goodness, not just human beings—it's better to be an ox, even an ordinary horse, so long as you work. Ever so much better than being a young lady who gets up at noon, has her coffee in bed, and then spends two hours getting dressed—oh, it's frightful! On a hot day sometimes you feel so thirsty—well, that's the way I long to work. (*Continuing.*) And if I won't get up early and go out to work, don't call me your friend.

**Chebutykin.**

Oh, I won't, I won't.

**Olga.**

Father trained us to get up at seven in the morning. But now Irina wakes at seven and lies in bed until nine at least—thinking of goodness knows what—looking so solemn. (*Laughter.*)

**Irina.**

You think of me as a little girl so it's odd when I look solemn. But I'm twenty today.

**Tusenbach.**

The longing for work, oh, my God, how I understand that. I've never done a stroke of work in my life. I was born in Petersburg, cold, idle Petersburg, into a family which knew neither work nor the need to work. When I came home from military school, I remember, there was a footman to pull off my boots. I would behave like a spoiled brat, but my mother worshiped me and was astonished if other people didn't. I was sheltered from work of every kind. But it isn't possible to be completely sheltered—No, it's not possible. The time has come; there is something enormous coming toward us, a tremendous storm is getting ready to break; it's coming; it's already near, and soon the laziness, the callous unconcern, the prejudice against work and all the rotten boredom will be swept away out of our society. I shall work; and in no more than twenty-five or thirty years everybody will be working. Everyone.

30 / Act I

**Chebutykin.**

I won't be working.

**Tusenbach.**

You don't count.

**Solyony.**

In twenty-five years you won't be on this earth, thank God! In two years or three you will die of apoplexy or a stroke or I may lose my temper and put a bullet into your skull, my angel. (*Sprinkles his hands with scent.*)

**Chebutykin.**

(*Laughs.*) As a matter of actual fact, I never did a single thing. After University I never lifted a finger. I didn't even read a single book! I read nothing but newspapers. (*Takes another newspaper from pocket.*) Look . . . I know from the newspaper that there was, let's say, a writer called Dobroluboff, but what he wrote—God knows, I don't. (*Knocking.*) Who's there? . . . Downstairs is calling me. Someone to see me. (*Shouts.*) Coming! Wait! (*Exit, combing his beard.*)

**Irina.**

He's got something up his sleeve.

**Tusenbach.**

Know what? You can expect a present.

**Irina.**

Oh, how *awful*!

**Olga.**

Yes, it's frightful. He always puts his old foot in it.

**Masha.**

“By the curved shore a green oak stands  
A golden chain hangs on that tree—  
And on that chain a wise tomcat  
Circles, and circles—endlessly.”

**Olga.**

You are not very cheerful today, Masha.

(*MASHA puts on her hat.*)

**Olga.**

Where are you going?

**Masha.**

Home.

**Irina.**

How very odd.

**Tusenbach.**

Leaving a birthday party!

**Masha.**

What of it? I'll be back this evening. Good-bye, my sweet. Once again—be happy. In the old days, when father was alive, when we had a birthday party, thirty or forty officers would be there. Noisy—yes. But today—hardly a man in sight, and quiet as the tomb . . . I am off . . . pay no attention. I am a bit depressed today. (*Laughing.*) Till later, good-bye, my darling. I'll be off.

**Irina.**

Where?

**Masha.**

Somewhere. Anywhere.

**Irina.**

Oh really!

**Olga.**

(*Through tears.*) I understand, Masha.

**Solyony.**

If a man talks philosophy, it will be philosophistica or some kind of sophistica; but if a woman talks philosophy or, God help us, two women, then do you know what it becomes? (*Snaps his fingers.*) Chit. Chit. Chit.

**Masha.**

What does all that mean, you perfectly terrible person?

**Solyony.**

Not a thing. Before he was fully aware he was crushed in the arms of a bear.

**Masha.**

(*To OLGA, severely.*) Shut up!

(*Enter ANFISA followed by FERAPONT with a chicken pie.*)

**Anfisa.**

In here, sweetheart, come in, your boots are clean. (*To IRINA.*) From the city council, from Michail Ivanovich Protopopov a chicken pie. . . . (*Indicates the pie.*) Over there!

**Irina.**

Thanks. Thank him. (*Takes the pie.*)

**Ferapont.**

What?

**Irina.**

(*Louder.*) Thank him.

**Olga.**

Nyanya, give him some pie. Run along, Ferapont.

They'll give you some pie.

**Ferapont.**

What?

**Anfisa.**

Come along, father dear—come along. (*Exit ANFISA and FERAPONT.*)

**Masha.**

I don't care for Protopopov, this Michail Potopich or Ivanovich. He shouldn't be invited.

**Irina.**

I didn't invite him.

**Masha.**

Good.

(*Enter CHEBUTYKIN followed by orderly with a silver samovar: a hum of surprise and displeasure.*)

**Olga.**

(*Covering her face with her hands.*) A samovar! How frightful! (*Goes to table in dining room.*)

**Irina.**

Doctor, dear, what have you done!

**Tusenbach.**

(*Laughing.*) What did I tell you!

**Masha.**

Doctor, you ought to be ashamed of yourself.

**Chebutykin.**

My dearest children, you are my only darlings. You are the dearest things I have in the world. I am almost sixty: I'm old. I'm lonely. A good for nothing old creature. The only good thing about me is my love for you. And if it weren't for you, I'd have died long ago. (*To IRINA.*) My dear, dear little girl! I've known you since the day you were born . . . I have carried you in my arms . . . I loved your dear mama . . .

**Irina.**

But why such expensive presents?

**Chebutykin.**

(*Through tears.*) Expensive presents . . . for heaven's sake . . . ! (*To orderly.*) Take the samovar in there. (*Mockingly.*) Expensive presents . . . (*Orderly takes samovar into the dining room.*)

**Anfisa.**

(*Coming into the drawing room.*) Children—a colonel, we don't know him. He's taken off his coat already, girls, he's coming in here, Irina.

**Tusenbach.**

Vershinin probably.

**Anfisa.**

You must be nice and polite, my baby. (*At the door.*) Oh, dear, it's lunchtime already. . . .

(*Enter VERSHININ. TUSENBACH clicking heels.*)

**Tusenbach.**

This is Colonel Vershinin.

**Vershinin.**

(*To MASHA and IRINA.*) I am pleased to meet you after so long.

**Irina.**

How do you do.

**Vershinin.**

My goodness, how you have grown up!

**Irina.**

Do sit down. We are delighted to see you.

**Vershinin.**

(*Gaily.*) Well, this is nice—it really is. But there were three sisters, I remember—three little girls. Your faces I can't remember anymore—just that your father, Colonel Prozorov, had three little girls, that I remember very well. I saw them with my own eyes. How time flies.

**Masha.**

Yes.

**Vershinin.**

Oh yes, time flies.

**Tusenbach.**

Colonel Vershinin comes from Moscow.

**Irina.**

From Moscow? You are from Moscow?

## 34 / Act I

**Vershinin.**

Yes, your late father commanded a battery there and I was an officer in the same brigade!

**Irina.**

*(Going.)* Olga, Olga.

**Vershinin.**

*(To MASHA.)* Now your face—it seems to me I do sort of remember it.

**Masha.**

I don't remember yours.

**Irina.**

*(Shouts.)* Olga! Olga! *(Shouting into the dining room.)* Olga, come.

*(OLGA comes from the dining room into the drawing room.)*

**Irina.**

You'll never guess, Colonel Vershinin is from Moscow!

**Vershinin.**

Why, you are Olga, the eldest . . . and you, Maria . . . and you, Irina, the youngest.

**Olga.**

Are you from Moscow?

**Vershinin.**

Yes, I was a student in Moscow. I began my service in Moscow. I served there a long time and now at last I have been given a battery—transferred here, as you see. Actually, I can't quite remember you. All I remember is that you were three sisters. I have a perfectly clear remembrance of your father. If I close my eyes, I can see him standing right there. I used to visit you in Moscow.

**Olga.**

I thought I could remember everyone—but now suddenly . . .

**Irina.**

You are from Moscow . . . how extraordinary!

**Olga.**

We are going there, you know.

**Irina.**

We expect to be there this autumn. It's our native

city—we were born there . . . in old Basmana Street.  
(*Both laugh delightedly.*)

**Masha.**

What a surprise to see someone from our own city.  
(*Excitedly.*) Now I remember. Olga, do you remember, at home they used to call him Major Susceptible. You were a Lieutenant then, in love, and for some reason or other everyone made fun of you by calling you Major Susceptible.

**Vershinin.**

(*Laughs.*) That's right. Major Susceptible. Quite right.

**Masha.**

You had a mustache then, but, oh, how much older you are now . . . (*Moved.*) How *much* older.

**Vershinin.**

Yes; when you used to call me Major Susceptible, I was still young: I was in love. But it's different now.

**Olga.**

But you don't look old a bit. You are older but still not old.

**Vershinin.**

I'm in my forty-third year. Have you been away from Moscow long?

**Irina.**

Eleven years. But why are you crying, Masha?  
(*Through tears.*) I shall cry, too.

**Masha.**

It's nothing. What street in Moscow did you live on?

**Vershinin.**

On old Basmana.

**Olga.**

But so did we.

**Vershinin.**

At one time I lived on Nemetzkaia. From there I used to walk to the barracks. I used to cross over an old sinister-looking bridge and under the bridge you could hear the water running. Rather makes your heart sink, when you are lonely. (*Pause.*) But here, how wide the river is, how noble. A beautiful river.

**Olga.**

Yes, but cold. It's cold here. And mosquitoes.

**Vershinin.**

Oh really! It's so healthy here. A really fine Russian climate—forests, river, and birch trees, too. Dear, modest birches! They are my favorite trees. This is a good place to live. It's an odd thing, though, that the railroad station is nearly twenty miles away. And nobody knows why.

**Solyony.**

I know why. (*Everyone looks at him.*) It's because if the station were near, it wouldn't be so far away; but if it's far away, it means it isn't near. (*Everyone is at a loss.*)

**Tusenbach.**

Ha-ha-ha!

**Olga.**

Do you know, I remember you too, now. Yes, I do.

**Vershinin.**

I knew your mother.

**Chebutykin.**

A wonderful woman—God rest her soul!

**Irina.**

Mama is buried in Moscow.

**Masha.**

(*In thought.*) Just think! I'm beginning to forget what she looked like. People won't remember us either. They'll forget.

**Vershinin.**

Yes, they'll forget. Such is life; that's all there is to it. What seems to us so serious, so important, so significant—the time will come—it'll all seem unimportant and be forgotten. (*Pause.*) Interesting; how we simply cannot know what will be thought of with reverence or respect, or what will seem trivial and absurd. Isn't it the case that in their own time the discoveries of Copernicus, or Columbus if you like, seemed superfluous and ridiculous; whereas, the empty scribblings of some crank or other seemed to be the ultimate truth? And it can happen that our present life, with which we are quite content, will at some future time seem weird, uncomfortable, unenlightened, squalid, perhaps even wicked.

**Tusenbach.**

Who knows? Perhaps they will remember our present time with reverence and respect. We don't have torture or executions anymore; nobody overruns our country, and yet, with all this, what a lot of misery there is.

**Solyony.**

*(In falsetto.)* Took! Took! Took! No food for our Baron, just stuff him with philosophy.

**Tusenbach.**

My dear Solyony, do leave me alone. *(He moves to another seat.)* You are quite a bore.

**Solyony.**

Took! Took! Took!

**Tusenbach.**

*(To VERSHININ.)* In spite of all the misery we see all around us—and how much of it there is—some moral improvement has taken place in our society.

**Vershinin.**

Yes, quite.

**Tusenbach.**

Yes.

**Chebutykin.**

Baron, just now you said, our time will be thought of as a great one. But people are small—look how small I am. Nobody *(Standing up.)* would call me great except to flatter me.

*(Offstage a violin is heard.)*

**Masha.**

That's Andrey playing—our brother.

**Irina.**

He's our intellectual. He'll be a professor probably. Papa was a military man, but his son has chosen the life of a scholar.

**Masha.**

It was Father's wish.

**Olga.**

We were teasing him today. He's a little bit in love, we think.

Irina.

With one of the locals. She'll turn up today more likely than not.

Masha.

My dear, her clothes! Not just ugly or out of date—they're just pathetic. Some sort of outrageous yellow skirt, with all sorts of cheap fringe on it, and a red blouse, and her cheeks scrubbed to such an extent! Audrey can't be in love. I won't allow it—after all, he has some taste; he's just simply teasing us, making fools of us. Yesterday I heard she's going to marry Protopopov, the chairman of our city council. Good thing, too. (*Shouting offstage.*) Andrey, come here just for a moment.

(*Enter ANDREY.*)

Olga.

My brother—Andrey Sergeievich.

Vershinin.

Vershinin.

Andrey.

Prozorov. (*Mops his face.*) You're the new battery commander?

Olga.

Imagine, the Colonel is from Moscow.

Andrey.

Really? Congratulations! You'll get no peace now from my sisters.

Vershinin.

Your sisters will have had enough of me already.

Irina.

Look at the frame Andrey gave me today for my birthday. (*Shows frame.*) Made it himself.

Vershinin.

(*Looking at it.*) Really . . . ! It's . . . Yes.

Irina.

And that frame too, over the piano. He made that too.

Andrey.

(*Makes a movement of dismissal.*)

Olga.

He's our intellectual.

Masha.

He plays the violin, too.

**Olga.**

And he carves all sorts of things with his fretsaw. He's good at everything, actually. Andrey—don't go away! That's how it always is—he's always trying to slip away. Come here!

(MASHA and IRINA take him by the arms and laughingly bring him back.)

**Masha.**

Come along.

**Andrey.**

Do leave me alone.

**Masha.**

Don't be a silly! Now the Colonel used to be called Major Susceptible and he didn't mind a bit.

**Vershinin.**

No, not a bit.

**Masha.**

And guess what! You're the Susceptible Fiddler.

**Irina.**

Or Professor Susceptible.

**Olga.**

He's in love—Andrey's in love.

**Irina.**

(*Applauding.*) Bravo! Bravo! Encore! Andrey's in love.

**Chebutykin.**

(*Approaches ANDREY from behind, takes him around the waist.*) "Man is made for love alone."

(*Laughs uproariously, all the time clutching newspaper.*)

**Andrey.**

Please. Please. That's enough. (*Mops his face again.*) I didn't sleep a wink all night and now I'm not myself, as they say. I read till four o'clock, then I lay down, but it was no good. I thought of this and that. Then at the very crack of dawn, the sun comes banging into my bedroom. This summer while I'm here, I want to translate a book from the English.

**Vershinin.**

You read English?

**Andrey.**

Yes. My father—God bless him—had us educated

within an inch of our lives. It's ridiculous and absurd, I admit, but do you know that after his death I began to put on weight.

**Vershinin.**

Really.

**Andrey.**

And now a year after, I've become quite heavy.

**Vershinin.**

Remarkable.

**Andrey.**

It's as if my body had been released from the pressure he imposed. Thanks to Father, my sisters and I know French, German and English, and Irina knows Italian as well. But at what a cost!

**Masha.**

In this town to know three languages is an unnecessary luxury. Not even a luxury—it's sort of an unnecessary appendage, like a sixth finger. We'd be better off without it.

**Vershinin.**

Well, there you are! (*Laughs.*) You know a lot of things which are unnecessary. It seems to me that there isn't, that there can't be, such a dull and deadly town as to have no use for an intelligent and educated person. This town has a population of a hundred thousand. And it certainly is a coarse and primitive town. Let's say that out of that hundred thousand there are only three people of your sort. It's perfectly obvious that you won't be able to overcome the mass of surrounding darkness. In your lifetime you'll have to give ground, and little by little be lost in the mob. Life will silence you. But still, you won't disappear; your influence will still be felt. People of your sort will come after you, six perhaps, then twelve, and so on, till finally people of your sort will become the majority. In two hundred or three hundred years, life on earth will be unimaginably beautiful—overpoweringly. Mankind *must* have such a life. And if it's still not here, mankind must have faith in its coming. Must wait for it, dream of it, prepare for it;

and for this reason he must know and feel more than his grandfather and father have known and felt. (*He laughs.*) And here you are complaining that you know too much.

**Masha.**

(*Takes off her hat.*) I'm staying for lunch.

**Irina.**

(*With a sigh.*) All that should be written down, actually.

(*ANDREY is not present. He left unnoticed.*)

**Tusenbach.**

Sir, you say that after many years, life on earth will be beautiful and wonderful. It's true. But to have a share in it—even in a small way—one must start preparing for it now. One must work.

**Vershinin.**

(*Standing up.*) Yes. What a lot of flowers you have.

(*Looks around.*) It's all charming. I'm quite envious.

All my life I've been traveling about in places with a couple of chairs, a single couch, and a stove which smokes. What's been missing in my life were flowers like this. (*Rubbing his hands.*) Oh, well, what of it.

**Tusenbach.**

Yes, one must work. I know what you're thinking: The German's getting sentimental. But I'm Russian—Word of honor! I don't even speak German. My father—he's Orthodox. (*Pause.*)

**Vershinin.**

(*Walking about.*) I often think: Suppose we could begin life all over again, but consciously. If the life which we've already lived were just a rough sketch, the second would be the finished drawing! Then each of us, I think, would try first of all not to repeat himself, and would at least create a different environment, would make a place like this for himself, full of flowers and sunshine . . . I have a wife, two girls; my wife's not in the best of health either and so on and so on. And if I could begin my life over again, I wouldn't get married . . . no . . . no!

(Enter KULYGIN in full-dress school uniform.)

**Kulygin.**

(*Going to IRINA.*) My dear sister-in-law, allow me to congratulate you on your birthday and to wish you sincerely from the bottom of my heart everything which one can wish for a young girl of your age. Next, let me present you with this book. (*Gives book.*) It is the history of our high school for the last fifty years—written by yours truly. Not an important book. I just wrote it in my leisure hours. All the same you should read it. Doctor, Baron. A good afternoon to you. (*To VERSHININ.*) Sir, my name is Kulygin. Teacher at the local high school; member of the Educational Advisory Board. (*To IRINA.*) In this book you will find the name of every single graduate from the high school during the whole of those fifty years. *Feci quod potui, faciant meliora potentes.* (*Kisses MASHA.*)

**Irina.**

But you gave me a copy of this at Easter.

**Kulygin.**

(*Laughing.*) It's not possible! Very well, then, give it back, or better still give it to the Colonel. You'll read it one day—if only out of boredom.

**Vershinin.**

Thank you. (*About to leave.*) Well, I'm very happy to have met you all. . . .

**Olga.**

Are you leaving? Oh, no.

**Irina.**

Do stay for lunch—please.

**Olga.**

Yes, do.

**Vershinin.**

(*Bows.*) I seem to have chanced on a birthday. Forgive me. I didn't know. I didn't congratulate you. (*Goes with OLGA into drawing room.*)

**Olga.**

You must simply stay for lunch.

**Kulygin.**

Today is Sunday, gentlemen, the day of rest; so let's

rest. Let's be jolly, each according to his age and station. The rugs ought to be taken up for the summer and stored until winter . . . Persian powder or naphthalene . . . The Romans were healthy because they knew how to work and also how to play, they had *mens sana in corpore sano*, their life flowed in a positive direction. Our Headmaster says: The most important thing in any life, he says, is its direction . . . if anything loses its direction, that's the end—and in our ordinary day-to-day life, the same thing holds good. (*Takes MASHA round the waist and laughs.*) Masha loves me. My wife loves me. And the curtains too—with the rugs . . . I feel so cheerful today—in the best of spirits. Oh, Masha, four o'clock today at the Headmaster's. A picnic for the teachers and their families.

**Masha.**

I won't go.

**Kulygin.**

(*Disappointed.*) Masha dear, why not?

**Masha.**

Later. (*Vexed.*) Oh, very well. I'll go. Only do leave me alone. (*She moves away.*)

**Kulygin.**

After that we shall spend the entire evening at the Headmaster's. Although he's not in the best of health, that man makes a particular point of being sociable—a wonderful, splendid person really. A magnificent man. Yesterday after the Teachers' Conference, do you know what he said to me—"Kulygin," he said, "I'm tired, tired." (*Looks at clock and then at his watch.*) Your clock is seven minutes fast. "Yes," he said, "tired."

(*Behind the scene a violin is heard.*)

**Olga.**

Gentlemen, please come to lunch. Chicken pie.

**Kulygin.**

Ah, my dear Olga—my dear girl, allow me. (*Takes piano stool.*) Yesterday I was at work from early morning till eleven at night. I was tired. But today, I feel happy. (*Goes to the dining room.*) My dear.

**Chebutykin.**

*(Puts newspaper in his pocket; combs his beard.)*  
Chicken pie. Wonderful.

**Masha.**

*(To CHEBUTYKIN, severely.)* Now, listen, Doctor, no drinking today. Do you hear? It's bad for you.

**Chebutykin.**

Ach! That's all a thing of the past. I've been off it for two years. *(Impatiently.)* All the same.

**Masha.**

Very likely but don't you dare to drink. Don't dare. *(Vexed but so that KULYGIN doesn't hear.)* Again—damn it—another ghastly, boring evening at the Headmaster's.

**Tusenbach.**

If I were you, I wouldn't go . . . quite simple.

**Chebutykin.**

No, don't go, my sweetheart.

**Masha.**

Yes, don't go . . . what a damnable, intolerable life. *(Goes to dining room followed by CHEBUTYKIN who makes noises expressive of resignation and encouragement.)*

**Solyony.**

Took! Took! Took!

**Tusenbach.**

That's enough. Stop it.

**Solyony.**

Took! Took! Took! *(Exit to dining room.)*

**Kulygin.**

*(Gaily.)* Your health, Colonel; I'm a pedagogue and I'm one of the family here—Masha's husband . . . she's a dear, good girl.

**Vershinin.**

I'll take some vodka . . . *(Drinks.)* Your health. *(To OLGA.)* It's so good to be here with you all.

*(In the drawing room only IRINA and TUSENBACH are left.)*

**Irina.**

Masha is rather depressed today. She married when she was eighteen, when he seemed to her to be the

most brilliant of men. But not any longer. He's the kindest but not the most brilliant.

**Olga.**

(*Irritated.*) Andrey, for the last time, will you come to lunch!

**Andrey.**

(*Offstage.*) Coming! (*Enters and goes to the dining room.*)

**Tusenbach.**

What are you thinking about?

**Irina.**

Nothing. I don't like that Solyony of yours. I'm afraid of him. He talks nothing but nonsense.

**Tusenbach.**

He's a strange fellow. I'm sorry for him and irritated by him. But mostly sorry for him. I suppose he's shy. When we're alone, he's sometimes quite clever and nice, but when people are there, he's coarse, a bully. Don't go, let the others get settled, stay with me. What are you thinking about? (*Pause.*) You are twenty. I'm not thirty yet. How many years there are ahead of us, a long, long, procession of days full of my love for you.

**Irina.**

Nicolai—don't talk about love.

**Tusenbach.**

(*Paying no attention.*) I have a passionate thirst for life, for struggle, for work; and this thirst and my love for you grow together in my heart, Irina; and somehow in the same way, because *you* are so wonderful—*life* seems to me to be wonderful! What are you thinking about?

**Irina.**

You say life is wonderful. Yes. But what if it only seems so? For us three sisters life hasn't been very wonderful yet. We've been choked like a plant choked by weeds . . . I'm crying . . . so stupid. (*She dries her eyes and smiles.*) One must work. Work. The reason we are not more cheerful, that we look on the dark side of things, is that we've never known what it is to work. We came of people who despised work.

(Enter NATASHA in a pink dress with a green sash.)

**Natasha.**

They're sitting down to lunch already. I'm late. (*Looks in the glass and fusses with her dress.*) I think my hair's all right. (*Notices IRINA.*) My dear, congratulations on your birthday! (*Gives her an effusive kiss.*) And you have such a lot of guests. I feel quite self-conscious . . . How are you, Baron?

**Olga.**

(*Enters from dining room.*) Why, here is Natasha. How are you, my dear? (*They kiss.*)

**Natasha.**

Congratulations on the birthday. You've such a big party. I feel terribly shy.

**Olga.**

Absurd. There is no one but ourselves. (*Sotto voce. Alarmed.*) You are wearing a green sash. My dear, it won't do.

**Natasha.**

Is green unlucky?

**Olga.**

No. It's just that it doesn't match. It's odd. . . .

**Natasha.**

(*Nearly crying.*) Really. But this isn't really green. It's a sort of no-color.

(*Follows OLGA to the dining room where lunch is beginning; there is no one left in the drawing room.*)

**Kulygin.**

(*Lifting his glass.*) Irina, here is to a handsome husband. It's time you got married.

**Chebutykin.**

Natalia Ivanovna, we must find one for you too.

**Kulygin.**

Natalia Ivanovna already has a beau to her string.

**Masha.**

(*Striking her fork on the plate.*) I'll have a glass. A toast. Here's to our empty life—to hell with it.

**Kulygin.**

Behave yourself! A bad mark for conduct!

**Vershinin.**

What nice vodka. What is it made with?

**Solyony.**

With cockroaches.

**Irina.**

Ugh! How revolting!

**Olga.**

Tonight we are going to have roast turkey for dinner and apple cake for dessert. Thank God, I've got the whole day at home and tonight as well. Gentlemen, do come tonight.

**Vershinin.**

May I come, too?

**Irina.**

But of course.

**Natasha.**

They are so informal here.

**Chebutykin.**

"Man is made for love alone." (*Laughs.*)

**Andrey.**

(*Crossly.*) Ah, shut up! Enough is enough.

(*FEDOTIK and RODE come into the drawing room with a big basket of flowers.*)

**Fedotik.**

They are at the table already.

**Rode.**

(*Loudly.*) At the table, at lunch? So they are.

**Fedotik.**

(*Photographing RODE with the flowers.*) Hold it! One! Again! Two! All over!

(*They both carry the basket into the dining room where they are received uproariously.*)

**Rode.**

(*Loudly.*) Congratulations! Here's wishing you everything you wish for yourself! What charming weather! Just sublime! I've been out walking all morning with a group of students. I'm giving gymnastic lessons in the high school.

**Fedotik.**

(*Takes a photograph.*) Group please. (*Group around IRINA, all on floor beside her.*) All right, Miss Irina, you can move now. You look charming today. (*Takes*

*a humming top out of his pocket.*) By the way, I brought you this . . .

**Irina.**

Oh, a humming top! How sweet.

**Masha.**

"By the curved shore a green oak stands  
A golden chain hangs on that tree—  
And on that chain a wise tomcat  
Circles, and circles—endlessly."

*(Emotionally.)* Why do I say that? That phrase has been haunting me since morning.

**Kulygin.**

We're thirteen at the table.

**Rode.**

*(Loudly.)* Gentlemen, don't tell me you are *really* superstitious? *(Everyone laughs.)*

**Kulygin.**

If there are thirteen at the table, it means we have lovebirds in our midst. Not you, Doctor, by any chance?

*(Laughter.)*

**Chebutykin.**

I am an old sinner but why is Natalia Ivanovna so embarrassed? Tell me that.

*(Loud laughter. NATASHA runs into drawing room. ANDREY follows.)*

**Andrey.**

Please, pay no attention. Wait . . . don't run away, please.

**Natasha.**

I am so embarrassed . . . I don't know what's the matter with me. . . . They are making a fool of me. I know it was rude to leave the table—but I can't—I can't. . . .  
*(Puts her hands over her face.)*

**Andrey.**

My dear, please, *please* don't be upset. I assure you it's only in fun. They don't mean to be unkind. My dear, my sweet, they are dear, goodhearted people;

they love me and you; do come over here to the window. They can't see us here. (*Looks around.*)

**Natasha.**

I am not used to big parties.

**Andrey.**

Ah, youth . . . wonderful, marvelous youth. My darling, adorable girl, don't be upset! Believe me, believe me . . . I feel ecstatically happy. Ah, they can't see, they can't. Why do I love you? When did I fall in love with you? Oh, I don't understand a single thing. My dear, my darling, my sweet innocent, be my wife! I love you, I love you—I've never loved anyone before.

FEDOTIK and RODE come in, see the kissing pair, stop in astonishment.)

CURTAIN



## ACT TWO

*Same scene as Act One. Eight in the evening. Off-stage in the street the sound of a harmonica is faintly heard. It is dark. NATASHA comes in, in peignoir, with candle; she stops at the door of ANDREY's room.*

**Natasha.**

Andrey, dear, what are you doing? Reading? It's nothing . . . I only . . . (*She moves to another door and opens it.*) If there's no light, then . . . (*Shuts door again.*)

**Andrey.**

(*Entering with a book in his hand.*) What is it, Natasha?

**Natasha.**

I'm making sure that no one's left a light burning. It's carnival time. The servants are completely out of hand, and one must keep an eye on everything the entire time. Last night I went into the dining room at midnight and there was a candle burning. I still haven't been able to find out who left it there. (*Puts down candle.*) What time is it?

**Andrey.**

(*Looking at watch.*) A quarter past eight.

**Natasha.**

Olga and Irina not home yet. Not back yet. Poor girls, they work so hard. There's Olga on the Teachers' Council, Irina in the telegraph office. (*She sighs.*) This morning I said to your sister: "You look after yourself, Irina darling." She doesn't pay any attention. A

quarter past eight, you say? I'm afraid our Bobik is really ill. Why is he so cold? Yesterday he was feverish and today he is cold all over. . . . I'm so worried.

**Andrey.**

It's nothing, Natasha. He's quite a strong little boy.

**Natasha.**

All the same he'd be better on a diet. I'm worried. And tonight at ten o'clock they say the Masquers will be coming here. But, you know, Andrey dear, it would be better if they didn't.

**Andrey.**

Would it? I don't know. They've been invited.

**Natasha.**

Bobik woke up this morning, looks at me, breaks into a smile. You know what that means: He knew me. Bobik, I say, I see you. I see you sweetie. And he laughs. Children know. They know perfectly well. Very well, Andrey, I'll say that the Masquers are not to come in.

**Andrey.**

(*Uncertainly.*) Yes, but isn't that for my sisters to say? I mean, they're the ladies of the house.

**Natasha.**

Oh, I'll tell them—of course. They're dears. . . . (*Going.*) I've ordered buttermilk for your supper. The doctor says you are to eat nothing but buttermilk, otherwise you'll never get your weight down. (*Stopping.*) Bobik is so cold. I'm afraid that room of his is cold. He should be in another room—at least until the warm weather comes. Now, Irina's room is just right for a child—dry, and the sun pours in all day long. She ought to be told. For the meantime she can go in with Olga. . . . Anyway, she's never at home in the daytime, only sleeps there. . . . (*Pause.*) Andrey, my sweetie, why don't you say something?

**Andrey.**

No reason. Just there's nothing to be said.

**Natasha.**

Oh, there was something I meant to say . . . Oh, yes; Ferapont is here from the council; he's asking for you.

Andrey.

(*Yawning.*) Ask him to come in.

Natasha.

Very well. (*Exit.*)

(ANDREY holds his book very close to the candle to get enough light to read. FERAPONT comes in, in a ragged old coat with the collar turned up, his head and ears muffled in a scarf.)

Andrey.

Good evening, my dear fellow. What is it?

Ferapont.

The chairman has sent you this book and papers of some kind. Here.

Andrey.

Thanks. Good. Why didn't you come earlier—it's getting on to nine.

Ferapont.

What?

Andrey.

(*Louder.*) I said you're late. It's getting on to nine.

Ferapont.

Very good, sir. When I came here it was still daylight, but they wouldn't let me in. The master is busy, they said, sorry. Very good, I said, busy is busy—and I'm not in a hurry. (*Thinking that ANDREY has asked him a question.*) What say?

Andrey.

Nothing. (*He looks at the book.*) Tomorrow is a holiday—the office won't be open, but I'll go there all the same . . . I'll keep busy. It's boring here at home. (*Pause.*) My dear old fellow, isn't it strange how life lets you down! Today, just out of boredom, just because I had nothing better to do, I picked up this book—old lecture notes of my university days. It's enough to make a cat laugh. My God!—I'm secretary now of the city council—the selfsame council of which Protopopov is chairman. I'm the secretary of the council and the most I can hope for is to become a member. I, a member of the city council—I, who dream every night that I'm a professor in the Uni-

versity of Moscow, a famous scholar, a scholar of whom all Russia is proud.

**Ferapont.**

How should I know . . . I don't hear very well.

**Andrey.**

If you could hear well, then I don't suppose I'd be talking to you. I just have to talk to someone. My wife doesn't understand; for some reason I'm afraid of my sisters, afraid they'll laugh at me, make me feel a fool . . . I don't drink, I don't like drinking places, but, oh, how I'd like to be in Moscow right now in one of the good restaurants.

**Ferapont.**

In Moscow, so a contractor was saying yesterday in our office, some merchants were eating pancakes and one of them ate forty and died, so the man said. Forty—or fifty, I can't remember which.

**Andrey.**

You're in Moscow in a great big restaurant—you don't know anybody, nobody knows you; but for all that you don't feel that you're a stranger. But here you know everybody, everybody knows you, and yet you *are* a stranger—a stranger . . . a stranger and lonely.

**Ferapont.**

What say? (*Pause.*) And the same contractor said—he was lying for all I know—that they've put a rope right across Moscow. . . .

**Andrey.**

Whatever for?

**Ferapont.**

How should I know? That's what the contractor said.

**Andrey.**

Ridiculous. (*Reads book.*) Were you ever in Moscow?

**Ferapont.**

(*Pause.*) No, I wasn't. God didn't grant me that.

(*Pause.*) Shall I go?

**Andrey.**

Yes, run along. Take care of yourself. (*Exit FERAPONT.*) Take care of yourself. (*Reads.*) Come back tomorrow morning for these papers. . . . Good night.

... Oh, he's gone. (*A bell rings.*) Ah, well! (*Stretches and slouches away into his room. Offstage a nurse is singing as she rocks a cradle. Enter MASHA and VERSHININ. Later in the scene a maid will come in with a lamp, and will light more candles.*)

**Masha.**

I don't know. (*Pause.*) I don't know. Of course you can't underestimate habit. For instance, after Father's death, for ages we simply couldn't get used to the fact that there wouldn't be orderlies around anymore. But, quite apart from habit, I believe it's only fair to say, of course, this may not hold true for other places, but in this town the nicest, best-bred, and best-educated people are the military.

**Vershinin.**

I'm thirsty. May I have some tea?

**Masha.**

(*Looks at watch.*) They'll bring it soon. My marriage was arranged when I was eighteen. I was afraid of my husband because he was a teacher, and I'd only just finished school. At that time he seemed to me immensely learned, intelligent, and important. But now it's not the same, I'm sorry to say.

**Vershinin.**

Oh, well. . . . Yes.

**Masha.**

Of course, I'm not talking about my husband—I'm used to him—but civilians as a whole are such a vulgar lot, unpleasant, uneducated. Vulgarly offends me, it distresses me. I can't bear to see a person who lacks refinement, lacks good manners, good breeding. When I find myself in a group of teachers, my husband's colleagues, I just can't bear it.

**Vershinin.**

Yes, quite. . . . But really, you know, civilian or military, they're all exactly the same, at least they are in this place—exactly. If you listen to the locals, even to someone of quite reasonable intelligence, be he civilian or be he in the army, he's sick to death of his wife, sick to death of his house, sick to death of his place

in the country, sick to death of his horses . . . the most completely typical thing about a Russian is his exalted way of thinking. But, then, his way of behaving is anything but exalted. Why is this? Can you tell me?

**Masha.**

Why, indeed?

**Vershinin.**

Why is he sick to death of his children, sick to death of his wife; and why are the wife and children sick to death of him?

**Masha.**

A bit gloomy, aren't you?

**Vershinin.**

Maybe, so. I didn't have dinner today. Haven't had a bite since breakfast. My daughter is a bit out of sorts; and when my girls are sick, I get so anxious; my conscience pricks because their mother is what she is. Oh, if you could see her today! What a—what a nothing she is! We began to quarrel at seven in the morning and at nine I left, and slammed the door behind me. (*Pause.*) I never speak about this. It's odd, but you're the only person I tell. (*Kisses her hand.*) Don't be cross with me. Except for you, I have nobody . . . nobody. (*Pause.*)

**Masha.**

Just listen to the chimney. . . . When Father was dying there was a sort of moaning in the chimney, just like now.

**Vershinin.**

Are you superstitious?

**Masha.**

Yes, I am.

**Vershinin.**

How strange. (*Kisses her hand.*) You are a wonderful, extraordinary woman. Extraordinary! Wonderful! It's dark here. But I can see the glitter of your eyes.

**Masha.**

(*Moving to another chair.*) There's more light over here.

**Vershinin.**

I love, love, love . . . I love your eyes, the way you

move; I dream about it. Wonderful! Extraordinary woman!

**Masha.**

*(Laughing softly.)* When you speak to me like this, I can't help laughing, although it makes me afraid. . . . Don't speak like that again—please. *(Sotto voce.)* And yet—I don't mind if you do. *(Covers her face with her hand.)* I don't mind. Someone is coming. Talk of something else.

*(IRINA and TUSENBACH come in.)*

**Tusenbach.**

I've got a triple-barreled name. My name is Baron Tusenbach-Krone-Altschauer; but I'm Russian. I'm as Russian as you are. There's hardly anything German left in me—maybe only the patience and persistence with which I pursue you. Every evening I see you home.

**Irina.**

Oh, I'm so tired.

**Tusenbach.**

Each and every day I shall come to the telegraph office and bring you home. I'll do it for ten—twenty years, until you chase me away. . . . *(Cordially to MASHA and VERSHININ.)* Oh, it's you! How are you?

**Irina.**

Here I am, home at last. *(To MASHA.)* Just now a lady came to send a telegram to her brother in Saratov to say that her son died today. But she couldn't remember the address. So she sent it without any address—simply to Saratov. She was crying. And without rhyme or reason I was rude to her. "I've no time," I said. So stupid. Are the Masquers coming tonight?

**Masha.**

Yes.

**Irina.**

*(As she sits down.)* Oh, the relief. I'm tired.

**Tusenbach.**

(*With a smile.*) When you get back from work you seem so young, sort of small. . . . (*Pause.*)

**Irina.**

I'm tired. No, I don't like that telegraph office. I really don't.

**Masha.**

You've got thinner. (*Whistles.*) You look younger—more like a young boy.

**Tusenbach.**

That's the way she has her hair.

**Irina.**

I think I must look for another job. This one isn't right for me. What I wanted, what I dreamed of, well, that's exactly what this job doesn't have. Work without poetry, without imagination. . . . (*A knock on the floor.*) That's the Doctor's knock. (*To TUSENBACH.*) Knock back, dear. I can't. Too tired. (*TUSENBACH knocks on floor.*) He'll come right up now. We shall have to make up our minds what to do. The Doctor and our Andrey were at the club yesterday, and lost again. They say Andrey lost two hundred rubles.

**Masha.**

(*Indifferently.*) Oh, well, what can we do about it?

**Irina.**

Two weeks ago he lost, in December he lost. If only he'd lose everything as quickly as possible, then maybe we could get away from this place. Oh, my goodness! I dream of Moscow every single night. I'm simply obsessed. (*She laughs.*) We're going to move there in June and before June comes round we have to get through February, March, April, May . . . almost half a year.

**Masha.**

Let's hope Natasha doesn't find out somehow about his losses.

**Irina.**

I don't believe she minds too much.

(*CHEBUTYKIN comes in. He has just got up from bed where he has been resting since dinner. Combs his*

beard. Sits down at a table and pulls a newspaper out of his pocket.)

**Masha.**

So here we are. . . . Have we paid our rent?

**Irina.**

No, not a penny for the last eight months. Forgot, probably.

**Masha.**

(Laughs.) And look at us sitting there as if we owned the place. (Everyone smiles. Pause.)

**Irina.**

(To VERSHININ.) Haven't you got anything to say, Colonel?

**Vershinin.**

I don't know. I'm dying for tea. I'd give anything in the world for a glass of tea. Haven't had a bite since breakfast.

**Chebutykin.**

Irina!

**Irina.**

What is it?

**Chebutykin.**

Come here. *Venez ici.* (IRINA goes and sits at table with him.) I can't do without you. (IRINA lays out a game of solitaire.)

**Vershinin.**

Oh, well! If they're not going to bring tea, don't you think we might as well talk philosophy.

**Tusenbach.**

Yes, let's do. What shall we discuss?

**Vershinin.**

What? Let's dream . . . for instance, of the sort of life which will come after us in two or three hundred years.

**Tusenbach.**

Well . . .

**Vershinin.**

Well . . .

**Tusenbach.**

Well . . . after us, people will fly in balloons, will change the cut of their coats, maybe they'll discover a sixth sense and develop it; but for all that, life will

still be exactly the same—a difficult life, full of mystery—and happy. And in a *thousand* years, mankind will still be sighing in the same old way. “Oh, how hard life is.” And he’ll still be afraid of death, just as he is now; still be reluctant to die.

**Vershinin.**

(*After a pause for thought.*) How can I put it? It seems to me that everything on this earth *must* change—maybe little by little. Why, everything is actually changing right before our eyes. In two hundred, three hundred years—or even a thousand—the time is unimportant—a new, happy life will come into being. We shall have no part in such a life, that’s certain; but all the same we are living for it now; working for it; suffering for it; we are creating it. This, and only this, is the goal of our existence; and only in this way can we approach happiness. (MASHA *laughs softly.*)

**Tusenbach.**

What’s the matter?

**Masha.**

I don’t know. I’ve been laughing all day, ever since morning.

**Vershinin.**

I was educated in the same way as you; I didn’t go to military academy either. I read a great deal, but I don’t know what books to choose; and I daresay I don’t read the books that I ought to; but even so, the longer I live, the more my thirst for knowledge increases. My hair’s growing gray, I’m an old man, almost, and I know so little, so very little! And yet I have the feeling that I know what is most important and most real—know it very well. Oh, I do wish I could prove to you that there is no such thing as happiness; that there ought to be no such thing and won’t be—for us. We must just work and work. Happiness will only be achieved by those who come long after us. (*Pause.*) If I am not to enjoy it, then at least my children’s children will.

(FEDOTIK and RODE come in. They sit down and sing softly to the guitar.)

**Tusenbach.**

You mean we're not even to dream of happiness? But supposing I *am* happy!

**Vershinin.**

Not possible.

**Tusenbach.**

(Clapping his hands and laughing.) Obviously we don't understand each other at all. How can I convince you? (MASHA laughs softly; he wags his finger at her.) Laugh away! (To VERSHININ.) Life *doesn't* change. Not just in two or three hundred years, but in a million, life will be exactly the same. *It doesn't change.* It remains static, following laws of its own, with which we have no concern and which, in any case, we can never know. You know how some kinds of birds migrate every year, like storks, for instance. They fly on and on; and no matter what thoughts, great or small, drift through their minds, still on they fly, and on, without knowing where they are going, or why. And on they will go no matter what bird-philosophers appear in their midst; they can philosophize to their hearts' content so long as they keep flying the appointed course.

**Masha.**

But, does that make sense?

**Tusenbach.**

Sense! It's snowing out there. Does that make sense? (Pause.)

**Masha.**

I believe that a person must have some kind of faith. Must seek for a faith, anyway; otherwise, life is empty—empty . . . to live and not to know why the storks fly, why babies are born, why there are stars in the heavens . . . we simply must have faith that there is a purpose to life, or else everything is just trivial and . . . Oh, well! (Pause.)

**Vershinin.**

All the same, it's sad when youth is over.

**Masha.**

Gogol said: "Life on this earth, gentlemen, is a bore."

**Tusenbach.**

And I say, "Arguing with you, my friends, is rather difficult." Oh, well, it doesn't matter.

**Chebutykin.**

(*Reading newspaper.*) Balzac was married in Berdichev. (IRINA hums.) I really must write that down in my notebook. (*Writes.*) Balzac was married in Berdichev. (*Goes on reading paper.*)

**Irina.**

(*Humming as she plays her solitaire.*) Balzac was married in Berdichev.

**Tusenbach.**

Well, the die is cast. (*To MASHA.*) You know I've sent in my resignation?

**Masha.**

Yes, I heard. I think it's a very poor idea. I don't like civilians.

**Tusenbach.**

Oh, well, it can't be helped. (*Gets up.*) I'm not good-looking; what kind of a soldier do I make. . . . Oh, well, it can't be helped. I shall work. For one day of my life anyway, I shall work so hard that I'll come home utterly tired out, tumble into bed and fall asleep immediately. (*As he goes to dining room.*) Workmen sleep like logs, I imagine.

**Fedotik.**

(*To IRINA.*) I brought you these crayons. Oh, and this penknife.

**Irina.**

You think of me as a little girl. But I'm grown up, you know. (*Takes crayons and knife delightedly.*) Aren't they sweet!

**Fedotik.**

And look! I bought this for myself. (*Shows knife.*) Just look—one blade, another blade, another; this is to pick your ears, here are scissors; you can clean your nails with this.

**Rode.**

(*Loudly.*) Doctor, how old are you?

**Chebutykin.**

I? Thirty-two. (*Everybody laughs.*)

**Fedotik.**

(*Referring to solitaire.*) Let me show you another. (*He lays out the cards. The samovar is brought in. ANFISA sits at samovar. A moment later NATASHA comes in and busies herself at the table. SOLYONY comes in; greetings are exchanged and he sits at the table.*)

**Vershinin.**

Isn't it windy today!

**Masha.**

Yes. I'm sick of winter. I've forgotten what summer is like.

**Irina.**

(*Referring to cards.*) Oh, look! It's going to come out! That means we shall get to Moscow.

**Fedotik.**

No; it's not coming out. Look, the eight is on top of the two of spades, (*Laughs.*) so you won't get to Moscow.

**Chebutykin.**

(*Reading newspaper.*) Tsi-Tsi-Kar. Did you ever! There's an outbreak of smallpox there.

**Anfisa.**

(*Coming to MASHA.*) Masha, dear, tea. (*To VERSHININ.*) Please come to tea, your honor . . . forgive me, I can't remember your name.

**Masha.**

Bring it here, Nya—Nya, I'm not going in there.

**Irina.**

(*Calling*) Nya—Nya!

**Anfisa.**

Coming!

**Natasha.**

(*To SOLYONY.*) So you see, babies understand perfectly. "I see you, Bobik. I see you, darling." He looks at me in the most extraordinary way. You think I'm just saying this because I'm his mother. But no, no. *Really*, this is a simply perfectly extraordinary child.

**Solyony.**

If he were mine, do you know what? I'd fry him in a pan and eat him. (*Takes his glass of tea and goes away to a corner of the drawing room.*)

**Natasha.**

(*Covering her face with her hands.*) Oh, beastly, horrid man!

**Masha.**

Happy people don't notice whether it's summer or winter. I think if I were in Moscow, I should be completely impervious to the weather.

**Vershinin.**

The other day I was reading the diary of some cabinet minister in France. It was written in prison. He'd been sentenced over the Panama Canal scandal. With what rapture and ecstasy he describes the birds which he'd seen from the window of his cell. In former days, when he was free, he simply hadn't noticed them; and now, after his release, naturally, he doesn't notice them again. It'll be just the same with you in Moscow. When you live there, you won't even notice it. Happiness we do not possess; happiness doesn't exist; it's just something we long for.

**Tusenbach.**

(*Opening a box.*) What's happened to the chocolate ones?

**Irina.**

Solyony has gobbled them up.

**Tusenbach.**

All of them? Took—Took—Took—Took.

**Anfisa.**

(*Serving tea.*) Oh, a note for you. (*To VERSHININ.*)

**Vershinin.**

For me? (*Takes it.*) From my daughter. (*Reads.*) Yes; of course . . . (*To MASHA.*) Please excuse me, I'll slip away. No, no tea, thanks. (*Gets up agitated.*) The old story.

**Masha.**

What is it? Can you tell me?

**Vershinin.**

(*In low tones.*) My wife has taken poison—again. I must go. I'll slip away. All this is horribly unpleasant.

(*Kisses her hand.*) Dearest of women. I'll slip out this way. (*Goes.*)

**Anfisa.**

Where is he off to? I've just brought his tea. What's the matter with him?

**Masha.**

Do be quiet. You go on and on and on. (*Takes her cup to the table.*) I'm sick of you. You're an old pest.

**Anfisa.**

Mashinka, what are you so cross?

**Andrey.**

(*Offstage.*) Anfisa!

**Anfisa.**

(*Mimicking.*) Anfisa! He just sits in that room . . .  
(*Exit ANFISA.*)

**Masha.**

(*At the table, angrily.*) Do make room. (*Pushes cards aside.*) Nothing but cards, cards, cards. Have your tea.

**Irina.**

Masha, don't be so horrid.

**Masha.**

If I'm horrid, don't any of you speak to me! Don't touch me!

**Chebutykin.**

(*Mockingly.*) Don't touch her! Don't touch her!

**Masha.**

You're sixty years of age and you still jabber away the most damned idiotic rubbish like a snotty little school boy.

**Natasha.**

(*Sighing.*) Masha, dear, why do you talk like that? With your looks—I'll be perfectly honest—you could get into the very best society, if you only wouldn't use that sort of language. *Je vous prie—pardonnez-moi, Marie, mais vous avez manières un peu grossières.*

**Tusenbach.**

(*Trying not to laugh.*) Please, may I have . . . Could I . . . I believe there's some cognac.

**Natasha.**

*Il paraît que mon Bobik déjà ne dort pas . . .* He's

awake. He's not a bit well today. I must go to him.  
Excuse me. (*Exit NATASHA.*)

**Irina.**

Where has the Colonel gone?

**Masha.**

Home. Something peculiar again with his wife.

**Tusenbach.**

(*Goes to SOLYONY with a decanter of cognac.*)

Sitting, brooding here all by yourself; and goodness knows what about. Let's make peace, shall we? Have some cognac. (*They drink.*) I expect I'll have to play the piano all evening; and nothing but rubbish, probably. . . . Oh, well. . . .

**Solyony.**

How do you mean, make peace? I've no quarrel with you.

**Tusenbach.**

You always give me a sort of feeling of unpleasantness between us. And you must admit there's something strange about you.

**Solyony.**

(*Declaiming.*) I am strange, who is not strange! Patience, forgive me, good Aleko.

**Tusenbach.**

What has Aleko got to do with it? (*Pause.*)

**Solyony.**

When I'm alone with somebody, I'm perfectly all right, just like anyone else. But in company I get gloomy, uncomfortable, and . . . I talk all kinds of nonsense. But even so, I'm more decent and honest than lots of other people. And I can prove it.

**Tusenbach.**

You're simply maddening . . . forever picking on me in front of people. But somehow I still like you. What the hell! I'm going to get drunk tonight. Have a drink!

**Solyony.**

Very well. (*They drink.*) I've no quarrel with you, Baron; I never had. But my personality is like Lermontov's. (*In a low voice.*) Do you know, people tell me I look a bit like Lermontov. (*Scents his hands.*)

**Tusenbach.**

I'm resigning my commission. I've had enough of the

army. I've been thinking it over for five years. And now at last I've decided. I'm going to work.

**Solyony.**

*(Declaiming.)* Forgive me, Aleko . . . Forget, forget your dreams. *(During the foregoing ANDREY has entered with a book and is quietly sitting at the table beside the lamp.)*

**Tusenbach.**

Yes, I'm going to work.

*(CHEBUTYKIN comes into drawing room with IRINA.)*

**Chebutykin.**

And the food was real Caucasian: onion soup and for the meat course—Chehartma.

**Solyony.**

But, Cheremsha isn't meat. It's a vegetable—it's a sort of onion.

**Chebutykin.**

Oh, no, my angel: Chehartma isn't onion. It's roast lamb.

**Solyony.**

I'm telling you Cheremsha is an onion.

**Chebutykin.**

And I'm telling you Chehartma is lamb.

**Solyony.**

And I'm telling you Cheremsha is an onion.

**Chebutykin.**

What's the good of arguing with him? He's never been in the Caucasus and he's never eaten Chehartma!

**Solyony.**

I've never eaten it because I simply can't stand it. Cheremsha smells like garlic.

**Andrey.**

*(Imploring.)* Gentlemen, gentlemen, please . . .

**Tusenbach.**

When are the Masquers coming?

**Irina.**

They promised to be here at nine; any minute now.

**Tusenbach.**

*(Embracing Andrey. Russian song.)*

**Andrey.**

*(Sings and dances. The same song.)*

**Chebutykin.**

*(Dances. The same song. Laughter.)*

**Tusenbach.**

*(Kisses Andrey.)* Damn it all, let's have a drink together. Andrey, your health. I'll go to Moscow with you, my dear fellow, to the University.

**Solyony.**

To which University? There are two Universities in Moscow.

**Andrey.**

No, there's only one University in Moscow.

**Solyony.**

There are two Universities in Moscow.

**Andrey.**

All right, then, there are three—better still.

**Solyony.**

In Moscow there are *two* Universities—*(Murmurs and hisses.)* In Moscow there are two Universities—the old one and the new one. And if you don't care to listen to me, if what I'm saying annoys you, I'll shut up. I can even go into another room. *(Exit SOLYONY.)*

**Tusenbach.**

Bravo! Bravo! *(Laughs.)* Come on, let's begin. I'm going to play. Solyony is a perfect fool. *(Sits at piano and plays a waltz.)*

**Masha.**

*(Dancing the waltz alone.)* The Baron is drunk. The Baron is drunk. The Baron is drunk. *(NATASHA enters.)*

**Natasha.**

*(To CHEBUTYKIN.)* Doctor! *(Whispers to him and goes.)*

*(CHEBUTYKIN touches TUSENBACH on the shoulder and whispers to him.)*

**Irina.**

What is it?

**Chebutykin.**

It's time we were off. Good-bye.

**Tusenbach.**

Good night. Time we were off.

**Irina.**

Oh, but what about the Masquers?

**Andrey.**

The Masquers aren't coming. You see, my dear, Natasha says Bobik isn't very well.

**Irina.**

*(Shrugging.)* Bobik isn't very well.

**Masha.**

I see! We're being thrown out, so we'd better go. *(To IRINA.)* Bobik isn't the one who's ill. It's she . . . here! *(Taps her head.)* Common little piece!

*(ANDREY goes off to his room. CHEBUTYKIN follows him. In the drawing room everyone is saying good-bye.)*

**Fedotik.**

What a shame! I was counting on the evening. But naturally if the baby isn't well . . . I'll bring him some toys tomorrow.

**Rode.**

*(Loud.)* I went to bed this afternoon because I was sure we'd be dancing all night. And it's only nine.

**Masha.**

Come on. We'll discuss it outside in the street. We'll decide what we'll do.

*(One hears farewells exchanged, TUSENBACH's cheerful laughter. Everyone leaves. ANFISA and the maid are clearing the table and putting out the lights. One hears the nurse singing offstage. ANDREY in hat and overcoat enters stealthily with CHEBUTYKIN.)*

**Chebutykin.**

I never had time to get married. Life passed in a flash. And another thing: I was madly in love with your mother and of course she was married already. . . .

**Andrey.**

One should never marry. One shouldn't because it's so tiresome.

**Chebutykin.**

Well, that's true, of course; but the loneliness. Look

## 70 / Act II

at it any way you like, my dear, it's a horrible thing to be lonely. . . . But in the end of all . . . Oh, well, it's all one.

**Andrey.**

Come on. Hurry up.

**Chebutykin.**

What's the rush? There's heaps of time.

**Andrey.**

I'm afraid my wife might stop us.

**Chebutykin.**

Ah!

**Andrey.**

I shan't play tonight. I'll just look on. I don't feel very well. Doctor, what am I to do about this breathlessness?

**Chebutykin.**

Why ask me? I don't remember, my dear . . . I haven't the slightest notion.

**Andrey.**

We'll slip out through the kitchen. (*Exit.*)

(*The bell rings once, then again: voices and laughter; bell offstage—IRINA enters.*)

**Irina.**

That's the bell. Who can it be?

**Anfisa.**

(*Whispers.*) The Masquers. (*Another ring.*)

**Irina.**

Nyanya, tell them there's nobody at home. They'll have to excuse us. (*ANFISA goes. IRINA wanders around the room in agitated thought. Enter SOLYONY. Another bell.*)

**Solyony.**

(*Astonished.*) Where has everybody gone?

**Irina.**

They've all gone home.

**Solyony.**

How funny! You're all by yourself!

**Irina.**

Yes, all by myself. (*Pause.*) Good night.

**Solyony.**

I was a nuisance just now. I lost my temper. But you're not like the others. You're innocent. You're

better than they are. You see the truth. . . . You're the only one who can understand me. I love you deeply, infinitely.

**Irina.**

Good night. Please go.

**Solyony.**

I can't live without you . . . You could be my salvation. (*Through tears.*) Oh, such joy. . . ! Those wonderful unbelievably beautiful eyes—I've never seen a woman with such eyes.

**Irina.**

(*Coldly.*) That's enough.

**Solyony.**

This is the first time I have spoken to you of love; and I feel as if I wasn't on the earth at all but on another planet. (*Rubs his forehead.*) But there . . . One thing is certain: You can't *make* another person love you . . . But I *will not have* successful rivals. I absolutely *will not*. If I have a rival, I swear by everything which I hold sacred that I will destroy him . . . You wonderful woman!

(NATASHA enters with a candle. She looks first into one room, then another; pauses by ANDREY's door.)

**Natasha.**

Andrey's in there. Let him read. Please excuse me, Captain Solyony, I didn't know you were here, and just look at me! (*Referring to her peignoir.*)

**Solyony.**

It's all the same to me. Good-bye. (*Exit SOLYONY.*)

**Natasha.**

(*Glances after SOLYONY.*) . . . You're tired, my poor dear sweet. (*Kisses IRINA.*) You ought to go to bed earlier.

**Irina.**

Is Bobik asleep?

**Natasha.**

He's asleep but he's restless. Oh, by the way, my dear, there was something I wanted to say, but either you're not here or else I'm busy. . . . I can't help thinking

that Bobik's nursery is a little bit chilly and damp. But your room is just perfect for a child. My own dearest love, would you move in with Olga?

**Irina.**

*(Not understanding.) Where? (A troika with bells is heard approaching.)*

**Natasha.**

You and Olga would share for a time, and Bobik would have your room. He's such a love. This morning I said to him "Bobik, you are mine, mine," and he gives me such a look with his darling little eyes. *(Bell rings.)* Olga, probably. How late she is. *(Maid comes to NATASHA and whispers.)* Protopopov. What a funny man! Protopopov has come, if you please, and wants me to go out for a drive with him in his troika. *(She laughs.)* Aren't men too odd! *(Bell.)* Someone else. Perhaps I should just go for a little drive—a quarter of an hour. . . . *(To maid.)* Say I'll be out directly. *(Bell.)* Who can it be? Olga probably. *(NATASHA and maid exit. IRINA sits pensively. Enter KULYGIN, OLGA, and behind them VERSHININ.)*

**Kulygin.**

*(Surprised to find the room empty.)* Well! . . . They said they were going to have a party.

**Vershinin.**

Strange. . . . I only left half an hour ago and they were expecting the Masquers.

**Irina.**

They've all gone.

**Kulygin.**

Masha too? Where did she go? And why is Protopopov waiting down there in his troika? . . . Who's he waiting for?

**Irina.**

Oh, don't ask me . . . I'm tired.

**Kulygin.**

You're just a bad, bad, girl.

**Olga.**

The meeting's only just finished. I'm utterly worn out. The Headmistress is ill and I'm taking her place. Oh,

my head, my head, it aches so. (*Sits down.*) Yesterday Andrey lost 200 rubles at cards. . . . It's all over town. . . .

**Kulygin.**

Yes; that meeting has tired me too. (*Sits down.*)

**Vershinin.**

My wife decided to give me a fright, so she all but poisoned herself. But it's all right now, I'm glad to say; I can relax. . . . So, we're to go—oh, well, in that case I must take my leave. Kulygin, let's go out somewhere! I simply can't stay at home . . . simply cannot . . . let's go!

**Kulygin.**

I'm tired. I don't think I'll go. (*Gets up.*) Tired! Did my wife go home?

**Irina.**

I expect so.

**Kulygin.**

(*Kissing IRINA's hand.*) Good night. Tomorrow and the day after—free. I can have a good rest. Good night. (*Going.*) I'd love some tea . . . I'd counted on spending the evening in pleasant company and . . . *O, fallacem hominum spem!* . . . Exclamatory accusative.

**Vershinin.**

All right, I'll go by myself. (*VERSHININ and KULYGIN go. VERSHININ whistling.*)

**Olga.**

Oh, I've such a headache . . . Andrey lost . . . the whole town's talking . . . I'll go and lie down. (*Going.*) Tomorrow I'm free. . . . Oh, what a pleasant thought! Tomorrow free and the day after free . . . I've such a headache—such a head. (*Exit.*)

**Irina.**

(*Alone.*) They've all gone. Nobody left.

(*Harmonica heard in street. Nurse sings.*)

**Natasha.**

(*In furs and a fur hat, passes through the drawing*

74 / Act II

*room followed by maid.*) I'll be back in half an hour.  
I shall just go for a little drive. (*Exit.*)

**Irina.**

(*Alone.*) Moscow! Moscow! Moscow!

CURTAIN

## ACT THREE

OLGA and IRINA's room. On the left and right are beds enclosed by screens. It is almost three in the morning. Offstage alarm bells are ringing because of the fire which has been going on for some time. Evidently nobody has gotten to bed yet in the house. On a sofa is MASHA, as always in black. Enter OLGA and ANFISA.

Anfisa.

(*Offstage.*) They were out in the street . . . in their nightgowns. (*Enters.*) . . . Now they're sitting down at the bottom of the stairs—I said to them, "Please come up. Don't sit there."—They are crying—"Where is Papa," they say. "Please God, he's not burned to death." Such an idea. And there are others out in the courtyard . . . they are half-dressed too.

Olga.

(*Takes dresses out of cupboard.*) Take this gray . . . and this . . . and the jacket . . . oh, and this skirt, Nyanya, dear . . . Oh, my God, what a disaster! The whole little street at the back is burned to the ground apparently . . . take this . . . take this. . . . (*Throws clothes into ANFISA's arms.*) The poor Vershinins have had a shock. . . . Their house was very nearly burned. Let them spend the night here . . . we can't let them go home. . . . At poor Fedotik's place everything was absolutely burned out—not a thing left.

Anfisa.

Call Ferapont, Olga, dear, I can't manage alone.

Olga.

(*Rings bell.*) It's no use ringing. (*Shouts through the door.*) Come here, whoever is there . . . up here. (*Through the open door a window is seen red from the glow of the fire. The fire engine is heard passing the house.*) How horrible! It makes me feel absolutely sick. (*Enter FERAPONT.*) Here, take all this stuff downstairs. The Kolotilin girls are at the foot of the stairs. Give it to them. Give this, too.

Ferapont.

Very good. In 1812 Moscow was on fire, too. . . . The French were quite surprised.

Olga.

Go. Go.

Ferapont.

Very good. (*Exit.*)

Olga.

Nyanya, dearest, give everything away. We don't need a thing. Give everything away, Nyanya. . . . I'm tired. . . . I can hardly keep on my feet. . . . We can't let the Vershinins go home. The girls can sleep in the drawing room and the Colonel can go down below with the Baron. . . . Fedotik can go to the Baron's room, too, or stay in the dining room. . . . The Doctor is drunk, terribly drunk. . . . It's as if he had done it on purpose—so one can't put anyone in with him. Oh, and Vershinin's wife . . . well, she can go in the drawing room, too.

Anfisa.

(*Tired.*) Olga, darling, don't throw me out, please.

Olga.

Why, what nonsense. Nobody would think of throwing you out.

Anfisa.

(*Puts her head on OLGA's chest.*) My dear, my dear, my jewel, I work hard . . . I do, I do . . . but I'm getting feeble, and then everyone will say, Go! But where am I to go? Where? I am eighty. No, eighty-one.

**Olga.**

Sit down, Nyanya. . . . You are tired, you poor thing. . . . (*She helps ANFISA to seat.*) Rest, darling. You look pale!

(NATASHA enters.)

**Natasha.**

They say that a committee must be organized as soon as possible to help the victims of the fire. Well, that's very right and proper, it's only right to assist the unfortunate—it's the duty of those who are better off. Bobik and baby Sophia are asleep, sleeping without a care in the world. Such crowds of people all over the house—wherever you go they're just swarming. There is a lot of influenza about just now. I'm afraid the children will catch it.

**Olga.**

(*Not listening to her.*) Thank goodness you can't see the fire from this room. It's quiet here.

**Natasha.**

Yes . . . my hair is every which way. (*Goes to the mirror.*) They say I've put on weight . . . but it's not true. Not true at all! Masha is asleep. Tired out, poor sweet. (*To ANFISA, coldly.*) How dare you sit down in my presence. Get up, this minute! Get out! Go on! (*ANFISA goes. Pause.*) Why you keep that old creature I cannot understand.

**Olga.**

(*Shocked.*) I am sorry. I can't understand, either.

**Natasha.**

Who needs her here? She is a peasant, she ought to go back to the country. . . . You people spoil her. I like order in a house. One shouldn't have useless servants about the place. (*Strokes OLGA's cheek.*) You are tired, my poor sweet! Our Headmistress is tired. When baby Sophia is a big girl and goes to the high school I shall be frightened of you.

**Olga.**

I shan't be Headmistress.

**Natasha.**

Oh yes, you'll be appointed, Olga. That's all settled.

**Olga.**

I shall refuse. I cannot . . . I don't feel equal . . .  
(*Drinks water.*) Just now you were so horrid to  
Nyanya. . . . I am sorry, I simply can't bear it . . .  
everything went black in front of my eyes.

**Natasha.**

(*Agitated.*) Forgive me, Olga, please forgive me. . . .  
I didn't mean to upset you.

(MASHA gets up, takes a cushion with her, and  
goes out angrily.)

**Olga.**

My dear, you must understand—perhaps we were  
brought up strangely, but I can't stand it. This kind  
of behavior simply crushes me, makes me ill. . . . I  
simply crumple up!

**Natasha.**

Forgive, forgive. (*Kisses OLGA.*)

**Olga.**

Even the very least rudeness, just a harsh word upsets  
me. . . .

**Natasha.**

Sometimes my tongue does run away with me, it's  
true; but you must agree, my dear, that she ought to  
go back to the country.

**Olga.**

But she's been with us for thirty years. . . .

**Natasha.**

But now that she can't work . . . Either I can't under-  
stand you or you won't understand me. She simply  
isn't fit for work. All she does is to sleep or sit about  
the place.

**Olga.**

Well, let her.

**Natasha.**

(*In astonishment.*) What on earth do you mean? She's  
a servant. (*Through tears.*) I simply can't understand  
you, Olga; I have a Nyanya and a wet nurse, we have  
a housemaid and a cook. What do you need with this  
old woman—tell me.

(*Offstage alarm bells.*)

**Olga.**

Tonight has aged me ten years.

**Natasha.**

We must come to an understanding, Olga dear. You are at the high school and I'm at home. You have your teaching. I run the house. Looking after the servants is my business—*is my business* . . . and no later than tomorrow I'll get this old thief, this old good-for-nothing out of here. (*She stamps.*) Old hag . . . don't dare to contradict me. Don't you dare. (*More softly, a change in tone.*) Really, if you don't move downstairs, we shall be squabbling the entire time. It's awful.

(*Enter KULYGIN.*)

**Kulygin.**

Where is Masha? It's time we were going home. They say the fire's dying down. (*He stretches.*) Only one little street was burned down; but there was a wind and at one time it looked as if the whole town might go up. (*Sits down.*) I'm tired, Olga, darling girl. . . . I often think . . . if I hadn't married Masha, it would have been you. You're so good. . . . I'm just dropping. (*Listening.*)

**Olga.**

What?

**Kulygin.**

The Doctor is on the booze, as if on purpose, and he's frightfully drunk. It's as if he had done it on purpose. (*He gets up.*) Listen, he's coming here . . . yes, here he comes. (*He laughs.*) What a man! Really! . . . I shall hide. (*Gets into cupboard.*) What an old reprobate!

**Olga.**

He hasn't been drinking for two years. And now, all of a sudden . . . (*Goes with NATASHA to the back of the room. Enter CHEBUTYKIN, not swaying at all, to all appearances sober. Walks about the room;*

*stops, looks around; goes to the washstand and begins to wash his hands.)*

**Chebutykin.**

*(Sternly.)* Damn them all! . . . Damn them! They think I'm a doctor, that I know how to cure this and that disease. I know absolutely nothing, forgotten everything I ever knew, don't remember a single thing, not a single thing. (OLGA and NATASHA go, unnoticed by CHEBUTYKIN.) Damn them! Last Wednesday I was attending a woman—she died—and it was my fault that she died. Yes . . . I knew something twenty-five years ago, but now I don't remember a single thing, not one thing. Maybe I'm not really a human being, only pretending to be one, only pretending to have arms and legs and a head; maybe I don't exist at all, maybe it only seems to me that I walk around, that I eat, that I sleep. *(He cries.)* Oh, if only I didn't exist. *(Stops crying; speaks sternly.)* Damn! Damn! Damn! We were talking at the club the other day; they talked about Shakespeare, Voltaire . . . I've never read them, not a single line of them, but I put on an expression of knowing all about them. And the others did exactly the same. Such vulgarity! Such cheap vulgarity! That patient I lost on Wednesday . . . all that came back into my mind . . . everything came back into mind but all muddled up, beastly, horrible . . . so I got drunk.

*(Enter IRINA, VERSHININ and TUSENBACH. TUSENBACH in civilian clothes, new and smart.)*

**Irina.**

Let's come in and sit here. Nobody will come here.

**Vershinin.**

If it hadn't been for the soldiers, the whole town would have burned down. Splendid fellows. *(He rubs his hands with pleasure.)* Salt of the earth. What splendid fellows.

(KULYGIN *emerges from the cupboard.*)

**Kulygin.**

What time is it?

**Tusenbach.**

It's four o'clock. Just beginning to get light.

**Irina.**

They're all in the drawing room still. Nobody's going home. And that Solyony of yours is in there, too, (*To CHEBUTYKIN.*) and as for you, Doctor, you ought to be in bed.

**Chebutykin.**

Quite all right . . . thank you. (*Combs his beard.*)

**Kulygin.**

(*Laughing.*) We are a tiny bit kicksibobus! (*Slaps the Doctor on the shoulder.*) Good old stick! *In vino veritas*, as they used to say of old.

**Tusenbach.**

They've asked me to get up a concert in aid of the fire victims.

**Irina.**

Oh, well!

**Tusenbach.**

We might arrange something. In my opinion Masha plays the piano splendidly.

**Kulygin.**

Splendidly.

**Irina.**

She's completely out of practice. She hasn't touched the piano for three or four years.

**Tusenbach.**

In town here there is absolutely no one who understands music—not a single soul. But I understand—and I give you my word of honor that Masha plays magnificently—with genius almost.

**Kulygin.**

You're right, Baron. I love Masha very much, she's a dear.

**Tusenbach.**

To be able to play so superbly and to know that nobody understands you.

**Kulygin.**

(*Sighing.*) Yes, but would it be the thing for her to

take part in the concert? I don't really know. I daresay it would be perfectly all right. I must own that our Headmaster is a broad-minded man—liberal even and very intelligent, but he has his own ideas. . . . Of course, it's not quite his business. If you like, I'll speak to him about it.

(CHEBUTYKIN *takes up a china clock and examines it.*)

**Vershinin.**

I got in a perfect mess in the fire. I look like nothing on earth. I heard a rumor yesterday that they're proposing to transfer our brigade—to the end of the earth. Poland, one man said—somebody else, Siberia.

**Tusenbach.**

I heard it, too. Oh well! The town *will* be empty.

**Irina.**

We'll be going, too!

**Chebutykin.**

(*Drops the clock, which breaks.*) Smashed to bits.

(*Pause. Everyone embarrassed and sorry.*)

**Kulygin.**

(*Picking up the pieces.*) To smash such a valuable piece! Oh, Doctor, Doctor! Zero for conduct and a hundred lines.

**Irina.**

That was Mama's little clock.

**Chebutykin.**

Very likely . . . if it was, it was. Maybe I didn't break it, it only seems that I broke it, maybe we only seem to exist. In reality we don't exist at all. I don't know anything. Nobody knows anything. (*At the door.*) Where are your eyes? Natasha's carrying on with Protopopov and you don't see it. . . . You sit here and see nothing; but Natasha is having a carry-on with Protopopov. (*Sighs. Then seriously.*) Have a banana! (*Exit CHEBUTYKIN.*)

**Vershinin.**

Yes! . . . (*Laughs.*) How weird everything is! (*Pause.*) When the fire began I ran home as fast as I could;

when I got there, there was our house completely undamaged—not even in danger, but my two girls were at the front door in nothing but their night-dresses; their mother isn't there; people are rushing about, horses and dogs are running wild, and the girls looked anxious, frightened, helpless, it made me heartsick to see them. Dear God, I think, what will those girls have to go through in the course of a lifetime! I took them and brought them along but with only one thought: What will they have to live through in this world. (*Alarm bell; pause.*) I get to this house and here is their mother screaming and raging. And my girls standing in the doorway in their nightgowns with the whole street crimson in the firelight and all that frightful noise made me think it was like something happening—oh, years ago—the enemy over-running us and looting and setting everything on fire. . . . And yet, really and truly what a difference there is between the past and the present! A little time will pass—two or three hundred years—and people will look back at our present life and think how terrifying and absurd; and everything of today will seem so clumsy and stodgy and uncomfortable and weird. Oh, what a life that will be—what a glorious life! (*Enter MASHA.*) (*He laughs.*) Oh, dear, there I go again! But please let me go on, friends, may I? I do so want to philosophize—I feel just in the humor. (*Pause.*) It's as though the whole world were asleep. So I say again what I've said before: what a life that will be. Just imagine! Now there are only three people of your kind in this town. But in a generation or two, there will be more, and then more and more, and a time will come when everything will be changed and be as *you* would have it. People will be living in *your* way—you'll be out of date, there'll be people who'll be better than you are. . . . (*He laughs.*) I'm in such an odd mood tonight . . . I have the most—oh, God, the wildest desire for life. . . . (*Sighs. Sings Gremin's aria from Eugen Onegin.*)

“Who is too old to feel love’s passion  
To feel the thrill of joy and anguish?”

**Masha.**

*(Humming same melody.)*

*(Both VERSHININ and MASHA humming same melody, ending in a laugh.)*

**Fedotik.**

*(Coming in—dancing to the rhythm of his speech.)*

Burned right out—burned right out—not a stick left!

*(Laughs.)*

**Irina.**

Nothing funny in that. You’ve lost everything.

**Fedotik.**

*(Laughs.)* Not a stick left, not one thing in the world. Guitar burned to ashes, all my photographic apparatus—ashes—all my letters—and a little notebook I’d meant to give you—ashes, too.

*(Enter SOLYONY.)*

**Irina.**

No, please go away, Captain. Please don’t come in.

**Solyony.**

Well, why do you let the Baron in and not me?

**Vershinin.**

You know, it’s time we all left. How’s the fire?

**Solyony.**

They say it’s dying down. You know, it’s a funny thing why you let the Baron come in but not me.  
*(Scents himself.)*

**Vershinin.**

*(Humming the Onegin melody.)* Tram—tam—tam.

**Masha.**

Tram—tam.

**Vershinin.**

*(Laughs: to SOLYONY.)* Let’s go into the dining room.

**Solyony.**

Very well. I shall make a note of it. One could elaborate on this thought, but better let sleeping dogs lie. . . . *(Looks at TUSENBACH.)* Wow! . . . Wow!

. . . Wow! (*Exit with VERSHININ and FEDOTIK.*)

**Irina.**

That Solyony's made the whole room smell of tobacco. (*Surprised.*) The Baron's fallen asleep. Baron. Baron.

**Tusenbach.**

(*Returning to consciousness.*) I'm tired out. . . . The brickworks. . . I'm not raving—but really and truly I'm going to the brickworks—directly. I'm going to start work. I've already made arrangements. (*To IRINA, tenderly.*) You look so pale—you are so sweet and adorable . . . do you know, your paleness seems to irradiate the darkness like light. . . . You are sad; you're discontented with life . . . come with me; let's go to work together.

**Masha.**

Look, Baron, do clear out.

**Tusenbach.**

(*Laughs.*) You here? I didn't see you. (*Kisses IRINA's hand.*) Good night. I'm off. Looking at you now, I remember how ages ago at your birthday you were so gay and lively. You talked about the joy of work . . . and what a happy life I was dreaming about then. Where has it gone? (*Kisses her hand.*) Tears in your eyes. . . . Go to bed, it's getting light. . . . It's morning. . . . If only I could give my life for you.

**Masha.**

Baron, for heaven's sake. . . .

**Tusenbach.**

I'm off. (*Goes.*)

**Masha.**

(*Lying down.*) Are you asleep, Fedor?

**Kulygin.**

What?

**Masha.**

You'd better go home.

**Kulygin.**

My darling Masha, my dearest Masha.

**Irina.**

She's tired. Let her rest, Fedya.

**Kulygin.**

Of course . . . my own dear wife! I love you, my one and only.

**Masha.**

(*Angrily.*) *Amo, amas, amat; amamus, amatis, amanti.*

**Kulygin.**

(*Laughs.*) You know, Irina, she's amazing! We've been married seven years and it just feels like yesterday. Word of honor. No, really. You're an amazing girl. I'm perfectly, perfectly content.

**Masha.**

I'm utterly, utterly bored. (*She sits up on the sofa and speaks.*) I can't get this out of my head, it's simply appalling . . . it's like a nail driven into my head, and I can't keep it to myself. It's Andrey . . . he's mortgaged this house to the bank and his wife grabbed all the money. But the house isn't just his—it belongs to all of us! And he ought to know that, if he had any integrity.

**Kulygin.**

Don't Masha, dear; what is it to you? You don't need money. Andrey's in debt all around—poor fellow.

**Masha.**

Well, anyway, it's simply appalling. (*She lies down.*)

**Kulygin.**

We're well enough off. I'm on the staff of the high school and give private lessons as well. . . . I'm a decent, ordinary kind of person—"omnia mea mecum porto," as the saying goes.

**Masha.**

It's not money I'm thinking about; it's the principle of the thing. (*Pause.*) Go home, Fedor.

**Kulygin.**

(*Kissing her.*) You're tired. Stay and rest for a bit. I'll go in there and wait for you. . . . Sleep. (*Going.*) I'm perfectly, perfectly content. (*Exit.*)

**Irina.**

Oh, dear, what a small person our Andrey has turned into. That woman has turned him into a little, crushed old man. Once his heart was set upon being a professor; and only yesterday he was patting himself on

the back because at last he'd been made a member of the city council. He's a *member* of the city council and Protopopov is the chairman. The whole town's talking and sniggering and he's the only one who sees nothing and knows nothing . . . and now here's everybody rushing to the fire and he sits in his room and pays not the least bit of attention—just plays his violin. . . . (*Emotionally.*) Oh, it's dreadful, dreadful, dreadful! (*Cries.*) I can't bear it—I really can't. I can't. I can't.

(*OLGA enters and tidies her dressing table.*)

**Irina.**

(*Crying bitterly.*) Send me away from here. I can't stand it anymore.

**Olga.**

(*Frightened.*) What's the matter? What's the matter, dearest?

**Irina.**

(*Still crying.*) Where? Oh where has everything gone? Where is it? Oh my God, my God, I've forgotten everything—everything . . . everything's confused. . . . I can't remember the Italian for window or ceiling . . . I can't remember anything—I forget things every day. Life is passing me by, never to come back; we shall never, never get to Moscow! . . . I see we shall never get there.

**Olga.**

Darling, darling.

**Irina.**

(*With more self-control.*) What a failure I am. . . . I can't work, I won't work. I've had enough of it! I worked at the telegraph office, now I'm working in the Town Hall and I loathe and despise everything they give me to do. I'm almost twenty-four. I have been working for ages. My brains are drying up, I'm losing weight, I'm losing my looks, I'm aging and for what? Nothing. I get no satisfaction out of it, time passes and it seems that one is moving further and further away from any real full life—further and further to-

ward an abyss. I'm *desperate*. I can't think why I'm still alive, why I haven't killed myself.

**Olga.**

Don't cry, my baby, don't cry. It's so awful when you cry.

**Irina.**

I'm not crying—really, I'm not. . . . I've had my cry. . . . Look, I'm not crying anymore. I've had my cry.

**Olga.**

My darling, I tell you this as a sister and a friend: If you take my advice, you'll marry the Baron! (IRINA *cries quietly*.) You respect him, you have a very high opinion of him. It's true he's not good-looking, but he has so much integrity, he's such a really good fellow. . . . One doesn't marry for love, it's a matter of duty. . . . At least that's what I think. And I'd marry without love. If anyone made me an offer, I'd take him, provided he was a man of integrity. I'd even marry an old man.

**Irina.**

I thought I'd wait till we got to Moscow and there I'd meet the real one; I dreamed of him, I loved him. But as it's turned out, that was just silly—silly.

**Olga.**

(*Embracing her.*) My own darling sister, I do understand; after the Baron had left the army and came here in civilian clothes, he seemed to me so plain that, do you know, I actually cried. . . . He asked: "Why are you crying?"—Well, what was I to say? But if it was God's will that he and you should marry, I should be happy. I know it's different—I know it's altogether different.

(NATASHA *with candle passes through from one side to the other without saying anything.*)

**Masha.**

(*Sits up.*) She thumps about as if *she'd* started the whole conflagration.

**Olga.**

Masha, don't be so silly. You're the silliest one of the whole family. I beg your pardon, darling. (*Pause.*)

**Masha.**

I think I must make my confession, my dear sisters—I feel so deeply troubled. I'll tell you this very minute. (*She speaks in a very low tone.*) It's my secret, but you must share it. . . . I can't keep it to myself. (*Pause.*) I'm in love, in love . . . in love with this man . . . the man you saw just now . . . oh, why beat around the bush, I'm in love with Vershinin.

**Olga.**

(*Going behind the screen.*) That's enough. I don't want to hear any more.

**Masha.**

What can one do? (*Clutches her head.*) At first I just thought he was odd . . . then I was sorry for him . . . then I fell in love. Fell in love with his voice, with what he said, with his troubles, his two girls—

**Olga.**

(*Behind the screen.*) I'm not going to listen. I don't know what sort of silliness you are talking, I just won't listen.

**Masha.**

Olya, don't be ridiculous. I'm in love—it's fate. It's my destiny. And he loves me . . . it's all terrifying. Yes? Is it wicked? (*Takes IRINA by the hand and draws her closer.*) Oh, my dear . . . what are we to do? What will become of us? . . . You read novels and it all seems so stale and so obvious. But when you fall in love yourself then you realize that no one knows anything and everybody has to make up his own mind . . . my own darling sisters . . . I've told you everything and now I won't say another word. Like Gogol's madman—silence . . . silence.

(*Enter ANDREY followed by FERAPONT.*)

**Andrey.**

(*Angrily.*) What is it? I don't understand. Don't bother me.

**Ferapont.**

(*At the door, impatiently.*) I have told you ten times, for God's sake.

**Andrey.**

That's no way to speak to a city councilor.

**Ferapont.**

Please, sir, it's the firemen, they want to know if they can go through the garden to the river or else they have to lug the hose a long way around and that would be a terrible lot of trouble.

**Andrey.**

All right. Tell them it's all right. (*Exit FERAPONT.*) I'm sick of the whole business. Where is Olga? (*OLGA comes out from behind the screen.*) I've come for the key to the cupboard. I've lost mine. You have the little key, haven't you? (*OLGA gives him the key in silence. IRINA goes behind the screen. Pause.*) What a colossal fire! Now it's beginning to die down. That damned old Ferapont—made me furious. And I said something idiotic to him. "No way to speak to a city councilor." Nothing to say, Olga? (*Pause.*) Isn't it time to forget this silliness and stop pouting for no reason at all. . . . You are here, Masha, and Irina, too. All right.—Once and for all let's get everything out into the open. What have you got against me? Well?

**Olga.**

Not now, Andrey dear. We'll talk about it in the morning. (*Agitated.*) What a ghastly night!

**Andrey.**

(*Very disturbed.*) Don't be upset. I'm asking you perfectly calmly, what have you got against me? Just tell me straight out.

**Vershinin.**

(*Offstage.*) Tram, tam, tam.

**Masha.**

(*Getting up, loudly.*) Tra—ta—ta. (*To OLGA.*) Good night, Olga, God bless you! (*Goes behind screen; kisses IRINA.*) Sleep well . . . Good night, Andrey. Leave them alone, they're tired. . . . We'll discuss it in the morning. (*Exit MASHA.*)

**Olga.**

Yes, really, Andrey, let's leave it till tomorrow. . . .  
(*Goes behind screen.*) It's bedtime.

**Andrey.**

Just let me say this and then I'll go. . . . First of all, you've got something against Natasha, my wife. I've noticed it from the very day of my marriage. Natasha is a splendid, honest girl . . . straight and decent—that's my opinion anyway. I love and respect my wife, do you understand?—respect her. And I insist that other people respect her, too. Do you hear, she's an honest, decent girl. And let me tell you that all our misgivings were nothing but prejudice. (*Pause.*) In the second place, you seem to have a grudge against me because I am not a professor, not occupied in scholarly pursuits. All right. I'm a public servant. I'm a member of the city council. And let me tell you that I consider that just as honorable and noble as being a scholar. I am a member of the city council, and I'm proud of it if you want to know. . . . (*Pause.*) And in the third place, there is something else I've got to say . . . I've mortgaged the house without asking your permission. I know it was wrong. I'm very sorry. I had to do it because of my debts—thirty-five thousand. . . . I've stopped playing cards—haven't played for ages. But the best excuse I can make is that you girls have pensions and I—well, I haven't what you could really call an income. (*Pause.*)

**Kulygin.**

(*At door.*) Masha isn't here? (*Disturbed.*) Where is she? It's funny. (*Exit.*)

**Andrey.**

They aren't listening. Natasha is a splendid, honest girl. (*He wanders about, then stops.*) When I married I thought that we'd be happy, that we'd all be happy. But, oh dear God! (*He cries.*) My darling sisters, my dearest sisters, don't believe a word, don't believe a single word I've said. (*Exit.*)

**Kulygin.**

(*At door, disturbed.*) Where is Masha? Isn't Masha here? Funny thing. (*Exit.*)

(*Fire bells offstage. Stage empty.*)

**Irina.**

(*Behind screen.*) Olga, who's that knocking on the floor?

**Olga.**

The Doctor. He's drunk.

**Irina.**

What a night! (*Pause.*) Olya! (*Looks out from behind the screen.*) Did you hear? The brigade's going to be taken away from us. Transferred to goodness knows where.

**Olga.**

That's only rumor.

**Irina.**

Then we shall be all alone . . . Olya!

**Olga.**

Well?

**Irina.**

My darling, my dearest, I respect the Baron. I have a very high opinion of him. He's a really good fellow. I will marry him. I agree. Only let's go to Moscow! . . . Let's, I implore you! In the whole world there is no place like Moscow. Let's go! Olya, do let's go.

CURTAIN

## ACT FOUR

*Garden of PROZOROV's house—a long avenue of firs, beyond is seen the river. On the far bank of the river is the forest. To the right is a terrace; bottles and glasses on the table. It is apparent that champagne has been drunk. It is noon. Occasionally passersby make a shortcut through the garden on their way to the river; four soldiers hurry by. CHEBUTYKIN, in a relaxed mood, which is maintained throughout the act, sits in a garden chair waiting to be called. He wears his uniform cap and has his walking stick. IRINA, KULYGIN, wearing his order on a ribbon around his neck, having shaved his mustache, and TUSENBACH are on the terrace saying farewell to FEDOTIK, and to RODE, who are going down the steps of the terrace. Both officers are in fatigue uniform. TUSENBACH kisses FEDOTIK.*

**Tusenbach.**

You are a good fellow. What good times we've had together. (*Kisses RODE.*) Once more . . . Good-bye, my dear old fellow.

**Irina.**

Good-bye.

**Fedotik.**

Yes, I'm afraid it really is good-bye. We shall never see each other again.

**Kulygin.**

Oh, don't say that! (*He wipes his eyes, then smiles.*) Look at me! Blubbering!

**Irina.**

We shall meet again.

**Fedotik.**

In ten or fifteen years? Why, we should hardly recognize one another! We shall be strangers. . . . (*Taking a photograph.*) Hold it—one last snap. Over here in the light.

**Kulygin.**

Don't forget to wind.

**Rode.**

(*Embracing TUSENBACH.*) We shall never see each other again. (*Kisses IRINA's hand.*) Thank you for everything—everything.

**Fedotik.**

(*Angrily.*) Oh, shut up!

**Tusenbach.**

Please, God, we meet again. Write to us. Be sure and write.

**Rode.**

(*Looking around the garden.*) Good-bye trees! (*He shouts.*) Yoo-hoo! (*Pause.*) Good-bye, Echo!

**Kulygin.**

All being well, you boys will get married in Poland . . . your Polish wives will hug you and call you "Kochani." (*Laughs.*)

**Fedotik.**

(*Looking at his watch.*) Less than an hour left. Solyony's the only officer in our battery to go on the barge. The rest of us are going on foot. Three batteries are leaving today, three more tomorrow—peace and quiet will return in the town.

**Tusenbach.**

To say nothing of infinite boredom.

**Rode.**

Where is Masha?

**Kulygin.**

Masha's down in the garden.

**Fedotik.**

I'd like to say good-bye to her.

**Rode.**

Good-bye. We must go or else I'll start to cry. (*Embraces TUSENBACH and KULYGIN. Kisses*

IRINA's hand.) What wonderful happy times we've had here!

**Fedotik.**

(*To KULYGIN.*) This is for you—a little remembrance . . . a notebook with a pencil . . . We'll go down this way to the river. (*They start and look back.*)

**Rode.**

(*Shouts.*) Yoo-hoo!

**Kulygin.**

Good-bye. Thank you.

(*On their way out, FEDOTIK and RODE meet MASHA and say good-bye; she leaves with them.*)

**Irina.**

They've gone. (*She sits on the bottom step of the terrace.*)

**Chebutykin.**

They forgot to say good-bye to me.

**Irina.**

Why should they say good-bye to you?

**Chebutykin.**

Why, yes, I forgot. I'll be seeing them soon. I'm leaving tomorrow. Yes . . . only one day more. In a year I shall be retired. I'll come back, dear, and end my days with you. Only a year till I get my pension. . . . (*Puts one newspaper in his pocket, gets out another.*) I'll come back to you. And I'll be a reformed character—I shall be so quiet . . . God-fearing . . . well-behaved.

**Irina.**

Quite right, my dear. A reformation is quite in order.

**Chebutykin.**

Yes, I think so myself. (*Sings quietly.*) Ta-ra-ra-boom-de-ay.

**Kulygin.**

The Doctor is incapable of reformation. Incapable.

**Chebutykin.**

You could whip me into shape.

**Irina.**

Fyodor's shaved off his mustache. I can hardly bear to look at him.

**Kulygin.**

What's wrong?

**Chebutykin.**

I could tell you what your physiognomy resembles, but I mustn't.

**Kulygin.**

Oh well, you see, this is the thing—this is the *modus vivendi*. Our Headmaster is clean-shaven, so the moment I became assistant head, I shaved off my mustache. Nobody likes it, but what do I care. I'm content. Mustache or no mustache—I'm content either way.

(ANDREY passes with a child asleep in a baby carriage.)

**Irina.**

Doctor, my own dearest darling, I'm so anxious. You were on the boulevard yesterday. Please tell me what happened there?

**Chebutykin.**

What happened? Nothing happened. Nothing to speak of. (*Reads newspaper.*) Oh well, it's all the same.

**Kulygin.**

They say that Solyony and the Baron met on the boulevard yesterday near the theater . . .

**Tusenbach.**

Oh stop it! . . . For goodness sake! (*Makes a gesture of dismissal and goes into the house.*)

**Kulygin.**

. . . Near the theater . . . Solyony kept badgering the Baron who lost his temper and insulted him.

**Chebutykin.**

I don't know anything about it, it's all ridiculous.

**Kulygin.**

A teacher in a seminary wrote "ridiculous" on a paper and the pupil thought it was a Latin word and wrote *ridiculus, ridiculior, ridiculissimus*. Did you ever hear anything so killing? They say that Solyony is in love with Irina and detests the Baron. . . . It's understandable enough. Irina's such a good girl. She's really like Masha—they are both the quiet kind. Only you

are gentler, Irina—but, of course, Masha's gentle, too. I love her, dear Masha.

(*Offstage: "Yoo-hoo!"*)

**Irina.**

(*Shuddering.*) I don't know why, but everything frightens me today. (*Pause.*) I'm all ready to go. After dinner I shall send my luggage off. The Baron and I are getting married tomorrow, and tomorrow we are off to the brickworks, and the day after that I shall start teaching at the school in the works. A new life will begin. I expect everything will be all right. Do you know when I passed my teaching exam, I actually cried for joy and thankfulness. (*Pause.*) The horse and cart will be coming for the luggage.

**Kulygin.**

Yes, of course, that's right; but none of this is really serious—it's all just a lot of fancy ideas, nothing really serious. Still I do wish you happiness from the very bottom of my heart.

**Chebutykin.**

(*Emotionally.*) My own dearest darling—my jewel. You've gone far ahead. I can't catch up with you. I am left behind. Like some old bird who can't keep up with the rest of the flock. But fly away, my darlings, you fly away—and God be with you. (*Pause.*) You know you ought never to have shaved off that mustache.

**Kulygin.**

That'll do. (*Sighs.*) Today that brigade will leave and everything will settle back into its old course. Whatever people say, Masha is good and honorable. I love her dearly, and I'm content with my fate. Fates are so different. A man called Kosereff works in the tax office. He was at school with me. He was dropped at the fifth grade because he couldn't do *ut consecutivum*. Now he's hard up. His health is gone to pieces. When we meet I say to him: "How are you

*ut consecutivum*,” and he says: “Right you are! That’s me *ut consecutivum*.” . . . and then he starts coughing and coughing. But I’ve been lucky all my life. I’m content. I even have the order of Saint Stanislaus of the Second Class and here I am *teaching ut consecutivum*. Of course, I’m intelligent, more intelligent than a lot of people. But, of course, that doesn’t make you happy.

(In the house “The Maiden’s Prayer” is heard at the piano.)

**Irina.**

After tonight I shan’t ever have to listen to that “Maiden’s Prayer”! I shan’t ever have to meet Protopopov. (*Pause.*) Protopopov, if you please, in our drawing room, sitting there this very minute, as usual.

**Kulygin.**

Isn’t the Headmistress here yet?

**Irina.**

No, we’ve sent for her. If you only knew how hard it is for me to live here by myself, without Olga. . . . She lives in the high school; she is the Headmistress; busy all day long. So I am alone, I’m bored, I have nothing to do—the room I live in is hateful . . . so I’ve made up my mind. If I’m not to be in Moscow, so be it. It’s fate. And there’s nothing to be done. Everything is as God wills, that’s true. The Baron has asked me to marry him. . . . Oh, well—I thought it over and accepted him. He’s a good man, you can hardly believe how good . . . and suddenly I felt as if my soul was on wings—I’ve become more cheerful, more at ease, and once again I am eager to work, work . . . . But yesterday something happened; there is some kind of mystery hanging over me.

**Chebutykin.**

Nonsense! *Ridiculissimus!*

**Natasha.**

(*Speaking from the window very coyly.*) The Headmistress!

**Kulygin.**

The Headmistress has come. Let's go.

(Goes into the house with IRINA. CHEBUTYKIN reads the newspaper, whistles quietly, then sings, "Ta-ra-ra-boom-de-ay." MASHA approaches; in the background ANDREY passes with a baby carriage.)

**Masha.**

Sitting. Just sitting.

**Chebutykin.**

What about it?

**Masha.**

(Sits down.) Nothing. (Pause.) Were you in love with my mother?

**Chebutykin.**

Very much so.

**Masha.**

And was she in love with you?

**Chebutykin.**

(After a pause.) D'you know, I can't remember.

**Masha.**

Is "Mine" here? Our cook Marfa used to speak about her policeman as "Mine." Is "Mine" here?

**Chebutykin.**

Not yet.

**Masha.**

When happiness is offered in little pieces and for moments at a time and then snatched away, by degrees one becomes hard and bitter. (Points to her breast.) I'm in a ferment. . . . (Indicates ANDREY.) Take my dear brother Andrey for example—all our hopes for him are dashed. Thousands of people raised the bell, with immense labor and expense; and suddenly the bell crashes down and breaks to pieces—without rhyme and reason. That's how it was with Andrey. . . .

**Andrey.**

Shall we ever have peace and quiet in the house?  
Such a racket!

**Chebutykin.**

Soon. (Looks at watch.) This is a good old watch. It strikes the hours. (Winds up watch, which strikes.)

100 / Act IV

First, second, and fifth batteries will leave at one o'clock precisely. (*Pause.*) And I tomorrow.

**Andrey.**

For good?

**Chebutykin.**

I don't know. Maybe I'll come back in a year.... Devil knows. . . . Anyway, it's all the same.

*(Far away a harp and violin are heard.)*

**Andrey.**

The town will be empty . . . sort of under a blanket. (*Pause.*) Something happened yesterday near the theater; everybody's talking about it, but I don't know what it was.

**Chebutykin.**

It was nothing. Nothing special. Solyony kept badgering the Baron. The Baron lost his temper and insulted him, and finally things got ugly and Solyony had to challenge him. (*Looks at watch.*) I believe it's time now. . . . Half past twelve, in the clearing in the forest—over there beyond the river—Piff! Paff! (*Laughs.*) Solyony thinks he's Lermontov. He even writes poetry. Joking apart, it's his third duel.

**Masha.**

Whose?

**Chebutykin.**

Solyony's.

**Masha.**

And the Baron?

**Chebutykin.**

What about him?

**Masha.**

What a mess it all is! (*Pause.*) I say they shouldn't be allowed to fight. He may wound the Baron—even kill him.

**Chebutykin.**

The Baron's a good fellow, but one baron more or less. What difference does it make? Let them fight, it's all the same.

*(Offstage: "Yoo-hoo!")*

**Chebutykin.**

Just wait. That's Skortzov calling—the Baron's second. He's waiting in a rowboat. (*Pause.*)

**Andrey.**

In my opinion dueling is utterly immoral. It's immoral even to be present at a duel, even as a doctor.

**Chebutykin.**

It only seems to be so. . . . We don't exist, nothing on this earth exists—there is no reality, things only seem to be real. So there you are, it's all the same.

**Masha.**

Nothing but talk, talk, talk, all day long. (*She moves about.*) The skies are falling and all we do is talk. (*She stops.*) I won't go into the house—I can't go in. Let me know when Vershinin comes. (*She goes into the garden.*) The birds are already flying south. (*She looks up.*) Wild geese or swans . . . my dears, so free—so free from care. (*Exit MASHA.*)

**Andrey.**

Our house will be empty. The officers are leaving, you are leaving; my sister's getting married. I shall be left in the house alone.

**Chebutykin.**

And your wife? . . .

(FERAPONT *comes in with papers.*)

**Andrey.**

Ah, my wife! She's a decent, honorable woman, a nice woman even, but in spite of that there is something in her which reduces her to a blind, scruffy little animal. Certainly she's not a human being. I'm telling you this as a friend, the only person to whom I can speak quite freely. I love Natasha—I really do. But sometimes, she seems so unspeakably common that I'm at a complete loss to understand how I can love her so—or anyway, how I used to love her.

**Chebutykin.**

My dear friend, I'm leaving tomorrow and very likely we shall never meet again. So here is some advice: Put on your hat, take your stick in your hand and

clear out—keep right on without looking back. Go. And the farther, the better.

(SOLYONY passes across with the officers. He sees CHEBUTYKIN, turns to him. The officers go on.)

**Solyony.**

It's time, Doctor. It's already half-past. (*Greets ANDREY.*)

**Chebutykin.**

Coming. I'm sick of you all. (*To ANDREY.*) If anyone asks for me, my dear, just say I'll be right back. (*Sighs.*) Oh, ho, ho.

**Solyony.**

Before he was fully aware he was crushed in the arms of a bear. (*To Doctor.*) You creak like a rusty old gate! Are you all right?

**Chebutykin.**

Fit as a fiddle.

**Solyony.**

There is no cause for the old boy to get upset. I won't let things go too far. I'll just wing him like a woodcock. (*Scents his hands.*) I've used a whole bottle today and still they smell . . . the smell of a dead body. (*Pause.*) Yes. Do you remember the lines: "Restless he waits the breaking of a storm, as if the storm should bring him peace?"

**Chebutykin.**

Before he was fully aware he was crushed in the arms of a bear.

(*Exit with SOLYONY.*)

(*Offstage: "Yoo-hoo!"*)

**Ferapont.**

The papers must be signed.

**Andrey.**

(*Nervously.*) Leave me alone. Leave me alone, please.

(*Exit ANDREY with baby carriage.*)

**Ferapont.**

But that's what papers are for—to be signed.

(Goes to back of stage. Enter IRINA and TUSENBACH, latter in a straw hat. KULYGIN crosses shouting "Masha! Masha!")

**Tusenbach.**

I think he's the only person in town who'll be glad the brigade is leaving.

**Irina.**

One can understand why. (Pause.) Our town will be empty now.

**Tusenbach.**

Darling, I'll be back quite soon.

**Irina.**

Where are you going?

**Tusenbach.**

I have to go to town. Then . . . I must see the fellows off.

**Irina.**

You are not telling the truth . . . why are you so evasive today? (Pause.) What happened yesterday near the theater?

**Tusenbach.**

(With an impatient movement.) I'll be back in an hour and be with you again. (Kisses her hands.) My perfection! (Gazes intently into her eyes.) I've been in love with you for five years and it still amazes me. You seem lovelier and lovelier. How beautiful your hair is! What eyes! Tomorrow I am taking you away. We'll work, we'll do well, my dreams will come to pass. You will be happy. But there is just one thing—one thing: You don't love me!

**Irina.**

That is not in my power. I'll be your wife, your faithful and obedient wife. But love is not there. What can I do? (She weeps.) I have never been in love in my life. I have dreamed of it, yes, dreamed for years, day and night. Do you know what my heart is like? It is like a piano—a fine and noble tone—but the case is locked and the key can't be found. (Pause.) You look so absent.

**Tusenbach.**

I didn't sleep all night. There is nothing in my life to make me afraid. Just this lost key haunts me and keeps me awake at night. Say something. (*Pause.*) Say something.

**Irina.**

What? What shall I say? What?

**Tusenbach.**

Anything.

**Irina.**

No, I can't.

**Tusenbach.**

What little things, what little tiny trifles become significant for no reason at all. You laugh at them as you did before, you know quite well what little things they are. But you go on and feel that you have no power to stop. Don't let's talk about it. I feel wonderfully happy. I feel as if I were seeing those fir trees, oak, birches, for the first time in my life. And everything looks at me, questioning, waiting. How beautiful the trees are! And, when you come right down to it, how beautiful life should be where there are such trees. (*Offstage: "Yoo-hoo!"*) I must go. It's time. . . . That tree is dead. And there it is still waving in the wind with the others. I can't help thinking that if I die, I shall still be part of life in some way or another. Good-bye my darling. (*Kisses her hands.*) The papers you gave me are on your desk under the calendar.

**Irina.**

I'm going with you.

**Tusenbach.**

(*In alarm.*) No. No. (*Goes quickly down to the river, then stops.*)

**Irina.**

Yes?

**Tusenbach.**

(*Not knowing what to say.*) I didn't have any coffee this morning. Ask them to have some ready. (*Quick exit.*)

(IRINA stays deep in thought; then goes to the

back of the stage and sits in the swing. Enter ANDREY with baby carriage. FERAPONT appears.)

**Ferapont.**

But those papers aren't mine. They're from the council. I didn't make them up.

**Andrey.**

Where have they gone? For what? What has become of those days when I was young and lively and clever, when I was full of dreams, when my imagination soared, when my present and my future glowed with hope? Why, when we've hardly begun to live do we become dull, gray, uninteresting, lazy, uncaring, useless, miserable? . . . Our town has been in existence for two hundred years. It has one hundred thousand inhabitants, not one of them but is just like all the rest. There isn't a single one capable of real achievement, now or in the past, not one learned man, not one artist, not a single one remarkable enough to excite jealousy or eager emulation—they just eat, drink, sleep, and then they die; others will be born and they, too, will eat, drink, sleep . . . and in order not to be drugged by boredom, just for a change, they fill their lives with prurient gossip, vodka, cards, lawsuits; and wives are unfaithful to husbands, and the husbands pretend not to hear anything or see anything, and this devastating triviality suffocates the children, and the divine spark in them is extinguished so that they, too, become pitiful husks—exactly like one another, exactly like their fathers and mothers. (To FERAPONT, *angrily*.) What do you want?

**Ferapont.**

Want? The papers have to be signed.

**Andrey.**

I'm sick of you.

**Ferapont.**

(*Giving papers.*) The doorman at the office was saying that in Petersburg in winter they had two hundred degrees of frost.

**Andrey.**

The present is detestable but when I think of the

future, oh how good it feels! How one's heart rises and expands, and far off in a faint shimmer of light, I see freedom. I see how I and my children will be free from sloth, from kvass, from goose and cabbage, from snoozes after dinner, from being no more than squalid parasites.

**Ferapont.**

He says that two thousand people died of cold. The people were scared. Maybe it was Petersburg; maybe Moscow! I can't remember.

**Andrey.**

(*Full of tenderness.*) My darling sisters, my wonderful sisters. Masha, my sister.

**Natasha.**

(*At window.*) Who's talking so loudly out there? You Andrey? You'll wake Baby. *Il ne faut pas faire du bruit, la bébé est dormée déjà. Vous êtes un ours.*

(*Angrily.*) If you must talk, then hand over the baby carriage to someone else. Well, Ferapont, take the carriage from the master.

**Ferapont.**

Very good, madam. (*Takes carriage.*)

**Andrey.**

(*Confused.*) I was speaking quite quietly.

**Natasha.**

(*Behind the window, petting her boy.*) Bobik! Naughty Bobik! Bad Bobik!

**Andrey.**

(*Looking at the papers.*) Very well, I'll look these over and sign where necessary. Then you can take them back to the office. (*Goes to the house, reading papers; FERAPONT wheels the carriage to another part of the garden.*)

**Natasha.**

Bobik, what is Mama's name? Mama's lover boy! And who is this? This is Aunt Olya. Say to Auntie, "How are you, Olya?"

(*Wandering musicians, a man and a girl, with violin and harp, begin to play. Enter from the house VER-*

SHININ, OLGA and ANFISA. *For a moment they listen in silence; IRINA approaches.*)

**Olga.**

Our garden might as well be the public highway. Such comings and goings. Anfisa, give the musicians something. (ANFISA gives money.)

**Anfisa.**

God bless you! (*Musicians bow and go.*) It's a hard life. They wouldn't go around doing that if their stomachs were full. (*To IRINA.*) Good day, my Irinotchka. (*Kisses her.*) My dear girl, I'm having such a time, you can't imagine! Such a time! I have my own little room at the high school—dearest Olga and I are together. God has granted me that in my old age. I have never been so well off, wicked old sinner that I am . . . lovely rooms in the high school, and I have a little bedroom all to myself with a bed. All at government expense. I wake up at night and oh, Mother of God, I say to myself, there isn't a happier woman in the world.

**Vershinin.**

(*Looking at a watch.*) We are leaving now, Miss Olga. It's time. (*Pause.*) My very, very best wishes. Where is your sister Masha?

**Irina.**

Somewhere in the garden. I'll go and look for her.

**Vershinin.**

Thank you. I haven't much time.

**Anfisa.**

I'll go and look for her, too. (*Shouts.*) Masha, dear? A—oo! (ANFISA and IRINA go to another part of the garden.) A—oo!

**Vershinin.**

Everything comes to an end, this is the parting of the ways. (*Looks at watch.*) The town gave us a luncheon of sorts—champagne, a speech from the mayor; I ate, listened, but all the time I was here with you. (*Looks around the garden.*) This has all become part of me.

**Olga.**

Shall we ever see each other again?

**Vershinin.**

I don't suppose so. (*Pause.*) My wife and the two girls will stay out here for a month or two; please, if anything happens, if they need anything . . .

**Olga.**

Yes, yes, of course. Don't worry about that. By tomorrow there won't be a soldier left in town. It will all be just a memory. Of course, for us a new life will begin. . . . (*Pause.*) Nothing turns out as you hope. I didn't want to be Headmistress. But here I am; and so I can't be in Moscow.

**Vershinin.**

Well . . . thank you for everything. Forgive me for anything I've done wrong. And of course, I've talked far too much—forgive that, too. Don't think too badly of me.

**Olga.**

(*With tears in her eyes.*) Why doesn't Masha come?

**Vershinin.**

What else is there to say before we part? What shall we philosophize about? (*He laughs.*) Life is difficult. To many of us it seems to be deaf, hopeless. But yet, one must own that the burdens become lighter and easier to bear. And it looks as though the time can't be far off when it will become simply radiant. (*Looks at watch.*) It's time I was off! In the past, mankind was given up to wars, life was entirely given up to marching, invasions, victories. But that's all past history—and has left behind it a tremendous void, which, as yet, we have found no way to fill. Mankind is seeking passionately for a way to fill this void, and will, of course, find it. Ah, if only it could be soon! (*Pause.*) You know, if you could combine the urge to work with the thirst for knowledge, and the thirst for knowledge with the urge to work . . . (*Looks at watch.*) You know, I simply must go.

**Olga.**

Here she comes. (*MASHA comes in.*)

**Vershinin.**

I just came to say good-bye.

**Olga.**

*(Moves thoughtfully away.)*

**Masha.**

*(Looking in his eyes.)* Good-bye. *(Long kiss.)*

**Olga.**

Come now . . . come.

**Masha.**

*(Cries desperately.)*

**Vershinin.**

Write to me. . . . Don't forget me. . . . I must go, it's time. Olga, dear, take her . . . my time's up. I'm late already. *(Deeply moved he kisses OLGA's hand, then again embraces MASHA and goes quickly.)*

**Olga.**

Now, Masha! Stop crying, my darling.

*(KULYGIN enters.)*

**Kulygin.**

*(Embarrassed.)* It's nothing . . . let her cry . . . let her. You are my own dear Masha, my good, good child . . . you are my wife, and I'm content in spite of all. . . . I've no complaints. I am not reproaching you in the least bit . . . and Olga here knows that's true. We'll start our old life all over again. I won't say a single word to you—not the least hint.

**Masha.**

*(Trying to control sobs.)* The green oak, the golden chain . . . I'm going out of my mind . . . the green oak.

**Olga.**

Control yourself. Pull yourself together. Bring her some water.

**Masha.**

I'm not crying anymore.

**Kulygin.**

She's not crying anymore . . . she's a good, good girl. . . .

*(Offstage in the distance a pistol shot is heard.)*

**Masha.**

The green oak . . . a green tomcat . . . green oak . . .

I'm all confused. (*Drinks water.*) Empty life . . . I don't need anything now . . . I shall be myself again in a moment. . . . It's all the same. . . . What is the meaning of curved shore? Why do these words keep haunting me? My mind is in a whirl.

(IRINA comes in)

**Olga.**

Control yourself, Masha, like a good girl . . . let's go inside.

**Masha.**

(*Angrily.*) I won't go in there. (*She begins to cry but immediately checks herself.*) I don't want to go into the house. I won't go into the house.

**Irina.**

Let's sit together and just say nothing. I'm going away tomorrow. (*Pause.*)

**Kulygin.**

Yesterday I confiscated this beard and mustache from a boy in grade four. (*Produces them and puts them on.*) Rather like the German teacher, eh? (*He laughs.*) Isn't it so? Aren't boys absolutely killing?

**Masha.**

You really are like that German of yours.

**Olga.**

(*Laughs.*) You know, he is!

(MASHA weeps.)

**Irina.**

That'll do, Masha.

**Kulygin.**

I really do look like him.

(NATASHA enters.)

**Natasha.**

(*To maid.*) What? Mr. Protopopov will look after baby Sophia. And my husband can take Bobik out. What a lot of trouble children do make. (*To IRINA.*) Irina, you're going away tomorrow. What a shame! Won't you stay just one week more. (*Sees KULYGIN and screams; KULYGIN laughs and takes off the*

*disguise.*) You wretch! What a fright you gave me! (*To IRINA.*) I've got used to you—I shall miss you dreadfully. I shall arrange for Andrey to move into your room with his violin. He can fiddle away there. And we'll put baby Sophia into his room. A simply, perfectly extraordinary child! *What* a little girl! Today she looked at me with her dear little eyes and "Mama," "Mama," she said.

**Kulygin.**

An extraordinary child—you are quite right.

**Natasha.**

So tomorrow I shall have the place all to myself. (*Sits in a comfortable chair. Sighs.*) Well, first of all I shall have the whole avenue of firs cut down. Then that oak, it looks so ugly in the evening. (*To IRINA.*) Darling, that sash doesn't suit you at all. It's not in very good taste. You should wear light colors. And everywhere around here I'll have them plant flowers, flowers, yes . . . such a heavenly odor. . . . (*Angrily.*) What is a fork doing on this bench! (*Going to the house and speaking to the maid.*) What is a fork doing on that bench, I should like to know. (*Shouts.*) Don't answer back.

**Kulygin.**

Here we go again!

(*Offstage a military march is heard. They all listen.*)

**Olga.**

They're going.

(*Enter CHEBUTYKIN.*)

**Masha.**

Our friends are going. Ah, well! . . . God bless them. (*To KULYGIN.*) Time we were going home. . . . Where are my things?

**Kulygin.**

I left them inside. I'll go and fetch them.

**Olga.**

Yes, now we can all go home. It's time.

**Chebutykin.**

Olga.

**Olga.**

Yes, what is it? (*Pause.*) What is it?

**Chebutykin.**

Nothing. . . . I don't know how to tell you. (*Whispers into her ear.*)

**Olga.**

(*Alarmed.*) Oh, no!

**Chebutykin.**

Yes . . . that's how it is. I'm tired, I'm really too exhausted to tell you any more. . . . (*Irritably.*) Oh, well, it is all the same.

**Masha.**

What's happened?

**Olga.**

(*Embraces IRINA.*) What a terrible day! I don't know how to break it to you, darling.

**Irina.**

What? Tell me at once. For God's sake, what has happened?

**Chebutykin.**

The Baron has just been killed in a duel.

**Irina.**

(*Crying quietly.*) I knew it. I knew it.

**Chebutykin.**

(*Sits down in a remote part of the garden.*) I'm tired. . . . (*Takes newspaper out of pocket.*) Let them cry. (*Sings quietly.*) Ta-ra-ra-boom-de-ay! Oh—it's all the same.

(*The three sisters huddle together.*)

**Masha.**

Just listen to the music. (*Band.*) They are going away from us. One has gone—forever. We are left alone to pick up our lives again. . . . We must go on living . . . we must go on.

**Irina.**

(*Puts her head on OLGA's breast.*) A time will come when everyone will know the reason for all this agony. It won't be a mystery anymore. Meantime we have to go on living. There's work to be done—work. Tomorrow I shall go away. I'll teach in the school at the brickworks. I shall devote my whole life where it's

needed. It's autumn now. Winter will soon be here—the world will be buried under snow, and I shall work—and work.

**Olga.**

*(Embracing both sisters.)* Listen to the music—so gay, so vigorous! It just makes you want to live. Oh, dear God! Time will pass and we shall be gone forever, we shall be forgotten—our faces, our voices, even the very fact that there were three of us. But out of our pain will spring joy for those who come after us. Peace and happiness will reign upon earth, and those who live after us will remember us kindly; they will bless us. Oh, my dear sisters, life is not over yet for us. Let us live. The music is so gay, so full of joy—I think in a little while we shall know why we are alive and the purpose of our suffering . . . if we could only know . . . could only know.

*(The music recedes further and further into the distance. KULYGIN, gay and smiling, brings MASHA's hat and cape; ANDREY pushes the baby carriage with Bobik in it. . . . CHEBUTYKIN sings softly.)*

**Chebutykin.**

Ta-ra-ra-boom-de-ay! *(Reads newspaper.)* It's all the same. It's all the same.

**Olga.**

If we could only know. If we could only know.

CURTAIN



ON A NEW TRANSLATION INTO ENGLISH OF THE  
THREE SISTERS

*by Tyrone Guthrie*

It may be asked what need there is for a new English version of *The Three Sisters*. There exist translations by Constance Garnett, the earliest and still the most popular; by Elizaveta Fen; and a version made by Stark Young about thirty years ago for American production. All are published and easily accessible.

Mrs. Garnett's seemed to us the most literal, the most literary, and the least actable. She, of the three, seemed to have the most sympathy for the emotional nuances of the play and, especially, for the philosophic flights of Colonel Vershinin. The other two were more prosaic, perhaps a little too matter-of-fact. Stark Young's version, while we thought it the most actable of the three, seemed, in spite of being the most recent, to be the most dated.

We have tried to use words and phrases which associate themselves with no particular time or locality. It is not easy to do this without being colorless; it may not even be possible. For this reason I suspect that any great classic ought to be re-translated every ten years or so. The original is great enough to transcend the passage of time and the necessarily exotic character of certain expressions and ideas, when translated into another language. It can hardly be expected that a mere translation should have a similar vitality.

My collaborator, Leonid Kipnis, is Russian born and was an habitu   of the Moscow Art Theatre. He was

able to recall inflections, groupings, nuances from more than one production of the play. He supplied the literal meaning of each word and phrase and suggested by analogy and comparison with similar phrases, not only in English but in French and German, what should be the intention of each phrase. I merely endeavored to express these ideas in speeches which should sound "natural" in the mouths of English-speaking actors, without losing the poetic and symbolic overtones of the original.

We have not attempted to be absolutely literal. For example, the Russian is full of expressions which, if rendered literally, would read: "My soul is unspeakably oppressed" or "My heart is filled with joy." Such expressions come perfectly naturally to Russians, but not to Anglo-Saxons. We are quite reticent about our hearts and souls. And, although I do not believe we feel less profoundly and sincerely, we express our feelings with more restraint. English or American actors, if they are to seem, or indeed to feel, "natural," must use less emotional tones and gestures than Russians, and the phrases written for them to speak must be less high-flown. This means that our English version may seem a little subdued in comparison with the original. But good actors can find the feelings inherent in very restrained language and can express it with matching restraint, often more interesting and more moving than overt displays of emotion.

I think perhaps it was the literalness of Mrs. Garnett's translations of Chekhov (a merit in many ways) which misled Western directors and actors and audiences into thinking that his plays were full of "Russian gloom" and that his characters were consumed by self-pity and an hysterical emotionalism very much opposed to the sort of behavior which we are conditioned to respect.

Clearly, Chekhov expected of his actors a display of feeling far less restrained than British or American actors would think suitable in the circumstances. Again and again his stage directions read "Weeping" or

"Through tears" in situations where a British or American dramatist, if he wrote any direction at all, might put "With some emotion" or some such indication of a far more restrained character. In other words, the performers of a translated play must do some translation of behavior if their performances are to seem "natural."

It is our belief that Chekhov is the supreme dramatist of the Natural school, far more so than Ibsen. But over and above the naturalism runs a current of poetry, expressed by his use of symbols and of leitmotifs, recurrent ideas and phrases associated with certain ideas. In this play the most obvious leitmotif is the repeated longing to go to Moscow. But there are others. The flight of birds, for instance; or the idea of life in the distant future, whether it will, or will not, be happier, more fulfilled than the present. These themes expressed, as it were, contrapuntally by different voices and in different contexts, give to his plays the character of chamber music. But the musical and symbolic and poetic values must, in our opinion, always be kept subordinate to the naturalism. If they are permitted to dominate the performance, then the commonplace characters and events are at odds with the poetry. The play will sound like a pianist, who plays in the bass in one key, while his right hand is playing in a far higher key. Besides, the humor of characters and situations will evaporate. If naturalism dominates, but the poetic qualities are subordinate but not entirely absent, then the poetry will irradiate the commonplace.

The actors, who, in our opinion, play Chekhov most appropriately are those who, while aware of the symbolic overtones, aware of the musical structure of the plays, nevertheless present life-sized and plausible portraits of commonplace and prosaic people who are immediately recognizable as ourselves and our friends. Only thus can the humor of the plays be expressed; only thus will the pathos seem a little laughable, and the fun a little sad.



## FROM CHEKHOV'S LETTERS

The following letters were translated by Constance Garnett, Louis Friedland and Sidonie Lederer. The translator of a letter is indicated by the first initial of the last name, in brackets, following the letter, [G], [F], [L].

*To Vl. I. Nemirovich-Danchenko*

[Yalta, November 24, 1899]

I am not writing a play at present. I have a plot, "The Three Sisters," but I shall not start on it before I have finished the stories I have on my mind [F].

*To A. L. Vishnevsky*

[Yalta, August 5, 1900]

I am writing the play; a goodly portion is finished, but as I am not in Moscow I cannot judge it. Perhaps it won't be a play after all, but a Crimean hodge-podge.

It is called "The Three Sisters," as you already know. I am writing the part of the high-school director for you; he is the husband of one of the sisters. You will appear in the customary uniform, wearing an order round your neck. The play is not for this season, but I'll have it in shape for the next. [F].

*To Olga Knipper*

[Yalta, August 14, 1900]

My darling, I don't know when I am coming to Moscow,—I don't know because, only fancy, I am actually writing a play now. It is not a play, but a sort of tangle. There are a great many characters,—perhaps I shall get in a muddle and give it up. [G].

*To Olga Knipper*

[Yalta, August 17, 1900]

Greetings, my dear, good little actress. I am writing my play, but visitors hinder me fiendishly. Yesterday from nine o'clock in the morning till evening, and to-day ever since dinner. Everything is in a muddle in my head, my mood is made petty, I am cross and every day I have to make a fresh start. [G].

*To Olga Knipper*

[Yalta, August 18, 1900]

My precious, I answer the questions that pop up out of your letter. I am not working at Gurzuf but in Yalta, and I am cruelly hindered, horribly and meanly hindered. The play is in my head, is already coming out, has got into shape and is clamouring to be on paper, but no sooner do I sit down to write than the door opens and some ugly face pokes in. I don't know how it will be, but the beginning has turned out fairly well, pretty smooth, I fancy. [G].

*To Olga Knipper*

[Yalta, August 20, 1900]

The play has begun well, I think, but I have cooled off to the beginning, it has all grown cheap to me—and now I don't know what to do. A play ought to be written, you know, without taking breath, and this is the first morning that I have been alone, that I have not been interrupted. But there, it's no matter. [G].

*To Olga Knipper*

[Yalta, August 23, 1900]

I am writing a play, but I am afraid it will be dull. I

shall write it and if I don't like it I shall lay it aside and put it away till next year or till I feel inclined to write it again. One season will pass without a play from me—there's no harm in that. However, we will talk about that when I am in Moscow. [G].

*To Olga Knipper*

[Yalta, August 30, 1900]

My dear Olya, I am alive and well and wish the same to you, actress. I don't write to you because you must wait a bit, I am writing my play. Although it's rather tedious I think it is all right, it is intellectual. I write slowly; that is something unexpected. If the play won't come out as it ought I shall put it away till next year. But I will finish it now, one way or another. [G].

*To Olga Knipper*

[Yalta, September 5, 1900]

My sweet, my angel, I don't write to you, but don't be cross, be indulgent to human weakness. All the time, I have been sitting over my play, more thinking than writing, but yet I fancied that I was busy and that I had no time now for letters. I am writing the play, but I am not hurrying over it, and it is very possible that I shall even come to Moscow without finishing it; there are a very great many characters, it's crowded, I am afraid it may come out indistinct or pale, and so it would be better to put it off till next season. By the way, "Ivanov" I did produce at Korsh's<sup>1</sup> immediately

<sup>1</sup> Korsh's Theater.

after writing it, but all the other plays I had by me for a long time waiting for Nemirovitch to ask for them, and so I had time to put in all sorts of corrections. [G].

*To Olga Knipper*

[Yalta, September 8, 1900]

I fancy it is a little warmer? Whatever happens, I shall come to Moscow on the 20th of September and stay there till the 1st of October. Every day I shall sit in the hotel and write my play. Write or make a fair copy? I don't know, dear granny. One of my heroines has gone a bit lame, I can do nothing with her and I am cross.

\* \* \*

Is Gorky writing a play or isn't he? Where did that paragraph in the "News of the Day" about the title "The Three Sisters" not being suitable come from? What tosh! Perhaps it isn't suitable, but I have no thought of changing it. [G].

*To His Sister*

[Yalta, September 9, 1900]

"The Three Sisters" is very difficult to write, more difficult than my other plays. Oh well, it doesn't matter; perhaps something will come of it, next season if not this. It's very hard to write in Yalta, by the way: I am

interrupted, and I feel as though I had no object in writing; what I wrote yesterday I don't like to-day. . . . [F].

*To Olga Knipper*

[Yalta, September 15, 1900]

. . . As for my play, it will be sooner or later, in September or October, or even November, but whether I shall make up my mind to produce it this season—that is uncertain, my sweet granny. I hesitate, because in the first place the play is not quite ready—let it lie on the table a bit, and in the second I must be present at the rehearsals, absolutely must! Four important female parts, four young women of the educated class I can't leave to Stanislavsky, for all my respect for his gifts and understanding. I must at least have a peep at the rehearsals. [G].

*To Olga Knipper*

[Yalta, September 28, 1900]

And so, keep well and happy. Oh, what a role there is for you in "The Three Sisters!" What a role! If you give me ten rubles you'll get it, otherwise I'll give it to another actress. I won't offer "The Three Sisters" this season; let the play lie a bit and ripen, or, as certain good ladies say about a cake when they put it on the table—let it sigh. [L].

*To Olga Knipper*

[Yalta, October 4, 1900]

My dear, if I come, it will be the 12th of October, not sooner. I will telegraph, that's certain. There has been a little hitch with the play. I haven't worked at it for ten days or more as I have been ill and am a little sick of it, so that I don't know what to write to you about it. I have had influenza, a sore throat and incessant cough; I had hardly begun to go out when I began having headaches, but now things are mending, I am already able to go out. The play will come off in any case, but it can't be played this season. [G].

*To Maxim Gorky*

[Yalta, October 16, 1900]

. . . On the 21st of this month I am going to Moscow, and from there abroad. Can you imagine—I have written a play; but as it will be produced not now, but next season, I have not made a fair copy of it yet. It can lie as it is. It was very difficult to write "The Three Sisters." Three heroines, you see, each a separate type and all the daughters of a general. The action is laid in a provincial town—it might be Perm—in the background military, artillery. [F].

*To V. F. Kommissarzhevskaya*

[Moscow, November 13, 1900]

"The Three Sisters" is completed, but its future, at least its immediate future, is obscure to me. The play turned out dull, verbose, and awkward. I say awkward because it has only four female roles, and its mood is duller than dull. Your artists would not take to it if I sent it to them at the Alexandra Theatre. Nevertheless, I shall send it to you. Read it and let me know if it would be a good idea to take it on tour for the summer. [F].

*To Olga Knipper*

[Nice, December 17, 1900]

... Yesterday I sent Act III to Moscow and tomorrow I will send Act IV. In Act III I have altered scarcely anything, but in Act IV I have made startling changes. I have given you many more words. (You ought to say thank you . . .) So for that, write to me how the rehearsals are going, what's happening and how. Write all about it. [G].

*To Olga Knipper*

[Nice, December 21, 1900]

The play is finished and sent off. I have given you a great deal more, especially in Act IV. You see I grudge you nothing, only do your best. [G].

*To Olga Knipper*

[Nice, December 26, 1900]

... Write how the rehearsals are going.<sup>1</sup> Which act is being done and so on. In fact, how things go in general and whether it wouldn't be better to put the play off till next season. [G].

<sup>1</sup>O. K. wrote, Dec. 13: 'To-day, dear, there was a splendid rehearsal of "Three Sisters"—the tones begin to come out—in Solyony, Chebutykin, Natasha, Irina and in me. Marya Petrovna (*i.e.* the actress Lilina, wife of K. S. Stanislavsky) has decided that I am the image of the papa, Irina of the mamma, while Andrey is his father in face and his mother in character. I have found the right walk for myself, I speak in a low voice. Only don't be afraid I shall overdo the roughness. To-morrow we shall go into the second act, on the 23rd we want to have the first dress rehearsal, in the rough. Marya Petrovna is delighted with her part, she makes her both bashful and free and easy. I don't see Tusenbach, Olga or Vershinin (Sudbinin) quite clearly.'

Dec. 16: 'To-day we blocked out the second act. To-morrow we go through it with Stanislavsky. I think it will be very interesting. He put in something of his own, of course—a mouse scratches in Masha's scene with Vershinin and there is a droning sound in the stove—but that, of course, is by the stage direction. Tusenbach pounces upon Andrey, sings: "My porch, oh my new porch!" all begin dancing, even Irina and Che-

*To Olga Knipper*

[Nice, December 28, 1900]

I was in such a hurry with the last act, I thought you needed it. It appears that you won't begin rehearsing it before Nemirovich returns. And if I had kept that act another two or three days it might have been much richer, perhaps. [G].

*To Olga Knipper*

[Nice, December 30, 1900]

I got a letter from Vishnevsky yesterday. He writes that he was magnificent in a dress rehearsal of the first two acts. No letters from Masha or Mother, so far, and of course there won't be any. I have written to a doctor in Yalta and begged him to write me how my family is getting on. They don't spoil me at home, my dear, and don't imagine in any case that I am an ungrateful beast. Are you by now going out and are you present at the rehearsals? Do you know of the changes I have introduced in Acts III and IV? And are you well up in Act II? Have they re-copied your parts or do you still read them from the old manuscript?

---

butykin. Afterwards when Tusenbach is playing the waltz, Masha flies out and begins dancing alone, then Fedotik seizes her, but she pushes him away (he can't dance), while Irina dances with Rode, and it is this uproar that brings Natasha in.'

Dec. 23: 'I can tell you nothing about the rehearsals—for the last six days I haven't been to the theatre.'

Vishnevsky writes that Sanin is playing Solyony and Katchalov Vershinin; the latter will not be bad, and if Sanin does not overdo it he will be exactly right. [G].

*To Olga Knipper*

[Nice, January 2, 1901]

Do describe at least one rehearsal of "The Three Sisters." Ought anything to be put in or taken out? Are you acting well, my darling? Oy, mind now! Don't make a mournful face in a single act. Angry, yes, but not mournful. People who have borne a grief in their hearts for a long time and are used to it only whistle and often sink into thought. So you may often be thoughtful on the stage during conversations. Do you understand? Of course you understand, because you are clever. [G].

*To Konstantin Stanislavsky*

[Nice, January 2, 1901]

I wish you a Happy New Year, and, if I may hope, a new theatre, which you will soon start building. And I wish you about five new and magnificent plays. As to that old play, "The Three Sisters," reading it at the Countess<sup>1</sup> evening party is absolutely forbidden under any circumstances. For God's sake, I beg of you, don't read it, not by any means, nor in any manner, otherwise you will cause me a great deal of anguish.

I sent Act IV off long ago, before Christmas, addressed to Vladimir Ivanovich. I have made a great many changes. You tell me that in Act III, when

<sup>1</sup> Tolstoy's wife, who was arranging a charity soirée.

Natasha makes the rounds of the house at night, she extinguishes the lights and looks for evildoers under the furniture. But it seems to me it would be preferable to have her walk across the stage in a straight line without looking at anything or anybody, à la Lady Macbeth, with a candle—that way the scene would be shorter and more bloodcurdling. . . . [L].

*To Olga Knipper*

[Nice, January 14, 1901]

Why do you write nothing about "The Three Sisters"? How is the play going? You have only written about Sanin and Meierhold, but nothing about the play in general, and I suspect my play will be a failure, and when I saw Nemirovich-Danchenko here and talked to him I felt very dreary and fancied that the play will certainly be a failure and that I shall write no more for the Art Theatre. [G].

*To Joasaph Tikhomirov*

[Nice, January 14, 1901]

I have just received your letter—you have given me great pleasure and I thank you enormously. Here are the answers to your questions:

1. Irina does not know that Tusenbach is having a duel, but surmises that something went wrong that may have grave, not to say tragic, consequences. And when a woman guesses, she says, "I knew it, I knew it."

2. Chebutykin only sings the words, "Would it not please you to accept this date . . ." These are words from an operetta which was given some time ago at the Hermitage. I don't remember its title, but you can make inquiries, if you wish, from Shechtel the architect (private house, near the Yermolayev Church). Chebutykin must not sing anything else or his exit will be too prolonged.

3. Solyony actually believes he looks like Lermontov; but of course he doesn't—it is silly even to consider a resemblance. He should be made up to look like Lermontov. The likeness to Lermontov is immense, but only in the opinion of Solyony himself. [L].

*To Konstantin Stanislavsky*

[Nice, January 15, 1901]

Many thanks for your letter. Of course you are a thousand times right, it wouldn't do at all to show Tusenbach's body. I myself felt it when I wrote the play and spoke to you of it, if you will recall. That the finale reminds one of "Uncle Vanya" is a minor evil. "Uncle Vanya" happens to be my own play, and not someone else's, and when you are reminiscent of yourself in your works, people will say that is the way it should be. Chebutykin doesn't talk, but sings the phrase, "Would it not please you to accept this date." It is from an operetta, I don't remember which one, not if my life depended on it. . . . [L].

*To Olga Knipper*

[Nice, January 17, 1901]

Of course the third act must be taken slowly on the

stage, that it may be felt that they are exhausted and sleepy. . . . How could a noise come in? There are stage directions where there should be ringing. [G].

*To Olga Knipper*

[Nice, January 20, 1901]

. . . Well, how are "The Three Sisters"? Judging from your letters, you are all talking unconscionable nonsense. In Act III there is noise, why noise? There should only be noise in the distance behind the scenes, a confused hollow noise, but here on the stage all are exhausted, almost asleep. If you spoil the third act, the whole play is done for, and I shall be hissed in my old age. Stanislavsky in his letters praises you very much and Vishnevsky also. And though I don't see you I praise you too. Vershinin pronounces 'tram-tram-tram' by way of a question and you by way of an answer, and that seems to you such an original joke that you utter your 'tram-tram' with a little laugh, you call out 'tram-tram' and laugh not loudly, but just audibly. You must not make the sort of face you do in "Uncle Vanya," but look younger and more full of life. Remember that you are given to laughing and being cross. But there, I rely upon you, my darling, you are a good actress.

I said at the time that it was unsuitable to carry Tusenbach's dead body across your stage, but Stanislavsky insisted that they couldn't do without the dead body. I wrote to him not to carry the dead body across, but I don't know whether he had my letter. If the play's a failure, I will go to Monte Carlo and lose till I can't see straight. [G].

*To Olga Knipper*

[Nice, January 24, 1901]

... I hear from you that in the third act two of you lead Irina in supported on each arm. What's that for? Is that in your mood? You ought not to leave your sofa. And can't Irina come in by herself? Why these innovations? The Colonel<sup>1</sup> has sent me a long letter, he complains of Fedotik, Rode and Solyony. He complains of Vershinin, his immorality, upon my soul he seduces another man's wife! I think, though, that that Colonel has done what I asked him, that is, the soldiers will be dressed like soldiers. The three sisters and Natasha he praises highly, by the way. He praises Tusenbach too. [G].

*To Olga Knipper*

[Sunday, January 28, 1901]

My precious, Masha's repentance in Act III isn't repentance at all, but only frank conversation. Take it nervously, but not desperately, don't scream, smile just occasionally, and the great thing is to do it so that the exhaustion of night may be felt. And that it may be felt that you are cleverer than your sisters, think yourself cleverer, anyway. [G].

<sup>1</sup> Colonel V. A. Petrov, who advised on military uniforms for the play.

*To Olga Knipper*

[Yalta, March 1, 1901]

I personally am giving up the theatre altogether, I am never going to write for the stage again. Writing for the stage is possible in Germany, in Sweden, even in Spain, but not in Russia, because dramatic authors are not respected, they are kicked and not forgiven their successes and their failures. [G].

*To G. M. Chekhov*

[Yalta, March 8, 1901]

"The Three Sisters" met with great success. Ah, if only there were three good, young actresses, and actors who know how to wear military uniforms. The play is not intended for the provinces. [F].

## FROM CHEKHOV'S NOTEBOOKS

*Nat.*: "I never have fits of hysterics. I am not a pampered darling."<sup>1</sup>

*Nat.* (continually to her sisters): "O, how ugly you have grown. O, how old you do look."

To live one must have something to hang on to. In the country only the body works, not the spirit.

You won't become a saint through other people's sins.

*Kulygin*: "I am a jolly fellow, I infect every one with my mood."

*Kul.* Gives lessons at rich houses.

*Kul.* in Act IV without moustaches.

The wife implores the husband: "Don't get fat."

O if there were a life in which everyone grew younger and more beautiful.

*Irina*: "It is hard to live without a father, without a mother." "And without a husband." "Yes, and without a husband. Whom could one confide in? To whom could one complain? With whom could one share one's joy? One must love someone strongly."

*Kulygin* (to his wife): "I am so happy to be married to you, that I consider it ungentlemanly and improper to speak of or even mention a dowry. Hush, don't say anything. . . ."

The doctor enjoys being at a duel.

<sup>1</sup>This and the following few passages are from the rough draft of Chekhov's play, *The Three Sisters*.

It is difficult to live without orderlies. You cannot make the servants answer your bell.

The 2nd, 3rd, and 6th companies left at 4, and we leave at 12 sharp.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup>Here the fragments from the rough draft of *The Three Sisters* end.

## FROM MY LIFE IN ART

*by Konstantin Stanislavsky*

### "THE THREE SISTERS"

Now, after the success of both of Chekhov's plays, our Theatre could not get along without a new play from his pen. We began to attack Anton Pavlovich to have him fulfil the promise he gave us in the Crimea to write us a new play. We were forced to tire him with our continual questions and hints. It was hard for him to have us continually beating at the gates of his soul, it was hard for us to force ourselves to violate his will. But there was nothing else for us to do. The fate of the Theatre from that time on was in his hands: if he gave us a play we would have another season, if he didn't the Theatre would lose all of its prestige. Unhappily the health of Chekhov seemed to be on the wane. The freshest news from his quarters came from Olga Knipper from the Crimea.—Strange!—We began to suspect her.—She knew altogether too much about everything that was going on in Yalta—of the state of health of Chekhov, of the weather in the Crimea, of the progress of work on the play, of the coming or not coming of Chekhov to Moscow.

"Aha," said we, Petr Ivanovich and I.<sup>1</sup>

At last, to the pleasure of all, Anton Pavlovich sent the first act of the new play, still unnamed. Then there arrived the second act and the third. Only the last act

<sup>1</sup> A quotation from Gogol's "The Inspector-General."

was missing. Finally Chekhov came himself with the fourth act, and a reading of the play was arranged, with the author present. As was our custom, a large table was placed in the foyer of the theatre and covered with cloth, and we all sat down around it, the author and the stage directors in the center. The atmosphere was triumphant and uplifted. All the members of the company, the ushers, some of the stage hands and even a tailor or two were present. The author was apparently excited and felt out of place in the chairman's seat. Now and then he would leap from his chair and walk about, especially at those moments when the conversation, in his opinion, took a false or unpleasant direction. After the reading of the play, some of us, in talking of our impressions of the play, called it a drama, and others even a tragedy, without noticing that these definitions amazed Chekhov. One of the speakers, who had a self-evident Eastern accent and tried to display his eloquence, began to speak of his impressions with pathos and the common vocabulary of a tired orator:

"Although I do not agree with the author in principle, still—"

Anton Pavlovich could not survive this "in principle." Confused, hurt, and even insulted, he left the meeting, trying to go out without being noticed. He succeeded, for we had not understood what had happened, and least of all could explain the cause that had made him leave us. Afraid that it was his state of health that had forced him to leave the Theatre, I went at once to his home and found him not only out of spirits and insulted, but angry. I do not remember ever seeing him so angry again.

"It is impossible. Listen—"in principle'!"

At first I thought that the flatness and the out-of-place use of the commonplace phrase and the vulgarity of pronunciation had made Anton Pavlovich lose his patience. But the real reason was that he had written a happy comedy and all of us had considered the play

a tragedy and even wept over it. Evidently Chekhov thought that the play had been misunderstood and that it was already a failure.

The work of stage direction began. As was the custom I wrote a detailed *mise en scène*—who must cross to where and why, what he must feel, what he must do, how he must look—things that are considered strange, superfluous and harmful at the present time, but which were unavoidable and necessary at that time because of the immaturity of the actors and the swiftness of production.

We worked with spirit. We rehearsed the play, everything was clear, comprehensive, true, but the play did not live; it was hollow, it seemed tiresome and long. There was something missing. How torturing it is to seek this something without knowing what it is. All was ready, it was necessary to advertise the production, but if it were to be allowed on the stage in the form in which it had congealed, we were faced with certain failure. And then what would happen to Anton Pavlovich? And what would happen to the Theatre? Yet, nevertheless, we felt that there were elements that augured great success, that everything with the exception of that little something was present. But we could not guess what that something was. We met daily, we rehearsed to a point of despair, we parted company, and next day we would meet again and reach despair once more.

"Friends, this all happens because we are trying to be smart," someone suddenly pronounced judgment. "We are dragging the thing out, we are playing bores on the stage. We must lift the tone and play in quick tempo, as in vaudeville, without any foolishness."

We began to play quickly, that is, we tried to speak and move swiftly, and this forced us to crumple up the action, to lose the text of our speeches and to pronounce our sentences meaninglessly. The result was that the play became worse, more tiresome, from the general disorder, hurry and flying about of actors on

the stage. It was hard to understand what was taking place on the stage and of what the actors were talking. The prevalent mistake of beginning stage directors and actors is that they think that the heightening of tone is the quickening of tempo; that playing in full tone is loud and quick talking and strained action. But the expressions the "heightening of tone", "full tone", "quickenning of tempo" have nothing to do with the actor and all with the spectator. To heighten tone means to heighten the mood of the audience, to strengthen the interest of the spectator in the performance; to quicken tempo means to live more strongly and intensively and to live over all that one says and does on the stage. And in talking and acting so that the spectator does not understand either the words or the problems of the actors, all that the actor really accomplishes is the letting down and lowering of the interest of the spectator in the performance and the general tone of his spiritual state of being.

At one of our torturing rehearsals the actors stopped in the middle of the play, ceased to act, seeing no sense in their work and feeling that we were standing in one place and not moving forward. At such times the distrust of the actors in the stage director and in each other reaches its greatest height and threatens to cause demoralization and the disappearance of energy. This took place late at night. Two or three electric lights burned dimly. We sat in the corners, hardly able to restrain our tears, silent, in the semigloom. Our hearts beat with anxiety and the helplessness of our position. Someone was nervously scratching the bench on which he sat with his fingernails. The sound was like that of a mouse. Now again there happened to me something incomprehensible, something that had remained a secret to me ever since an analogous happening during the rehearsals of "The Snow Maiden". Apparently the sound of a scratching mouse, which must have had some meaning for me at an early period of my life, in conjunction with the darkness and the condition and

the mood of the entire night, together with the helplessness and depression, reminded me of something important, deep and bright that I had experienced somewhere and at some time. A spiritual spring was touched and I at last understood the nature of the something that was missing. I had known it before also, but I had known it with my mind and not my emotions.

The men of Chekhov do not bathe, as we did at that time, in their own sorrow. Just the opposite; they, like Chekhov himself, seek life, joy, laughter, courage. The men and women of Chekhov want to live and not to die. They are active and surge to overcome the hard and unbearable impasses into which life has plunged them. It is not their fault that Russian life kills initiative and the best of beginnings and interferes with the free action and life of men and women.

I came to life and knew what it was I had to show the actors. I had to show them what was to be done on the stage and how. And they also came to life. We began to work; it was clear to everybody that the dress rehearsal was not far away at last. Olga Knipper still had some trouble with her part, but Nemirovich-Danchenko worked privately with her. At one of the rehearsals something seemed to open in her soul and her rôle began to progress excellently.

Poor Anton Pavlovich did not wait, not only for the first night, but even for the dress rehearsal. He left Russia, giving his failing health as an excuse for going. I think there was another reason also—his anxiety over the play. This suspicion of mine was borne out by the fact that Chekhov did not leave an address where we could telegraph him of the reception of the play. Even Olga Knipper did not know where he had gone. And it seemed—

But Chekhov had left a viceroy in the person of a lovable colonel who was to see that there should be no mistakes made in the customs of military life, in the manner and method of the officers' bearing in the

play, in the details of their uniforms, and so on. Anton Pavlovich paid a great deal of attention to this detail of his play because there had been rumors that he had written a play against the army, and these had aroused confusion, expectation, and bad feelings on the part of military men. In truth, Anton Pavlovich always had the best of opinion about military men, especially those in active service, for they, in his own words, were to a certain extent the bearers of a cultural mission, since, coming into the farthest corners of the provinces, they brought with them new demands on life, knowledge, art, happiness, and joy. Chekhov least of all desired to hurt the self-esteem of the military men.

During the dress rehearsals we received a letter from Chekhov abroad, but again there was no mention of his address. His letter stated, "Cross out the whole speech of Andrey and use instead of it the words 'A wife is a wife'." This was typical, for it gives a good picture of the laconism of Chekhov. In the original manuscript Andrey delivered a fine speech which defined wonderfully and censured strongly the prosiness and smallness of many Russian women. Till marriage they kept alive in themselves a bit of poetry and femininity. But once married, they wore dressing gowns and slippers at home, and rich but tasteless clothes outside. The same dressing gown and the same tasteless clothes were apparent in their spiritual life and relationships. Is not this whole thought of Chekhov expressed without the use of unnecessary words in the secret meaning and the undercurrent of his short sentence, so full of helplessness and sadness: "A wife is a wife"?

FROM MY LIFE IN THE  
RUSSIAN THEATRE

*by Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko*

Before he sat down to the actual writing of a play Chekhov spent a great deal of time preparing the material. He had before him a thickish notebook, in which he wrote down separate phrases caught in passing or read somewhere, characteristic of his personages. When there was accumulated a sufficient number of details, out of which, as it seemed to him, rôles might be constructed, and after he had found the proper mood for every act, only then would he begin to write the play according to the acts. The persons of the play were by now perfectly defined in his own mind, and, according to a letter of his, as the play proceeded they remained unchangeable. He did not believe in dragging things in, and this he scrupulously avoided. The events of the play crept along even as life itself during this epoch, in a tired sort of way, without any visible logic. Human beings acted under the influence of chance happenings; they did nothing to build their own lives. Here is the substance of his first act: a birthday party, the spring, gaiety, birds singing, bright sunshine. And of the second act: triviality gradually takes into its hands the power over sensitive, nobly inclined human beings. Of the third act: a conflagration in the neighbourhood, the entire street is aflame; the power of triviality grows intenser, human beings somehow flounder in their experiences. The fourth act: autumn, the collapse of all hopes, the triumph of triviality. Human beings are as chess pawns in the hands of invisible

players. The absurd and the pathetic, the noble and the worthless, the intelligent and the stupid, are all interwoven and assume a form of peculiar theatrical resonance, become a harmony of human voices and external sounds; somewhere there is a fiddle, somewhere a woman street-singer with a harp, elsewhere one hears the wind blowing down the chimney, elsewhere the fire alarms.

From letters:

When I am to come to Moscow is something I cannot say, because—can you imagine it?—I am writing a play—well, not exactly a play, but a kind of tangle: there are many characters in it; it is possible that I shall go astray and chuck it.

I am writing a play, but if it shall fail to please me, I will put it aside, hide it till next year or until such time as the desire comes to resume it. There is still no rain. A barn is now being built in the yard. . . . I love you.

By the way, 'Ivanov' alone of all my plays was put on by Korsh the moment I finished writing it. The other plays reposed a long time with me awaiting Vladimir Ivanovitch, and for this reason I had plenty of time to make all sorts of revisions.

As regards my play, I shall have it finished sooner or later—perhaps in September, even in October or even in November. But whether or not I decide to have it produced this season is unknown to me, my dear little woman.

Yalta is still without rains. The poor trees, especially those which are on the hills and on this side: not a single drop of rain have they received all summer, and they have turned yellow. Thus also it happens that in a lifetime human beings receive not a drop of happiness. It must be that that is how it should be.

He arrived in Moscow in the middle of October. He has remained very much in my memory during this visit. He was energetic, gay, grown younger. In a splendid mood, he sat down to make a clean copy of his new play. And do you know, for a writer the best

and perhaps the only pleasant part of his labours is when he writes his final copy, when the so-called 'throes of creation' are already behind him. Olga Knipper had already had a great success as an actress; very soon she would be known as one of the most interesting of women; which meant that the male *amour propre* of Chekhov had its gratification.

It was during this period that he made the final copy of 'The Three Sisters.' We in the theatre read the play in his presence. He fought with his own embarrassment and several times repeated: 'I've written a vaudeville piece!' Later he would say the same thing of 'The Cherry Orchard', that he had written a vaudeville piece. Really we could not understand why he called his play that, when on the title of the manuscript he called it a drama. On the other hand, within fifteen or twenty years irresponsible theatrical men would juggle with the phrase.

When the actors, who had listened to the reading of the play, asked him to explain, he answered, as was his habit, with phrases which explained little: 'Andrey appears in this scene in slippers,' or 'Here he simply whistles.' In this respect he was much more precise in his letters: 'Human beings who have long borne affliction in their hearts usually only whistle or lapse often into thought.' The rehearsals of 'The Three Sisters' began while he was still in Moscow. Above all, he insisted on the accuracy of everyday truth. For example: as certain artillerists appear in the play, it was necessary that there should be present at the rehearsals an acquaintance of his, a colonel in the artillery; he also insisted that the sounds of the conflagration off the stage should be extremely verisimilar; and so on.

In December he left for Nice. I met him there toward the end of the same month. As always, he concealed his nervousness. There I received from him some corrections in the text of the play, with which I returned to Moscow. At this time he wrote to his betrothed: 'I feel a rust in my soul. If the play should fail, I would

go to Monte Carlo and play until I lost my last kopeck.'

But no matter how much he tried to hide behind a joke, he showed the true state of his feelings by leaving Nice a day or two before the first performance, without ostensible reason, and going to Algiers, then Italy, flitting rapidly from city to city—Pisa, Florence, Rome; in short, justifying the suspicion that he was running away from news of the results of the *première*. Or he would again put on his armour of indifference. After all, after 'The Sea Gull' this was his first new play, his return to the theatre. Not only a letter, but even a telegram failed to find him.

Towards the end of February he returned to Nice, where he first learned the details of 'The Three Sisters.'

This is what he wrote in a letter: 'It resembles a failure; well, it's all the same to me. . . . I am going to chuck the theatre and never again write for it. It is possible to write for the theatre in Germany, in Sweden, even in Spain, but not in Russia, where dramatic authors are not respected, are kicked with hooves, and their successes and failures not forgiven.'

'The Three Sisters' has remained the best production of the Art Theatre, not only because of the superb ensemble but also because of the fine *mise en scène* by Stanislavsky. It lacks the lyricism of 'The Sea Gull'; in 'The Three Sisters' the absence of spontaneity is compensated for by the wonderful craftsmanship. Quite apart from this, Chekhov did something in his play that is usually censured by the shrewdest dramatic critics: he had written a play for definitely designated actors. He, as a superb, if one may call him so, a dramatic, psychologist, excellently caught the artistic peculiarities of our young company and chose for this play, out of his literary baggage, such images as were closest to their artistic qualities. This also assisted the ensemble in no small measure.

## FROM RECOLLECTIONS

*by Maxim Gorky*

Reading Anton Chekhov's stories, one feels oneself in a melancholy day of late autumn, when the air is transparent and the outline of naked trees, narrow houses, greyish people, is sharp. Everything is strange, lonely, motionless, helpless. The horizon, blue and empty, melts into the pale sky, and its breath is terribly cold upon the earth, which is covered with frozen mud. The author's mind, like the autumn sun, shows up in hard outline the monotonous roads, the crooked streets, the little squalid houses in which tiny, miserable people are stifled by boredom and laziness and fill the houses with an unintelligible, drowsy bustle. Here, anxiously, like a grey mouse, scurries *The Darling*, the dear, meek woman who loves so slavishly and who can love so much. You can slap her cheek and she won't even dare to utter a sigh aloud, the meek slave. . . . And by her side is Olga of *The Three Sisters*: she too loves much, and submits with resignation to the caprices of the dissolute, banal wife of her good-for-nothing brother; the life of her sisters crumbles before her eyes, she weeps and cannot help anyone in anything, and she has not within her a single live, strong word of protest against banality.

And here is the lachrymose Ranevskaya and the other owners of *The Cherry Orchard*, egotistical like children, with the flabbiness of senility. They missed the right moment for dying; they whine, seeing nothing

of what is going on around them, understanding nothing, parasites without the power of again taking root in life. The wretched little student, Trofimov, speaks eloquently of the necessity of working—and does nothing but amuse himself, out of sheer boredom, with stupid mockery of Varya, who works ceaselessly for the good of idlers.

Vershinin dreams of how pleasant life will be in three hundred years, and lives without perceiving that everything around him is falling into ruin before his eyes; Solyony, from boredom and stupidity, is ready to kill the pitiable Baron Tusenbach.

There passes before one a long file of men and women, slaves of their love, of their stupidity and idleness, of their greed for the good things of life; there walk the slaves of the dark fear of life; they straggle anxiously along, filling life with incoherent words about the future, feeling that in the present there is no place for them.

At moments out of the grey mass of them one hears the sound of a shot: Ivanov or Treplev has guessed what he ought to do and has died.

Many of them have nice dreams of how pleasant life will be in three hundred years, but it occurs to none of them to ask themselves who will make life pleasant if we only dream.

In front of that dreary, grey crowd of helpless people there passed a great, wise, and observant man; he looked at all these dreary inhabitants of his country, and, with a sad smile, with a tone of gentle but deep reproach, with anguish in his face and in his heart, in a beautiful and sincere voice, he said to them:

"You live badly, my friends. It is shameful to live like that."

FROM ANTON CHEHOV

*by William Gerhardt*

His works are built up as though they were Wagnerian operas—on *Leitmotifs*. These themes are principally determined by the fact that each character in Chekhov is, as I have said, an isolated soul that, in essentials, lives alone in a world of its own creation through which it looks upon the life “that is” in a misty, half-uncomprehending way; and the blend, the clash, the incongruity of it is what moves us: there is beauty in that blend of comicality and pathos. There is Madame Ranevskaya, the owner of the Cherry Orchard, who has a world of her own—one can feel it plainly throughout the play—and only every now and then she comes down to earth to face reality, but not for long. And there is Anya, her daughter of seventeen, who also has her world and her “new life”; and there is the poor “eternal student,” who lives mostly outside the present. And what each thinks about he lets out inadvertently between relevant sentences in the colloquial way, and—strangely—it so happens that what matters to him most is to appear irrelevant to the company in which he lives. In *The Sea Gull* the young teacher always broods over his poverty and the fact that he has to keep a family on twenty-three roubles a month, while the estate-agent is always lost in reminiscence of theatrical news of the past generation. Thus, when the estate-agent relates how a famous bass, Silva, once took the low C, and a church cantor in the gallery

consternated everyone by booming out "Bravo, Silva!" a whole octave lower, the teacher only asks: "And what is the pay of a church cantor?"

The thematic construction is nowhere more apparent than in his plays. There is the young doctor's theme in *Uncle Vanya*, "Those who will live one or two hundred years after us." This is how he puts it in the course of a narration in the first act when he relates how a patient died before him under chloroform: "I sat down, closed my eyes—like that, and thought: those who will live one or two hundred years after us, and for whom we are now treading the path, will they remember us gratefully?" He takes up the theme again in the fourth act, thus: "Those who will live one or two hundred years after us, and who will despise us for having lived our lives so stupidly and so tastelessly—they may perhaps find the means to be happy, but we . . . You and I have but one hope. The hope that when we shall sleep in our graves, we shall see visions, perhaps even pleasant ones." And at the conclusion of the play Sonia takes up a theme which may, in part, be said to flow out of the theme I have quoted: "... and there, beyond the grave, we shall say that we had suffered, that we had cried, that our lot had been bitter, and God will take pity on us, and both of us, uncle, dear uncle, shall see a life lofty and tender and beautiful, we shall know gladness and look on our present predicaments, with affection, a smile—and we shall rest." It runs on: "We shall rest! We shall hear angels, we shall see heaven all diamonds, we shall see how all evil drowns in the mercy that shall engulf the whole world, and our life will be peaceful and tender and sweet, like a caress. . . ."

This passage is strikingly beautiful in the original. And it is interesting to note here that the particular element which lends it (and the final passages in *The Three Sisters*) its peculiar, disturbing beauty is perhaps the inadequacy, almost falseness, of the consolation. In the final passages of *The Three Sisters* that particular

emotional effect is even more crushing because, whereas Sonia, in *Uncle Vanya*, for the moment is really fervent about the things which are to make up for her thwarted life, the three sisters are not so sure of their consolations: hence the more disquieting effect of Olga's final speech in *The Three Sisters*—to which, however, I shall presently return. But there is, of course, an alternative (or even a simultaneous) interpretation of the final passage from *Uncle Vanya*, since Chekhov never disclaimed the possibility of immortality for the individual soul, if only as part of the "world soul," or something of that sort, something necessarily vague, of course. Chekhov's attitude was that he did not know one way or the other, but that he suspected that there may be a way which, by our present standards of logic, was neither one way nor the other, but somehow utterly another. Was it Ibsen who said that one can believe and doubt at the same time? At worst, extinction itself was a sort of bliss.

In *The Sea Gull* Masha's mother complains to Doctor Dorn, with whom she is in love, I think in the first or second act: "Our time is passing." In the third act, when she assists at the departure of the great actress and is reproved by her for crying, she answers: "Our time is passing." She takes a pathetic view of love; hence her tender solicitude over her daughter's unrequited love. The school master's theme in *The Three Sisters* relates to the headmaster's character, and he seems to be so concerned about his chief throughout the three preceding acts that one is not surprised to learn in the course of the last act that he has been promoted to the position of assistant headmaster. One is reminded at intervals that Solyony does not forget, even if we do, that he is like Lermontov, by his quotations from the poet. The old doctor's theme is that "perhaps we only think that we exist, when actually we don't," and that nothing matters. He shakes his head and mutters: "It's all the same! It's all the same!" And there is the old deaf messenger who comes round

at intervals with documents to sign and is ever waved aside by Andrey, whereupon he complains at last: "That's what documents are for, to be signed." He comes on again later and pleads: "Andrey Sergeievich, it isn't as if the documents were mine, they are official. I didn't make them." To which Andrey replies by a long soliloquy: "Oh, what has become of my past, and where is it?" and so forth in this strain, till he concludes with a question addressed sharply to the waiting messenger: "What do you want?" "What? Documents want signing," says the deaf old man. And this is answered with: "I'm tired of you." The play concludes with the documents still unsigned.

Irina has her "beautiful thoughts"; Moscow is the pivot on which her existence turns. The curtain falls on her in the second act as she wails all alone in her misery: "To Moscow! To Moscow! To Moscow!" And towards the end of the third act she tells her sister Olga that she had been always waiting till they should be settled in Moscow, where her real life would begin. She implores her sisters to go to Moscow, where they had lived as children before their late father, a general, had settled in the provinces. But they never get to Moscow, and one knows beforehand that, even if they did, it would be no solution of their essential problem. Nor is the reason why they cannot get off to Moscow by any means insurmountable: it is simply that for a thousand minor reasons they cannot get themselves to go there. One of the reasons is that their beloved brother Andrey is contemplating becoming a professor at the University of Moscow, and their plan is to remove to Moscow when the time comes for Andrey to hold the chair. But in the course of years Andrey falls in love with a local provincial girl, who, when he marries her, usurps the place of mistress of the household; and under the influence of provincial slackness he gradually abandons his professorial ambitions and takes up municipal duties, which largely consist of signing the documents which the deaf old messenger brings to his home.

And as the years advance Andrey takes firmer root in the provincial town, and, like him, his fascinating but now gradually withering three sisters take up uncongenial work, and as they are growing older, provincial life is gradually drying them up, and they will, despite their fading hopes, perish slowly where they are. Yet they are all remarkable and singularly fascinating women, who should have been destined to lead more interesting lives. The drama is that the people in this play go through their lives hesitating, conscious of its shortness and its consequent lost opportunities. For some of them it has already "flashed by like lightning," and they are full of regrets for the things they have left undone, and those who are in their full bloom are too wise, too sensitive, too apprehensive not to be aware that a similar fate awaits them: they are wretched because they are not doing things, not living fully, while life is passing by, and they cannot make up their mind "to live" for fear that their choice, which in the nature of things must needs exclude alternatives, may not be the real important one after all: they can do nothing because there are too many things that they could do. It would be better for them if they were dull and stupid; but they are represented to be the "feeler" of creative evolution. They are types and individuals at the same time. They tell a friend that their knowledge of foreign languages, for example, is a useless luxury in their provincial town, and are answered by the philosophically minded Colonel Vershinin that there is not a town, however dull, where an educated person is not an asset. "Let us assume," he tells them, "that among the one hundred thousand people of this coarse and backward town there are only three like you. Naturally, you will not conquer the dark mass which surrounds you; in the course of your life, little by little, you will have to give way and lose yourselves in the crowd, life will stifle you, but still you won't have vanished, won't have gone without leaving a trace; after you there might come already six like yourselves,

then twelve, and so on, until, finally, people like you will prevail." And as the play unfolds one is made aware how gradually and very slowly their lives have been changing; the progress of their years alone has been swift, the change in them has been infinitesimal. There is a tragic beauty about the three sisters, for they are too fine, too exquisitely sensitive for personal happiness. They go on working humbly, teaching with success, serving the purpose of the future happiness of mankind as much as lies in them to serve, and destined to die with their longings unsatisfied.

Throughout there runs Colonel Vershinin's theme: "In two or three hundred years' time life on this earth will be unimaginably beautiful and wonderful," and so on. This *motif* is first sounded by him soon after his appearance in the first act, and then recurs through all the succeeding three acts of the drama. In the second act he says: "Well, if we can't have any tea, let's philosophise, at any rate. . . . Let us meditate . . . about life as it will be after our time," and so on. In the third act he comments on the effect of the fire that has broken out in the town: "I thought that something of the sort used to happen many years ago when an enemy made a sudden attack, and looted, and burned. . . . And at the same time what a difference there really is between the present and the past! And when a little more time has gone by, in two or three hundred years, perhaps, people will look at our present life with just the same fear, and the same contempt, and the whole past will seem clumsy and dull, and very uncomfortable, and strange. Oh, indeed, what a life there will be, what a life! . . . There are only three persons like you in the town just now, but in future generations there will be more and more, and still more, and the time will come when everything will change and become as you would have it, people will live as you do, and then you too will go out of date; people will be born who are better than you."

Contrariwise to this, as if following the rule of

counterpoint, there runs the theme of Baron Tusenbach: "After our time people will fly about in balloons, the cut of one's coat will change, perhaps they'll discover a sixth sense and develop it, but life will remain the same, laborious, mysterious, and happy. And in a thousand years' time people will still be sighing: 'Life is hard!' and at the same time they'll be just as afraid of death, and unwilling to meet it, as we are."

In the first act Masha says about her dead mother: "Do you know, I'm beginning to forget her face. We'll be forgotten in just the same way." And Colonel Vershinin replies: "Yes, they'll forget us. It's our fate, it can't be helped. A time will come when everything that seems serious, significant, or very important to us, will be forgotten, or considered trivial." A little later Irina says to Baron Tusenbach: "You say that life is beautiful. Yes, but if it only seems so! The life of us three hasn't been beautiful yet; it has been stifling us as if it were weeds." Towards the end of the third act Irina sobs: "Where? Where has everything gone? Where is it all? O, my God, my God! I've forgotten everything, everything. . . . I don't remember what is the Italian for window or, well—for ceiling. . . . I forget everything, every day I forget it, and life passes and will never return, and we'll never go away to Moscow . . . I see that we'll never go. . . . I'm already twenty-three, I've been at work for a long while, and my brain has dried up, and I've grown thinner, plainer, older, and there is no relief of any sort, and time goes and it seems all the while as if I were going away from the real, the beautiful life, farther and farther away, down some precipice. I'm in despair, and I can't understand how it is that I am still alive, that I haven't killed myself."

This is, I need hardly say, the embryo of the theme that cumulates in a kind of stifled paroxysm which, by reason of the restraint placed on the emotions, is enhanced tenfold, indeed carried to the highest pitch and made wellnigh intolerable in the concluding pas-

sages, as the receding sounds of the military bands convey to our mind the marching off of the artillery brigade, and the three sisters, over-sensitive for their surroundings, find themselves alone once more. And though the brigade which is now departing to the strains of military music had caused no solution of their intimate problems, and though the presence of the officers who have bidden farewell to them had settled nothing, and such incidents as the fire that had broken out one night had only caused them to sit up till dawn, so serving as a background against which the better to set off their several emotions, yet, now that the last distraction has gone with the departed regiment, the climax is achieved. Even the news of the Baron's death in the duel is no real surprise to them: it is only in keeping with the unavailing nature of their plans; now they will certainly never go to Moscow.

It is a day of late autumn; the air is transparent and the outline of trees in the garden is sharp. The sky is pale, with a warning of winter, but it is not yet cold. The three sisters are standing on the open terrace, pressing against each other.

**Masha.**

O, how the music plays! They are leaving us, one has quite left us, quite and forever. We remain alone, to begin our life over again. We must live . . . we must live. . . .

**Irina.**

(*Puts her head on Olga's bosom.*) A time will come when everyone will know what all this is about, what all this suffering is for, there will be no more mysteries, but meanwhile we must live . . . work, only work! Tomorrow I will go away alone, I shall teach at the school and give my whole life to those who may want it. Now it's autumn, it will soon be winter, the snow will cover everything, and I shall be working, I shall be working . . .

The emotion that has by now accumulated would be enough to overwhelm mountains. But Chekhov was not an artist for nothing: in the few simple, colloquial sentences that follow, wherein, as in all great art, the particular is identified with the universal, there is compressed such stifling intensity of yearning that in a spiritual sense we gasp for breath. Here is your "‘trigger’ process, the release of enormous forces by some tiny movement”:

**Olga.**

(*Embracing both sisters.*) The bands are playing so gaily, so bravely, and one longs to live. O, my God! Time will pass on, and we shall depart forever, they will forget us, forget our faces, voices, and how many there were of us . . .

Granted they recognise the purpose of "modern culture" that is to culminate in the clear knowledge of the spirit of God some day, but not yet awhile, are they not to be allowed a squeak for their individual soul if it is to perish on the threshold of a kingdom wherein they shall have no part: are they not to be allowed a doubt—to kindle their faith, as a draught kindles a fire? Faith and doubt lie beyond each other—on whichever note you choose to end your little sermon. But here, too, Chekhov goes one step farther, and blends the note of race-hopefulness with a kind of personal weariness. The passage runs on, the intensity of yearning gaining in contrast by the ineffectual meekness of the consolation:

. . . but our suffering will turn to joy for those who will live after us, peace and happiness will reign on earth, and they will remember us with kindly sayings and bless those who are living now. O, dear sisters, our life is not yet at an end. Let us live! The bands are playing so gaily, so gladly, and it seems that in another little while we shall know why we are living,

why we are suffering. . . . If we could know, if we could know!

We are living on a higher plane; the atmosphere, as if before a thunderstorm, is charged with universal omen. Yet Chekhov, true to life, does not allow them to hold forth from the house-top: the three sisters speak half-audibly, as if each spoke to herself, and the other people present act in contrasting mood. Only a few moments earlier the old army doctor Chebutykin had been singing softly to himself the well-worn refrain, "Ta-ra-ra-boom-de-ay; this is our washing day"—a trashy tune; which only throws into relief the mood of the three sisters, the most searching of which the human heart is capable. The music the while has been growing fainter and fainter. The dull, complacent schoolmaster, who told Irina that her wish to lose herself in public work was "something not serious," and who boasted that he had got on because, unlike most people, he was intelligent, now brings out the hat and coat for his despondent wife Masha; they are going home, and he is smiling happily. Andrei, the would-be professor, wheels out the perambulator with the baby.

**Chebutykin.**

(*Sings softly.*) Ta-ra-ra-boom-de-ay . . . this is our washing day . . . (*reads the paper*). It's all the same! It's all the same!

**Olga.**

If we could know, if we could know!

CURTAIN

## FROM CHEKHOV THE DRAMATIST

by *David Magarshack*

One result of the conflict between Chekhov and the directors of the Moscow Art Theatre was the belief that Chekhov regarded *The Three Sisters* as a comedy. This curious idea is based on some obscure reference by Stanislavsky to Chekhov's dissatisfaction with his interpretation of the play on the ground that he (Stanislavsky) regarded it and *The Cherry Orchard* as tragedies. It is quite true that Chekhov was furious with Stanislavsky for insisting that *The Cherry Orchard* was a tragedy, but so far as *The Three Sisters* is concerned, there is no indication that Chekhov regarded it as anything but a "drama." It is significant that whenever Chekhov wrote a comedy, he always referred to it as such in his letters. *The Three Sisters*, on the other hand, is always referred to by Chekhov in letters as a "play," never as a comedy. And Chekhov's own description of it in the published text is: "A Drama in Four Acts." The only play whose exact nature Chekhov did not specify is *Uncle Vanya*, which bears the description Chekhov gave to *The Wood Demon*, namely, "Scenes from Country Life in Four Acts," a description he took over from Alexander Ostrovsky.

\* \* \*

The predominance of the chorus element in *The Three Sisters* creates a new kind of relationship between the auditorium and the stage, the spectator's perception

of the dramatic action being, as a rule, much more complex than that of the characters. This becomes clear at once from Chekhov's use of the messenger element in this play as an inseparable part of the chorus element. For instance, Olga's part in the opening chorus of the three sisters is mainly narrative in character so far as the audience is concerned. But the sisters themselves as well as Tusenbach and Chebutykin know the facts mentioned by Olga, such as the General's death, his funeral, his arrival with his family from Moscow eleven years earlier, and so on. The only thing about these facts which is of importance to them is Olga's reaction to them; it is the way in which she narrates them and not the narration itself that evokes their comments. But this dual method of treatment of the audience and the characters occasionally provides the spectator with a glimpse into the future which is completely hidden from the characters and in this way helps to intensify the play's suspense. Such an instance occurs at the very opening of the play. The fine spring morning which filled Olga with such a passionate yearning for home and made Irina feel that the whole meaning of life lay in hard work, brought nothing but unhappiness to Masha, the second sister, who is married to a dull-witted schoolmaster and who could hope for no change in her life from the projected return to Moscow. She decides suddenly to go home. Olga sympathises with her. "I understand you, Masha," she says, "with tears." It is at this point that Solyony makes one of his usual rude remarks about the difference between men's and women's intellects. Masha turns on him at once and asks him what he meant by his remark, adding mockingly, "you frightfully terrible man!" Solyony resents this characterisation of him just because it describes too well the affected ferocity of his manner with which he hopes to disguise his natural "shyness" and emptiness of soul. He replies quickly, "Nothing," but, to get his own back on Masha, quotes two very familiar lines from Krylov's fable *The Peasant and the Farm Labourer*:

"He had hardly time to catch his breath before the bear was hugging him to death." Now, the relevance of this quotation is obvious: Solyony is referring to the swift way Masha has pounced on him. But this quotation has a much deeper meaning, as appears immediately from the following dialogue.

*(Enter ANFISA and FERAPONT with a cake.)*

**Anfisa.**

Come in, my good man, come in. Your boots are clean. *(To IRINA.)* From the agricultural board, my dear, from Mr. Protopopov, Mikhail Ivanych—a cake.

**Irina.**

Thank you. Please give my thanks to Mr. Protopopov. *(Accepts the cake.)*

**Ferapont.**

Beg pardon, Miss?

**Irina.**

*(Louder.)* Thank Mr. Protopopov!

**Olga.**

Nyanya, please give him some pastry. Ferapont, go to the kitchen, they'll give you some pastry there.

**Ferapont.**

Beg pardon, Miss?

**Anfisa.**

Come along, my dear, come along. *(Goes out with Ferapont.)*

**Masha.**

I don't like this Protopopov, this Mikhail Potapych or Ivanych. You shouldn't have invited him.

**Irina.**

I didn't invite him.

**Masha.**

Excellent.

This is the first mention of Protopopov in the play, the same Protopopov who, though he never appears on the stage, will be responsible for the eviction of the three sisters from their house and the installation of Natasha and himself in it. From the very beginning, then, Protopopov makes his presence felt through his

unwanted birthday cake. But it is the sensitive Masha, the only true artist in the family, who perceives something ominous about him. She cannot help disliking him. And here Chekhov adds an unexpected touch, connecting Protopopov with the bear in Krylov's fable. Masha seems uncertain about Protopopov's patronymic and, as though still remembering Solyony's quotation, calls him Mikhail Potapych, the humorous name given by Russian peasants to a bear. (The familiar name for a bear in Russian is "Mishka," the diminutive of Mikhail—Michael.) Not one of the characters of course suspects that Protopopov will actually play the part of the bear in the two lines from the fable, but a Russian audience seeing the play for the first time could not help but associate, however vaguely, the very familiar two lines from Krylov's fable with Masha's "Mikhail Potapych." Indeed, Chekhov has here summarised in a symbolic form the whole peripetia element of the play: in the first act the three sisters are the owners of the beautiful house and the considerable fortune their father had left them, but in the last act the situation is completely reversed, for Natasha with the help of Protopopov (she is too stupid and too cowardly a creature to have schemed it all by herself) has evicted the three sisters from their house and grabbed their money. That Chekhov used the Krylov quotation deliberately (another instance, incidentally, of his effective use of literary echoes) because he wanted it to be associated with Protopopov is proved by the fact that he repeats it twice at the end of the play. It is again Solyony who quotes the two lines first. Solyony comes to hurry up Chebutykin, as he wants his duel with Tusenbach to be over as soon as possible. He means to kill Irina's fiancé and he means to do it before Irina leaves the house: his revenge will be more complete that way.

**Solyony.**

It's time, doctor. Half past twelve already. (*Exchanges greetings with Andrey.*)

**Chebutykin.**

One moment, please. I'm sick of the lot of you. (*To Andrey.*) I say, my dear chap, if anyone should ask for me, tell him that I shall be back presently. (*Sighs.*) Dear Lord!

**Solyony.**

He had hardly time to catch his breath before the bear was hugging him to death. (*Going with him.*) What are you groaning about, old man?

**Chebutykin.**

Well!

**Solyony.**

How do you feel?

**Chebutykin.**

(*Angrily.*) Fit as a fiddle.

**Solyony.**

There's nothing to be so upset about, old chap. I shan't go too far, I shall only wing him like a woodcock. (*Takes out his bottle of scent and sprinkles his hands.*) I've emptied a whole bottle on my hands today and still they smell—smell like a corpse. (*Pause.*) Yes, sir. Remember Lermontov's lines—and he, the rebel, the raging tempest seeks, as though in the tempest peace can be found.

**Chebutykin.**

Yes. He had hardly time to catch his breath before the bear was hugging him to death. (*They go out.*)

There is a double meaning in this repeated quotation of Krylov's lines: they refer not only to Tusenbach's coming death, but also—by a previous association of ideas—to Protopopov's triumph over the three sisters: a double triumph of evil over good synthesised with the help of two lines from a fable.

In a play where the chorus element predominates to such an extent that the whole inner movement of the action is subordinated to it, as is the case with *The Three Sisters*, the contrast between the realistic and

symbolic planes of perception assumes quite exceptional importance. That is why almost every character in the play has a number of symbols attached to him or her in order to emphasise the fact that they belong to a world of art rather than to ordinary life. Solyony is one of them, and it is his hands—the hands of a destroyer of life—on which Chekhov concentrates the attention of the audience. The very first words Solyony utters as he comes into the drawing room with Chebutykin are about hands. “With one hand,” Solyony says, “I can only lift half a hundredweight, but with two I can lift a hundredweight or more. From that I infer that two men are not only twice as strong as one, but three times or even more.” And a little later Chekhov makes him produce his bottle of scent and sprinkle his chest and hands. Towards the end of the second act after Solyony’s words, “I even look a bit like Lermontov—so I’m told,” Chekhov makes him again take out his bottle of scent and, this time, sprinkle only his hands. These two stage directions Chekhov only added to the text of the play published in 1902, which shows how much importance he ascribed to this attempt of Solyony’s to deaden the smell of decay which his hands seemed to exude. In the middle of Act III and at the end of Act IV, Chekhov gives Solyony the same stage direction, but it is only in Act IV that he supplies the reason for Solyony’s sprinkling his hands with scent.

Solyony, as has been suggested earlier, is a direct descendant of Fyodor in *The Wood Demon*, a villain with a literary background, but while Fyodor is a purely melodramatic villain, Solyony is a villain with a soul, and it is the utter emptiness of his soul that provides the key to his character and his actions. He cannot abide Tusenbach just because the baron has an aim to which he is ready to devote his whole life. Solyony has no aim except the satisfaction of his own selfish desires. When Irina tells Tusenbach that she is afraid of Solyony and that he talks nothing but rubbish, Tusenbach agrees that he is a queer fish, but he finds that it is his

"shyness" that is to blame for his rudeness. "When we're alone together," he says, "he is very intelligent and friendly, but in company he is rude and a bully." Solyony himself confirms Tusenbach's analysis of his character. In Act II he tells Tusenbach immediately after uttering his veiled threat ("I'm queer, but who is not queer? Do not be angry, Aleko!"—Aleko being the character of Pushkin's poem *The Gipsies* who in a fit of jealousy kills his wife and her lover): "When I am alone with someone, I'm all right—I'm just like the rest, but in company I feel depressed, I am shy and—I just talk a lot of nonsense. But all the same," he adds characteristically, "I'm a damned sight better and more honest than a lot of other people. And I can prove it too." He always gets involved in all sorts of absurd arguments, such as whether there is one or two universities in Moscow. (Chekhov was referring to the New and the Old University, the names the Moscow University students of his day gave to two different buildings of one and the same university.) These arguments prove both Solyony's utter ignorance and his resentment of the way people, whom he knows to be better educated than he, react to it. He does not care a rap whether he is educated or not, or whether he is right or not; what matters to him is his own opinion. If he says something, however absurd, it is right and he is "ready to prove it" by forcing people to accept it whether they agree with him or not. He is the typical fascist: he exalts his own neurosis to an article of faith. He is sincere in his love for Irina. "I'm sorry I behaved so indiscreetly and tactlessly a moment ago," he tells Irina at the end of Act II, "but you're not like the others—you're high-minded and pure—you can see the truth." This leads him quite logically to the conclusion that she alone could understand him, and having raised her to so high a pinnacle as to be the only person in the world to be able to understand him, it naturally follows that he expects her to reciprocate his love. Irina's blunt refusal to have anything to do with him (*Irina*. Goodnight!

Please, go away!) makes no impression on him whatever.

**Solyony.**

I can't live without you. (*Going after her.*) Oh, my joy! (*Through tears.*) Oh, my happiness! Lovely, exquisite, wonderful eyes, the most beautiful eyes in all the world——

**Irina.**

(*Coldly.*) Don't please!

**Solyony.**

It's the first time I've spoken of my love to you and I feel as though I am not on earth but on another planet. (*Passes his hand feverishly a few times across his forehead.*) Never mind. I can't force you to love me, of course. But I shall tolerate no successful rivals. I swear to you by all the saints that I shall kill my rival. Oh, my wonderful one!

It is in these last few words that the true Solyony is revealed. The idea that Irina might prefer someone else to him is something that he is incapable of accepting. If there should be such a man, he must be destroyed. And he does destroy him. It is the only way by which he can re-establish himself in his own estimation. No one seems to take him seriously otherwise. It is only with Natasha that he succeeds in getting his own back without having to resort to extreme measures. For in Natasha he meets his match in stupidity and selfishness. In the second act Natasha is just beginning to feel her way as the future mistress of the house. Her chief weapon is her little boy. To make the life of the three sisters as humiliating as possible, she invents an illness of Bobikin, since that would put an end to the Shrovetide festivities the sisters were planning for the evening. She overcomes her husband's objections by simply ignoring them. Then, flushed with her success, she comes into the drawing-room eager to pounce on anyone who would be willing to listen to her stories about what a wonderful child her Bobikin was. But the only

person she can get to listen to her is the always silent and morose Solyony. He listens to her prattle with feigned attention, waiting patiently for the right moment to crush her. Then he begins quietly, "If this child had been mine——" Natasha beams at him in expectation of some really nice compliment—"I'd fry him in a pan——" Solyony goes on slowly, enjoying the sudden startled expression in Natasha's eyes—"and eat him," he finishes with relish, and then walks quietly off into the drawing-room with his glass of tea and sits down in a corner, leaving the horrified Natasha to express her disgust with him as best she can. This is the only time Solyony can expect the audience to sympathise with him, for Natasha can make even an innocent child into a horror.

Chekhov was anxious that Solyony should not be acted as a melodramatic villain. In a letter to Olga Knipper, he insisted that the actor taking his part should not make him "too coarse."



## FROM THE ELEMENTS OF DRAMA

*by J. L. Styan*

The changes taking place in the mind of the audience during performance, and what it feels as the result of the impact of a play, cannot be discovered by any straightforward adding up of the sum of its parts. If the audience is affected by a growing unity, in which the parts gather added meaning from their place in the pattern, one cannot make a decision about a play's effect on the evidence of a single, even a final, suggestion. Thus the effect of Chekhov's *The Three Sisters* is not to be judged, even if the author wished it to be, solely by the sentiments expressed by Masha, Irina and Olga at the final curtain. The sisters say, as if in conclusive chorus, that they must go on living and working and trying to find out why they are suffering, expressing a desperate hope that life will be better for others. This is an example of an impression apparently working at odds with the trend of the scene. The accumulating impressions delineate people who cannot escape the consequences of their own natures. This is not a reference simply to the pointless death of Irina's suitor Baron Tusenbach, to the unlucky departure of the regiment commanded by Masha's admirer Colonel Vershinin, to the fact that brother Andrey's Natasha has a child by another man, or to the other painful events that serve as milestones in the last act. These events, followed by the apparently heartening conclusion from the sisters, are not to signify that fate is

playing the characters unkind tricks which they will rise above. If this were so, the ending would surely supply a false close.

This is a play about time, time that the sisters cannot restrain; their life is a dream that deludes them into inertia; they represent people searching for answers they will never hear because they are asking the wrong questions. Chekhov is too gentle to have them appear stupid, but at the end of the play time is still slipping through their fingers; even if Moscow has faded, they still hug their dream; do they not still ask the same questions as at the beginning? To define our final sensations by the final words of the sisters, simply because they speak, is to treat fictions as truths, characters as mouthpieces, and to disregard the contribution of the whole series of impressions. Is this a play of hope? Rather, of resignation and endurance. Is not Chebutykin *also on the stage*? The following is a hint at the kind of inspection this play should get if we wish to arrive at its composite meaning.

In the last five or ten minutes, it is as if Chekhov is writing terse dramatic footnotes to the previous scenes. He does not let the image rest. The pathos of Vershinin's parting from Masha is enhanced, while Masha herself is almost belittled, by the pathetic comedy of Kulygin, her dull schoolmaster husband, whose insufficiency as a man is likely to make her future even drearier.

**Kulygin.** (*Embarrassed.*) Never mind, let her cry, let her. . . . My dear Masha, my dear, sweet Masha. . . . You're my wife, and I'm happy in spite of everything. . . . I'm not complaining, I've no reproach to make—not a single one. . . . Olga here is my witness. . . . We'll start our life over again in the same old way, and you won't hear a word from me . . . not a hint. . . .

As Kulygin gropes for comforting words, and, quite unable to fathom the realities of his own position and

hers, finds comfortless ones, what is the audience thinking? That Masha is unlucky? That dear, kind Kulygin is a fool? Neither of these suggestions stands alone. We conjure a composite picture, of the woman who has never taken the first step towards understanding her husband, starting life over again 'in the same old way', with a man who has never shown a real understanding of his wife, only an inadequate sympathy. We cannot be wholly uncritical towards them. The characters have not heard Chekhov's gently insinuating whisper; but we have.

Heard offstage is the shot that reminds us Irina's love affair is over. Love affair? In that shot we hear the echo of the stunted marriage Irina would have made. We remember her words:

I'll be your wife, I'll be loyal and obedient to you, but I can't love you . . . What's to be done? (*Weeps.*) I've never loved anyone in my life. Oh, I've had such dreams about being in love! I've been dreaming about it for ever so long, day and night. . . .

Her romantic ideas will now never suffer the test of experience: Irina will go the way of Olga. All this we feel as she herself enters in a state of wishful happiness, and says with undisguised joy in her voice, persisting in her error, 'Let's sit down together for a moment, and not talk about anything. I'm going away tomorrow, you know . . .' . We know better. Then Kulygin for the moment condenses all their stupidities in his vain attempt to amuse his distracted wife with a comic antic:

Yesterday I took away a false beard and a moustache from a boy in the third form. I've got them here. (*Puts them on.*) Do I look like our German teacher? . . . (*Laughs.*) I do, don't I? The boys are funny.

Olga laughs, responding to the need of the situation.

Masha struggles, but bursts into tears again. Poor, lovable Kulygin. A little aggrieved, he adds, 'Very much like him, I think!' Irina's thoughts are far away.

So the impressions accumulate. Natasha enters, the little-minded wife of Andrey, and she flashes about the stage, reminding the sisters by her manner that she is now the mistress of the house. Her apparently positive qualities, sinister though they may be, have won her this position, and we here see them concisely enacted. At the same time she retraces in her behaviour what she was and what she has become. The children are to be tended by their respective fathers, and in arranging this she is conscious of playing the virtuous mother: 'What a lot of work these children make!' The irony is unmistakable. She comments as if sympathetically on Irina's going away: 'What a pity! Do stay just another week, won't you?'—but she has already made plans for Andrey to have Irina's room and for illegitimate Sofochka to have her husband's, this with no sense of his humiliation. This closely woven speech shows her mind in its fully 'developed' state, insincere, vicious, opportunist. She even contrives to introduce a sarcastic cut at Andrey and his violin. And she will have the trees cut down, the very trees upon which the Baron commented, 'What beautiful trees—and how beautiful, when you think of it, life ought to be with trees like these!' She marks her assumption of a 'superior' taste by unconsciously returning Olga's criticism of her dress when she first entered the house, only it is Irina who is the victim:

My dear, that belt you're wearing doesn't suit you at all. Not at all good taste. You want something brighter to go with that dress. . . .

Having attacked all she can within a few seconds, she flings back into the house with a scream of abuse at the maid. This is the calculating little coquette who felt 'dreadfully shy' at Irina's party in Act 1. Her speech

summarizes a creeping evil, not to be exorcised by the ineffectual and the lamely hopeful, however warm-hearted they are.

Chekhov does not hesitate, as in *The Cherry Orchard*, to call upon a sound effect to provide a further emotional epitome of the situation, every adjunct to the image defining it more precisely. The remainder of the scene is coloured by the music of a military band growing fainter and fainter. The sisters think it jaunty; for us it at once suggests the incongruity permeating the action, the spirited music of a brassy military band taking its high spirits with it as it goes. Against this sound, boisterous at its height, Irina is told her Baron has been killed. And against the sound of her tears the stagnant doctor Chebutykin, indifferent to life or death, passive and growing numb where Natasha was active and malevolent, takes out his newspaper once again and sings to himself: 'Let them cry for a bit. . . . Tarara-boom-di-ay. . . .'

With all this as their setting, the sisters finally offer the chorus of their feelings: they will live and work. They sing their slow song, voices rising to a crescendo as the music of the band fades in diminuendo. They realize Moscow has gone for good: they complete their cycle and return to their sterile beginning. What they say we cannot now accept at face value for we are still assimilating and fashioning our impressions of Masha and Kulygin, of Irina and Natasha, and of Chebutykin. But we, 'the people who come after', learn from their experience; and we shall remember them kindly. We know it is only the limitation of time, the time we have been made so well aware of in the play, that will prevent such another cycle recurring for these particular people. In 1902 Chekhov added a new touch in a revised stage direction. Kulygin, all smiles, enters to fetch his Masha, and Andrey is seen pushing Bobik in his pram. After the intense and statuesque pose of the sisters, motionless in a way strikingly at odds with the realistic manner of the rest of the play, suddenly the

stage bustles into activity again. This is the last comment: life goes on. Kulygin and Andrey are in thrall to normality, and Masha, Irina and Olga know they will be dragged back there too. This microcosm of life sways between the forces of indifference and the painful urge to understand, between Chebutykin and Olga:

**Chebutykin.** . . . What does it matter? Nothing matters!  
**Olga.** If only we knew, if only we knew!

I do not see how we can agree with Mr. David Margarshack's evaluation of this scene. It would be the greatest mistake to interpret it, he writes,

as an instance of what is so generally assumed to be the expression of 'Chekhovian' frustration and gloom. Mary Masha], indeed, says in the bitterness of her heart that her life is a failure and that there is nothing more she wants, but as her little speech in the chorus of the three sisters shows, she soon recovers from her feeling of desolation. Parting is such sweet sorrow—and Chekhov makes it quite clear that it is not by any means the end.

The other great themes of the play—the theme of the illusion of happiness, the theme of mankind's future, and, above all, the theme of the regenerative powers of work—all are carefully interwoven with the action and find a *gay* affirmation of life in the final chorus of the three sisters to the accompaniment of an invigorating march by the band of the departing regiment.

The illogicality of Masha's quick 'recovery' after her loss, of the 'gay' affirmation of life, of the 'invigorating' march, and so on, does not need insistence. The alternative to frustration and gloom is not necessarily gaiety. Yet curiously, perhaps by contrast with Natasha and Chebutykin, the sisters do not present us with negative values: their sensitiveness, their warmth and love, their buoyancy, their refusal to become callous in the face of adversity, is a reassurance. The play therefore leaves an incisive question. Chebutykin's and Olga's last two

lines are the dying notes that suffuse the large complex image we carry away. Are we to join in Olga's desperate search for consolation? Do we know what matters?

With Chekhov, as with all good dramatists, the clustering of the impressions does its own work. The playgoer likes to know what the writer is 'saying', but drama is the literary form least likely to tell him directly. There can be no final asking what the experience *is*: one can only see the piece played over again. Wagner asserted that when you create, you do not explain; Henry James went a step further and suggested that a work of art one has to explain fails of its mission. As a poet thinks with words, so a playwright weaves his fabric by thinking directly in terms of the materials he manipulates.

## SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bruford, W. H., *Chekhov*, London, 1957.  
——— *Chekhov and His Russia: A Sociological Study*, London, 1947.
- Brustein, Robert, *The Theatre of Revolt*, Boston, 1964.
- Chekhov, A. P., *Letters to O. L. Knipper*, translated by Constance Garnett, London, 1926.  
——— *Letters on the Short Story, the Drama, and Other Literary Topics*, edited by Louis S. Friedland, New York, 1964.  
——— *Notebooks*, translated by S. S. Koteliensky and Leonard Woolf, London, 1921.  
——— *Selected Letters*, edited by Lillian Hellman and translated by Sidonie Lederer, New York, 1955.
- Gerhardi, William, *Anton Chekhov: A Critical Study*, London, 1923.
- Gorky, Maxim, *Reminiscences of Tolstoy, Chekhov and Andreyev*, London, 1934.
- Hingley, Ronald, *Chekhov*, London, 1950.
- Katzer, Julius, ed., *A. P. Chekhov 1860-1960*, Moscow, 1960.
- Koteliensky, S. S., ed., *Anton Tchekhov: Literary and Theatrical Reminiscences*, London, 1927.  
——— and P. Tomlinson, *Life and Letters of Anton Tchekhov*, London, 1925.
- Kronenberger, Louis, *The Republic of Letters*, New York, 1955.
- Magarshack, David, *Chekhov: A Life*, New York, 1953.  
——— *Chekhov the Dramatist*, London, 1952.
- Mann, Thomas, *Last Essays*, New York, 1959.
- Muchnic, Helen, *An Introduction to Russian Literature*, New York, 1947.
- Nemirovich-Danchenko, Vladimir, *My Life in the Russian Theatre*, Boston, 1937.
- Peacock, Ronald, *The Poet in the Theatre*, London, 1946.
- Simmons, Ernest J., *Chekhov*, Boston, 1962.
- Stanislavsky, Constantin, *My Life in Art*, Boston, 1924.
- Toumanova, Princess Nina Andronikova, *Anton Chekhov: The Voice of Twilight Russia*, New York, 1937.
- Williams, Raymond, *Drama from Ibsen to Eliot*, London, 1952.
- Yermilov, Vladimir, *A. P. Chekhov*, Moscow, n. d.
- RECORDING: In Russian, with the Moscow Art Theatre: Bruno Hi-Fi Records 23020-2. (3 records)

