THREE SISTERS

Три сестры

A Drama in Four Acts

CAST OF CHARACTERS

PROZOROV, ANDREY SERGEYEVICH
NATALIYA IVANOVNA, his fiancée, afterwards his wife
OLGA
MASHA — his sisters
IRINA
KULYGIN, FYODOR ILYICH, high school teacher, Masha's husband
VERSHININ, ALEKSANDR IGNAIYEVICH, Lieutenant Colonel, battery commander
TUZENBACH, NIKOLAY IVOVICH, Baron, Lieutenant
SOLONY, VASILY VASILYEVICH, Staff Captain
CHEBUTYKIN, IVAN ROMANOVICH, army doctor
FEDOTIK, ALEKSEY PETROVICH, Second Lieutenant
RODÉ, VLADIMIR KARLOVICH, Second Lieutenant
FERAPONT, messenger for the County Council, an old timer
ANFISA, nanny, an old woman of 80

Three Sisters

The action takes place in a county seat.  

ACT ONE

In the Prozorov's home. A drawing-room with columns, behind which a large reception room can be seen. Midday: outside it's sunny and bright. In the reception room a table is being set for lunch.

OLGA, wearing the dark blue uniform of a teacher at a high-school for girls, never stops correcting students' examination books, both standing still and on the move. MASHA, in a black dress, her hat in her lap, sits reading a book. IRINA, in a white dress, stands rapt in thought.

OLGA. Father died just a year ago, this very day, the fifth of May, your saint's day.

It was very cold, snowing, in fact. I never thought I'd live through it, you had fainted dead away. But a year's gone by now, and we don't mind thinking about it, you're back to wearing white, your face is beaming. (The clock strikes twelve.) The clock struck then too. I remember, when Father was carried to his grave, there was music playing, they fired a salute at the cemetery. He was a general, commanded a whole brigade, but

4 The capital of the guberniya and hence the seat of the regional government.
5 According to V. V. Luntzsky:

In Three Sisters on the rise of the curtain, as Stanislavsky's concept has it, birds are singing. These sounds were usually produced by Stanislavsky himself, A. L. Vishnevsky, I. M. Moskvin, V. F. Gribinin, N. G. Aleksandrov, and I, standing in the wings and cooing like doves. [Chekhov] listened to all these shamans, and, walking over to me, said, "Listen, you bill and coo wonderfully, only it's an Egyptian dove!" And of the portrait of the sisters' father — General Prozorov (me in the makeup of an old general) he remarked, "Listen, that's a Japanese general, we don't have that kind in Russia." (Solntse Rossi 228/25 [1914])

6 Olga and Kulygin teach at a gymnasium, or four-year high school, open to all classes of society; in 1876, to slow down the upward mobility of the lower classes, a heavy dose of Latin, Greek, and Old Church Slavonic replaced the more dangerous subjects of history, literature, and geography in the extremely rigorous curriculum. Hence Kulygin's frequent citations from the classics.

7 Also known as a name day. Orthodox Russians celebrate the day of the saint after whom a person was named more commonly than they celebrate the person's birthday. St. Irina's day is May 5 in the Orthodox calendar.
very few people showed up. Of course, it was raining at the time. Pelting rain and snow too.

IRINA. Why remember?

*Behind the columns, in the reception room near the table,*
*BARON TUSENBACK, CHEBUTYKIN, and SOLONY appear.*

OLGA. Today it's warm, the windows can be thrown open, and the birch trees aren't even budding yet. Father was put in charge of a brigade and we all left Moscow eleven years ago, and I distinctly remember, it was early May, why, just this time of year, everything in Moscow would already be in bloom, warm, everything would be bathed in sunlight. Eleven years have gone by, but I can remember everything there, as if we'd left yesterday. Oh my goodness! I woke up this morning, saw the light pouring in, the springtime, and joy began to quicken in my heart, I began to long passionately for my beloved home.

CHEBUTYKIN. To hell with both of you!

TUSENBACK. You're right, it's ridiculous.

MASHA, brooding over her book, quietly whistles a tune under her breath.8

OLGA. Don't whistle, Masha. How can you!

*Pause.*

Because I'm at the high school all day long and then have to give tutorials well into the night, I've got this constant headache, and my thoughts are those of an old woman. As a matter of fact, the four years I've been working at the high school, I've felt as if every day my strength and youth were draining from me drop by drop. While that same old dream keeps growing bigger and stronger . . .

IRINA. To go to Moscow. To sell the house, wind up everything here and go to Moscow . . .

OLGA. Yes! Quick as you can to Moscow.

CHEBUTYKIN and TUSENBACK laugh.

IRINA. Brother will probably become a professor, he certainly won't go on living here. The only thing holding us back is our poor old Masha.

OLGA. Masha will come and spend all summer in Moscow, every year.

MASHA quietly whistles a tune.

IRINA. God willing, everything will work out. *(Looking out the window.)*

Lovely weather today. I don't know why my heart feels so light! This morning I remembered that it was my saint's day, and suddenly I felt so happy, and remembered my childhood, when Mama was still alive. And such wonderful thoughts ran through my head, such thoughts!

OLGA. You're simply radiant today, you look especially pretty. And Masha's pretty too. Andrey'd be good looking, only he's putting on too much weight, and it doesn't suit him. And I'm aging just a bit and getting terribly thin, I suppose because I get cross with the girls at school. Well, today I'm free, I'm home, and my head doesn't ache, I feel younger than I did yesterday. I'm only twenty-eight . . . Everything is for the best, everything is God's will, but I do think that if I were married and could stay home all day, things might be better.

*Pause.*

I'd love my husband.

TUSENBACK (to Solony). You talk such rubbish, a person gets sick and tired just listening to you. *(Entering the drawing-room.)* I forgot to mention. Today you'll be getting a visit from our new battery commander Vershinin. *(Sits at the baby grand piano.)*

OLGA. Is that so? That'll be nice.

IRINA. Is he old?

TUSENBACK. No, not really. Forty at most, forty-five. *(Quietly plays by ear.)*

A splendid fellow, by all accounts. And no fool, that's for sure. Only he does talk a lot.

IRINA. Is he interesting?
TUSENBAKH. Yes, so-so, but he's got a wife, a mother-in-law, and two little girls. His second wife at that. He goes visiting and tells everybody that he's got a wife and two little girls. He'll tell it here too. The wife's some kind of half-wit, with a long braid, like a schoolgirl, only talks about highfalutin stuff, philosophy, and she makes frequent attempts at suicide, apparently in order to give her husband a hard time. I would have left a woman like that ages ago, but he puts up with it and settles for complaining.

SOLONY (entering the drawing-room from the reception room with CHEBUTYKIN). With one hand I can't lift more than fifty pounds, but with both it goes up to two hundred pounds. Which leads me to conclude that two men are not twice as strong as one, but three times as strong, even stronger . . .

CHEBUTYKIN (reads the paper as he walks). For loss of hair . . . eight and a half grams of naphthalene in half a bottle of grain alcohol . . . dissolve and apply daily . . . (Makes a note in a memo book.) Let's jot that down, shall we! (To Solony.) Listen, as I was saying, you stick a tiny little cork in a tiny little bottle, and pass a tiny little glass tube through it . . . Then you take a tiny little pinch of the most common, ordinary alum . . .

IRINA. Ivan Romanych, dear Ivan Romanych!

CHEBUTYKIN. What, my darling girl, light of my life?

IRINA. Tell me, why am I so happy today? I feel as if I'm skimming along at full sail, with the wide blue sky above me and big white birds drifting by. Why is that? Why?

CHEBUTYKIN (kissing both her hands, tenderly). My own white bird . . .

IRINA. When I woke up today, I got out of bed and washed, and suddenly it dawned on me that I understand everything in the world and I know how a person ought to live. Dear Ivan Romanych, I know everything. A person has to work hard, work by the sweat of his brow, no matter who he is, and that's the only thing that gives meaning and purpose to his life, his happiness, his moments of ecstasy. Wouldn't it be wonderful to be a manual laborer who gets up while it's still dark out and breaks stones on the road, or a shepherd, or a schoolteacher, or an engineer on the railroad . . . My God, what's the point of being human, you might as well be an ox, an ordinary horse, so long as you're working, rather than a young woman who gets up at noon, has her coffee in bed, and takes two hours to dress . . . oh, isn't that awful! Sometimes when the weather's sultry, the way you long for a drink, well, that's the way I long for work. And if I don't get up early and work hard, stop being my friend, Ivan Romanych.

CHEBUTYKIN (tenderly). I will, I will . . .

OLGA. Father drilled us to get up at seven. Nowadays Irina wakes up at seven and stays in bed at least till nine, thinking about things. And the serious face on her! (Laughs.)

IRINA. You're used to treating me like a little girl, so you think it's strange when I put on a serious face. I'm twenty years old!

TUSENBAKH. The longing for hard work, oh dear, how well I understand it! I've never worked in my life. I was born in Petersburg, cold, idle Petersburg, to a family that didn't know the meaning of hard work or hardship. I remember, whenever I came home from school, a lackey would pull off my boots, while I'd fidget and my mother would gaze at me in admiration and be surprised when anyone looked at me any other way. They tried to shield me from hard work. And they just about managed it, only just! The time has come, there's a thundercloud looming over us, there's a bracing, mighty tempest lying in wait, close at hand, and soon it will blow all the indolence, apathy, prejudice against hard work, putrid boredom out of our society. I shall work, and in twenty-five or thirty years everyone will be working. Every last one of us!

CHEBUTYKIN. I won't work.

TUSENBAKH. You don't count.

SOLONY. In twenty-five years you won't be on this earth, thank God. In two or three years you'll die of apoplexy, or I'll fly off the handle and put a bullet through your brain, angel mine. (Takes a flask of perfume from his pocket and sprinkles his chest and hands.)

CHEBUTYKIN (laughs). As a matter of fact, I've never done a thing. Ever since I left the university, I haven't lifted a finger, not even read a book,
nothing but newspapers… *(Takes from his pocket a second newspaper)*

You see… I know by the papers that there was, let’s say, somebody named Dobrolyubov,

but what he wrote—I don’t know. God knows… *(Someone can be heard knocking on the floor from a lower story.)* There… They’re calling for me downstairs, someone’s come for me. I’ll be right there…

hold on… *(Leaves hurriedly, combing his beard)*

IRINA. This is something he’s cooked up.

TUSENBAKH. Yes. He went out with a look of triumph on his face, I’ll bet he’s about to deliver a present.

IRINA. How unpleasant!

OLGA. Yes, it’s awful. He’s always doing something silly.

MASHA. “On the curved seashore a green oak stands, a golden chain wound round that oak… A golden chain wound round that oak…” *(Rises and hums quietly)*

OLGA. You’re in a funny mood today, Masha. *(Masha, humming, adjusts her hat.)* Where are you off to?

MASHA. Home.

IRINA. Strange…

TUSENBAKH. Leaving a saint’s day party!

MASHA. Doesn’t matter. I’ll be back this evening. Good-bye, my dearest… *(Kisses Irina.)* Best wishes once more, good health, be happy. In the old days, when Father was alive, every time we celebrated a saint’s day some thirty or forty officers would show up, there was lots of noise, but today there’s only a man and a half, and it’s as desolate as a desert… I’m off…

I’m melancholic today, I don’t feel very cheerful, and you mustn’t mind me. *(Laughs through tears.)* Later we’ll have a talk, but good-bye for now, my darling, I’m off.

IRINA *(put out)*. Well, that’s just like you…

OLGA *(plaintively)*. I understand you, Masha.

SOLONY. If a man philosophizes, you could call it philosophistry or even sophisticuffs, but if a woman philosophizes or two women, that you could call—Polly wants a cracker!

MASHA. What do you mean by that, you dreadfully awful man?

SOLONY. Not a thing. “He scarcely had time to gasp, when the bear had him in its grasp.”

Pause.

MASHA *(to Olga, angrily)*. Stop sniveling!

Enter ANFISA and FERAPONT with a layer cake.

ANFISA. Over here, dearie. Come on in, your feet’re clean. *(To Irina.)* From the County Council, from Protopopov, from Mikhail Ivanych… A cake.

IRINA. Thank you. Thank him. *(Takes the cake.)*

FERAPONT. How’s that?

IRINA *(louder)*. Thank him!

OLGA. Nanny dear, give him some pie. Ferapont, go on, out there they’ll give you some pie.

FERAPONT. How’s that?

ANFISA. Let’s go, dearie, Ferapont Spiridonych. Let’s go… *(Exits with Ferapont.)*

10 Nikolay Aleksandrovich Dobrolyubov (1836–1861), Russian journalist of the radical democratic camp and proponent of realistic literature. He invented the concept of the “superfluous man.”

11 Masha is quoting from the opening lines of the famous poetic fable *Ruslan and Lyudmila*, by Aleksandr Pushkin, a classic love story. On her wedding night, Lyudmila is abducted by a wizard and Ruslan finds her only after many adventures. The lines are: “On the curved seashore a green oak stands, A golden chain wound round that oak; / And night and day a learned cat / Walks round and round upon that chain. / When he goes right a song he sings, / When he goes left a tale he tells.” An English equivalent might be Edward Lear’s “The owl and the pussycat went to sea, In a beautiful pea-green boat… A beautiful pea-green boat…”

12 Меланхолия, instead of melancholiya. A favorite word of Chekhov’s, often used in private correspondence, as well as in “The Emissary Magistrate” and *Isaac…* your nerves are in bad shape and you’re under the sway of a psychiatric semi-afflict, which seminarians calls melancholic*.* *(to A. A. Svirin, August 23, 1893.)*

13 Quotation from the fable “The Peasant and the Emissary,” by Ivan Krylov (1768–1844), which Chekhov also quotes in the story “Among Friends” (1898). “He had a habit, unsettling for his interlocutor, of pronouncing as an explanation a certain phrase which had no relation to the conversation, while snapping his fingers.”
MASHA. I do not like Protopopov, that bear bearing gifts. It isn’t right to invite him.

IRINA. I didn’t invite him.

MASHA. Good girl.

Enter CHEBUTYKIN, followed by a soldier carrying a silver samovar; a low murmur of astonishment and displeasure.

OLGA (hides her face in her hands). A samovar! How dreadfully inappropriate.14 (Goes to the table in the reception room.)

IRINA. Ivan Romanych, you darling, what are you doing!

TUSENbach (laughs). I told you so.

Together

MASHA. Ivan Romanych, you’re simply shameless!

CHEBUTYKIN. My dears, my darlings, you’re the only ones I have, for me you’re more precious than anything on this earth. I’ll be sixty soon, I’m an old man, a lonely, insignificant old man . . . There’s nothing good about me, except this love for you, and if it weren’t for you, I’d be dead and gone long ago . . . (To Irina.) My dearest child, I’ve known you since the day you were born . . . I held you in my arms . . . I loved your poor mama . . .

IRINA. But why such expensive presents?

CHEBUTYKIN (through tears, angrily). Expensive presents . . . You’re the limit! (To the orderly.) Put the samovar over there . . . (Mimes.) Expensive presents . . . (The orderly takes the samovar into the reception room.)

ANFISA (crossing the drawing-room). My dears, a strange colonel! He’s already took off his overcoat, boys and girls, he’s coming in here. And nushka, now you be a charming, polite little girl . . . (Going out.) Lunch should have been served a long time ago now . . . Honest to goodness . . .

TUSENbach. Vershinin, I suppose.

Enter VERSHININ.

Lieutenant Colonel Vershinin.

VERSININ (to Masha and Irina). May I introduce myself: Vershinin.15 Very, very pleased to meet you at long last. How you’ve grown! My! my!

IRINA. Do sit down, please. We’re glad to have you.

VERSININ (merrily). I am delighted, delighted. But weren’t you three sisters? I remember three little girls. I’ve stopped remembering faces, but your father, Colonel Prozorov, had three little girls, that I distinctly remember and I saw them with my own eyes. How time flies. Dear, dear, how time flies!

TUSENbach. The Colonel is from Moscow.

IRINA. From Moscow? You’re from Moscow?

VERSININ. Yes, that’s where I’m from. Your late father was battery commander there, I was an officer in the same brigade. (To Masha.) Now your face I do seem to remember.

MASHA. And I remember yours—not at all!

IRINA. Olya! Olya! (Shouts into the reception room.) Olya, come here! (OLGA enters the drawing-room from the reception room.) Lieutenant Colonel Vershinin, it turns out, is from Moscow.

VERSININ. You must be Olga Sergeevna, the eldest . . . And you’re Masha . . . And you’re Irina—the youngest . . .

OLGA. You’re from Moscow?

VERSININ. Yes. I was at school in Moscow and entered the service in Moscow, served a long time there, was finally assigned a battery here—I’ve been transferred here, as you see. I don’t remember you individually, I only remember that you were three sisters. Your father’s stuck in my memory, why, I can close my eyes and see him as if he were alive. I used to visit you in Moscow . . .

OLGA. I was sure I remembered everyone, and suddenly . . .

VERSININ. My name is Aleksandr Ignatyevich . . .

IRINA. Aleksandr Ignatyevich, you’re from Moscow . . . That’s a coincidence!

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14 A samovar was traditionally given by a husband to his wife on their silver or golden anniversary.
OLGA. In fact we’ll be moving there.

IRINA. We think we’ll be there as soon as autumn. Our home town, we were born there . . . On Old Basman Street . . .

*Both women laugh for joy.*

MASHA. We’ve unexpectedly come across someone from our neck of the woods! (Vivaciously.) Now I remember! I do remember. Olya, at home they used to talk about “the lovesick major.” You were a lieutenant then and in love with someone, and everybody teased you, calling you major for some reason . . .

VERSININ (laughs). That’s right, that’s right! . . . The lovesick major, right you are . . .

MASHA. Then you only had a moustache . . . Oh, how you’ve aged! (Plainly.) How you’ve aged!

VERSININ. Yes, in those days they called me the lovesick major, I was still young and in love. It’s not the same now.

OLGA. But you don’t have a single gray hair yet. You’ve aged, but you haven’t grown old.

VERSININ. Nevertheless I am forty-three. Have you been away from Moscow a long time?

IRINA. Eleven years. Why, what’s wrong, Masha, you’re crying, you crazy . . . (Plainly.) Now I’m starting to cry . . .

MASHA. I’m all right. And what street did you live on?

VERSININ. Old Basmanny.

OLGA. Why, we lived there too . . .

VERSININ. At one time I lived on German Street. I’d walk from German Street to the Red Barracks. On the way there’s this grim-looking bridge, with the water roaring beneath it. A lonely man begins to feel his heart bowed down.

*Pause.*

But here there’s such a broad, such a fertile river! A wonderful river!

OLGA. Yes, only it’s cold. It’s cold here and there are mosquitoes . . .

VERSININ. Why should you care? Here there’s such a wholesome, bracing Russian climate. A forest, a river . . . and birch trees here too. Dear, humble birches, I love them more than any other tree. It’s a good place to live. Only it’s odd, the train station is over thirteen miles away . . . And nobody knows why that is.

SOLONY. I know why that is. (Everyone stares at him.) Because if the station were nearby, it wouldn’t be far away, and if it were far away, obviously it wouldn’t be nearby.

*An awkward silence.*

TUSENBAKH. Always clowning, Solony.

OLGA. Now I’ve remembered you too. I do remember.

VERSININ. I knew your dear mother.

CHEBUTYKIN. She was a good woman, rest her soul.

IRINA. Mama is buried in Moscow.

OLGA. In Novo-devichy churchyard . . .

MASHA. Just imagine, I’m already beginning to forget what she looked like. No one will remember about us either. They’ll forget.

VERSININ. Yes. They’ll forget. Such is our fate, nothing you can do about it. The things we take to be serious, meaningful, of great importance—a time will come when they will be forgotten or seem of no importance.

*Pause.*

And the interesting thing is, we have absolutely no way of knowing just what will be considered sublime and important, and what trivial and absurd. Didn’t the discoveries of Copernicus or, say, Columbus at first sound pointless, absurd, while some idiotic nonsense written by a crank sounded true? And it may come about that our present life, which we’re so used to, will in time seem strange, uncomfortable, unintelligent, devoid of purity, maybe even depraved . . .

16. Graveyard attached to the historic Moscow “New Virgin” convent, where many celebrities of politics, society, and culture, including Chekhov and his father, are buried.
OLGA. This is my brother, Andrey Sergeich.

VERSININ. Veshinin.

ANDREY. Prozorov. (Wipes his sweating face.) You’re here as battery commander?

OLGA. Imagine, the Colonel is from Moscow.

ANDREY. Really? Well, congratulations, now my sisters won’t give you a moment’s peace.

VERSININ. I’ve had plenty of time already to bore your sisters.

IRINA. Just look at the portrait-frame Andrey gave me today! (Displays the frame.) He made it himself.

VERSININ (looking at the frame and not knowing what to say). Yes . . . quite something . . .

IRINA. And there’s that picture frame over the baby grand, he made that too.

ANDREY waves his hand in dismissal and moves away.

OLGA. He’s the scholar in the family and plays the violin and makes all sorts of things with his fretsaw, in short, a jack-of-all-trades. Andrey, don’t go away! He’s funny that way—always wandering off. Come over here!

MASHA and IRINA take him by the arms and laughingly escort him back.

MASHA. Come on, come on!

ANDREY. Leave me alone, for pity’s sake.

MASHA. Don’t be ridiculous! They used to call the Colonel the lovesick major and he didn’t get the tiniest bit angry.

VERSININ. Not the tiniest bit!

MASHA. And I want to call you: the lovesick fiddler!

IRINA. Or the lovesick professor! . . .

OLGA. He’s lovesick! Andruyscha’s lovesick!

IRINA (applauding). Bravo, brav! Encore! Little Andruyscha’s lovesick!
CHEBUTYKIN (comes up behind Andrey and puts both arms around his waist). “For love alone did Nature put us on this earth!” (Roars with laughter; he’s still holding on to his newspaper.)

ANDREY. All right, that’s enough, that’s enough . . . (Wipes his face.) I didn’t get a wink of sleep last night and now I’m not quite myself, as they say. I read until four, then I went to bed, but it was no good. I kept thinking about this and that, and the next thing I knew it’s dawn and the sun’s creeping into my bedroom. This summer, while I’m still here, I want to translate a certain book from the English.

VERSININ. So you read English?

ANDREY. Yes. Father, rest in peace, overstocked us with education. It sounds silly and absurd, but, still, I must admit, after his death I started putting on weight and, well, I put on so much weight in one year, it’s as if my body were freeing itself of its constraints. Thanks to Father, my sisters and I know French, German, and English, and Irina also knows a little Italian. But what good is it?

MASHA. In this town knowing three languages is a superfluous luxury. Not even a luxury, but a kind of superfluous appendage, a bit like a sixth finger. We know a lot of useless stuff.

VERSININ. Well, I’ll be. (Laughs.) I don’t think there is or can be a town so boring and dismal that an intelligent, educated person isn’t of use. Let’s assume that among the one hundred thousand inhabitants of this town, which is, I grant you, backward and crude, there are only three such as you. Naturally, it’s not up to you to enlighten the benighted masses that surround you. In the course of your lifetime you must gradually surrender and be swallowed up in the crowd of a hundred thousand, you’ll be smothered by life, but even so you won’t disappear, won’t sink without a trace. In your wake others like you will appear, maybe six, then twelve, and so on, until at last the likes of you will be the majority. In two hundred, three hundred years life on earth will be unimaginably beautiful, stupendous. Man needs a life like that, and if it isn’t here and now, then he must look forward to it, wait, dream, prepare himself for it, and that’s the reason he must see and know more than his father and grandfather saw and knew. (Laughs.) And you complain you know a lot of useless stuff.

MASHA (takes off her hat). I’m staying for lunch.

IRINA (with a sigh). Honestly, I should have taken notes . . .

ANDREY’s gone, he left unnoticed.

TUSENBAKH. Many years from now, you say, life on earth will be beautiful, stupendous. That’s true. But to take part in it now, even remotely, a person has to prepare for it, a person has to work . . .

VERSININ (rises). Yes. By the way, you have so many flowers! (Looking around.) And wonderful quarters! I’m jealous! All my life I’ve knocked around in cramped quarters with two chairs, the same old sofa, and stoves that invariably smoke. The main thing missing in my life has been flowers like these . . . (Waves his hand in dismissal.) Oh, well! That’s how it is!

TUSENBAKH. Yes, a person has to work. I suppose you’re thinking: he’s gushing all over the place like a typical sentimental German.18 But, word of honor, I’m a Russian, I don’t even speak German. My father belongs to the Orthodox Church . . .

Pause.

VERSININ (paces the stage back and forth). I often think: what if a man were to begin life anew, and fully conscious at that? If one life, which has already been lived out, were, how shall I put it?, a rough draft, and the other—a final revision! Then each of us, I think, would, first of all, try hard not to repeat himself, at least we’d create a different setting for our life, we’d furnish quarters like these for ourselves with flowers, great bunches of flowers . . . I have a wife, two little girls, moreover my wife’s not a well woman, etcetera, etcetera, yes, but if one were to begin life from the beginning, I wouldn’t get married . . . No, no!

Enter KULYGIN in a uniform dresscoat.19

17 The opening of Taisiya’s “Russian aria” in the old opera-vendeville Reversal by Pyotr Kobyakov (1808): “For love alone did Nature put us on this earth: As comfort to the mortal race: She gave the gift of tender feelings!”

18 Tusenbach further explains his German ancestry in Act Two. In Chekhov’s notebooks, Tusembach’s patronymic is Karlovitch (son of Karl), which was later changed to Luxovich (son of Leo, a more Russian name).

19 “You wear the tailcoat only in Act One; as to the handkerchief (a polished black apron) you are quite right. At least until Act Four you should wear the uniform such as it was before 1900” (Chekhov to Aleksandr Vishnevsky, January 6 [18], 1901).
KULYGIN (comes up to Irina). Dearest sister, may I congratulate you on your saint's day and sincerely wish you, from the bottom of my heart, the best of health and all those things proper to wish a young girl of your years. (Gives her a book.) The history of our high school over the past fifty years, written by yours truly. A frivolous little book, written when I had nothing better to do, but you go ahead and read it all the same. Greetings, ladies and gentlemen! (To Vershinin.) Kulygin, teacher in the local high school. Civil servant, seventh class. (To Irina.) In that book you'll find a list of all the alumni of our high school for the past fifty years. Fei quad potui, faciant meliora potentes.20 (Kisses Masha.)

IRINA. But didn't you give me this book last Easter?

KULYGIN (laughs). Impossible! In that case give it back, or better yet, give it to the Colonel. Here you are, Colonel. Some day you'll read it when you're bored.

VERSHININ. Thank you. (Prepares to go.) I'm most happy to have made your acquaintance... 

OLGA. You're going? No, no!

IRINA. You'll stay and have lunch with us. Please.

OLGA. I insist!

VERSHININ (bows). I seem to have dropped in on a saint's day party. Forgive me, I didn't know, I haven't congratulated you... (Goes into the reception room with OLGA.)

KULYGIN. Today, ladies and gentlemen, is Sunday, the day of rest, therefore let us rest, let us make merry each according to his age and station in life. The rugs will have to be taken up for summer and put away until winter... With moth balls or naphthalene... The Romans were a healthy people because they knew how to work hard and they knew how to relax, they had mens sana in corpore sano.21 Their life moved according to a set pattern. Our headmaster says: the main thing in every man's life is its pattern... Whatever loses its pattern ceases to exist—and in our everyday life the same holds true. (Takes Masha round the waist, laughing.) Masha loves me. My wife loves me. And the window curtains too along with the rugs... Today I'm cheerful, in splendid spirits. Masha, at four o'clock today we have to go to the headmaster's. An outing's been arranged for the faculty and their families.

MASHA. I'm not going.

KULYGIN (mortified). Masha dear, whyever not?

MASHA. We'll discuss it later... (Angrily.) Very well, I'll go, but do leave me alone, for pity's sake... (Walks away.)

KULYGIN. And then we'll spend the evening at the headmaster's. Despite his failing health that man strives above all to be sociable. An outstanding, brilliant personality. A magnificent man. Yesterday after our meeting he says to me, "I'm tired, Fyodor Ilyich! I'm tired!" (Looks at the clock on the wall, then at his watch.) Your clock is seven minutes fast. Yes, says he, I'm tired!

Offstage someone is playing the violin.

OLGA. Ladies and gentlemen, please come to the table! There's a meat pie!

KULYGIN. Ah, my dear Olga, my dear! Yesterday I worked from morn to eleven at night, I was exhausted and today I feel happy. (Goes to the table in the reception room.) My dear...

CHEBUTYKIN (puts the newspaper in his pocket, combs out his beard). A meat pie? Splendid!

MASHA (sternly, to Chebutykin). Just watch your step, don't have anything to drink today. You hear? Drinking's bad for you.

CHEBUTYKIN. Bah! That's over and done with. Two years since I last was drunk. (Impatiently.) Anyways, lady, it don't make no never mind!

MASHA. All the same don't you dare drink. Don't you dare. (Angrily, but so her husband can't hear.) Damn it to hell, another boring evening at the headmaster's!

TUSENBACK. If I were in your shoes, I wouldn't go... Plain and simple.

CHEBUTYKIN. Don't go, my lovely!

MASHA. 'S all very well to say: don't go... This damned life is unbearable... (Goes into the reception room.)
CHEBUTYKIN (following her). Now, now!

SOLONY (crossing into the reception room). Cheep, cheep, cheep . . .

TUSENBACK. That's enough, Solony. Cut it out!

SOLONY. Cheep, cheep, cheep . . .

KULYGIN (merrily). Your health, Colonel! I'm an educator, and here in this house one of the family, Masha's hubby . . . She's a kindhearted creature, really kind . . .

VERSHININ. I'll have some of that dark vodka

In the drawing-room IRINA and TUSENBACK remain.

IRINA. Masha's in a funny mood today. She married at eighteen, when he seemed to her to be the cleverest of men. And now he doesn't. He's the kindest, but not the cleverest.

OLGA (impatiently). Andrey, are you coming?

ANDREY (offstage). Right away. (Enters and goes to the table.)

TUSENBACK. What are you thinking about?

IRINA. This. I don't like that Solony of yours, I'm afraid of him. Everything he says is stupid . . .

TUSENBACK. He's a strange fellow. I feel sorry for him, and I get annoyed by him, but mostly sorry. I think he's shy . . . When we're alone together, he's often clever and pleasant enough, but in company he's rude, a bully. Don't go, let them sit at the table a little. Let me be near you for a while. What are you thinking about? (Pause.) You're twenty, I'm not yet thirty. How many years there are ahead of us, a long, long series of days, filled with my love for you . . .

IRINA. Nikolay Lvovich, don't talk to me about love . . .

TUSENBACK (not listening). I thirst so passionately for life, struggle, hard work, and this thirst of my heart has blended with my love of you, Irina, and it all seems to fit, because you're beautiful and life looks just as beautiful to me! What are you thinking about?

IRINA. You say: life is beautiful. Yes, but what if it only seems that way! For us three sisters, life hasn't been beautiful, it's choked us, like weeds . . . There are tears running down my face. That's not what we need . . . (Quickly wipes her face, smiles.) What we need is work, work. That's why things look so gloomy to us, why we take such a dim view of life, because we don't know what hard work is. We're the children of people who despised hard work . . .

NATALIYA IVANOVNA enters, wearing a pink dress with a green belt.

NATASHA.23 They've already sat down to lunch . . . I'm late . . . (Catches a glimpse of herself in a mirror, sets herself to rights.) My hairdo looks all right . . . (On seeing Irina.) Dear Irina Sergeevna, congratulations! (Kisses her energetically and at length.) You've got a lot of guests, honestly, I'm embarrassed . . . Good afternoon, Baron!

OLGA (entering the drawing-room). Why, here's Nataliya Ivanovna too. Good afternoon, my dear!

They exchange kisses.

NATASHA. With the party girl. You've got such a lot of company, I'm awfully nervous . . .

OLGA. Don't be silly, it's all family. (In an undertone, shocked.) You're wearing a green belt! My dear, that's a mistake!

NATASHA. Is it bad luck?

OLGA. No, it simply doesn't go . . . It's all wrong somehow . . .

NATASHA (on the verge of tears). Really? But actually it's not green, it's more a sort of beige.

Follows OLGA into the reception room. In the reception room everyone is seated at the table; not a soul is left in the drawing-room.

22 Vodka is traditionally flavored with herbs and spices, such as buffalo grass, cardamom, and peppercorns.

23 "Natasha" is the usual diminutive of "Nataliya" and is used throughout by the sisters.
KULYGIN. I wish you, Irina, a proper fiancé. It’s high time you got married.

CHEBUTYKIN. Nataliya Ivanovna, I wish you a tiny little fiancé.

KULYGIN. Nataliya Ivanovna already has a tiny little fiancé.

MASHA (raps a fork on a plate). I’ll have a glass of wine! What the hell, life’s for living, so let’s live dangerously!

KULYGIN. Your conduct gets C minus.

VERSHININ. My, this is a tasty cordial. What’s it flavored with?

SOLONY. Cockroaches.

IRINA (on the verge of tears). Ick! Ick! That’s disgusting! . . .

OLGA. For supper we’re having roast turkey and apple pie.24 Thank God, I’m home all day today, home this evening . . . Gentlemen, do come again this evening.

Vershinin. May I come in the evening too?

IRINA. Please do.

NATASHA. It’s do as you please around here.

CHEBUTYKIN. “For love alone did Nature put us on this earth.” (Laughs.)

ANDREY (angrily). Will you stop it, gentlemen! Don’t you get sick of it?

FEDOTIK and RODÉ enter with a large basket of flowers.

FEDOTIK. They’re already eating lunch.

RODÉ (loudly, rolling his rs). They’re already eating? Yes, they are already eating . . .

FEDOTIK. Wait just a minute! (Takes a snapshot.) One! Hold it just a bit more . . . (Takes another snapshot.) Two! Now we’re through!

They take the basket and go into the reception room, where they are greeted boisterously.

RODÉ (loudly). Congratulations, I wish you the best of everything, the best of everything! Enchanting weather today, simply splendid. All this morn-

ing I was out on a hike with the high school students. I teach gymnastics at the high school . . .

FEDOTIK. You may move now, Irina Sergeevna, yes you may! (Takes a snapshot.) You are an interesting model today. (Pulls a humming-top out of his pocket.) And in addition, look, a humming-top . . . Makes a wonderful sound . . .

IRINA. What a treasure!

MASHA. “On the curved seashore a green oak stands, a golden chain wound round that oak . . . A golden chain wound round that oak . . .” (Tearfully.)

Now, why do I keep saying that? Those lines have been stuck in my head since this morning . . .

KULYGIN. Thirteen at table!

RODÉ (loudly). Ladies and gentlemen, how can you possibly lend credence to superstitions?

Laughter.

KULYGIN. If there are thirteen at table, that means there are lovers here. Might you be one, Doctor, perish the thought . . .

Laughter.

CHEBUTYKIN. I’ve been a sinner from way back, but, look, why Nataliya Ivanovna should get embarrassed is something I simply cannot understand.

Loud laughter. NATASHA runs out of the reception room into the drawing-room, followed by ANDREY.

ANDREY. Never mind, don’t pay any attention! Wait . . . Stop, please . . .

NATASHA. I’m embarrassed . . . I don’t know what to do with myself, and they’re all poking fun at me. I just left the table, and I know it’s impolite, but I can’t . . . I can’t . . . (Hides her face in her hands.)

ANDREY. My dearest, please, I beg you, don’t get upset. I swear to you, they’re only joking, it’s all in good fun. My dearest, my own, they’re all kind, loving people, and they love me and you. Come over here to the window where they can’t see us . . . (Looking around.)

NATASHA. I’m so unaccustomed to being in society! . . .

24 American though this sounds, the turkey would have been stuffed with liver and walnuts, sliced, and served with a Madeira sauce. The open-face apple pie would contain almonds, cherry jam, and raisins.
NDREY. Oh, youth, wonderful, beautiful youth. My dearest, my own, don't get so upset!... Believe me, believe me... I feel so good, my heart is brimming over with love, delight... Oh, they can't see us! They can't see! Why I fell in love with you, when I fell in love with you—oh, I have no idea. My dearest, good, pure love, be my wife! I'd love you, love you... like no one ever... (A kiss.)

TWO OFFICERS enter and, on seeing the kissing couple, stop in amazement.

Curtain

ACT TWO

Same set as in Act One.

Eight o'clock at night. From stage, as if from the street, one can faintly hear a concertina playing. No lights.

Enter NATALIYA IVANOVNA in a housecoat and carrying a candle; she walks around and stops by the door leading to Andrey's room.

NATASHA. Andryusha, what're you doing? Reading? Never mind, I'm just... (Walks around, opens another door and, after peeping in, closes it again.) Seeing if there's a light...

NDREY (enters, holding a book). You what, Natasha?

NATASHA. I'm checking to see if there's a light... Now that it's carnival week,25 the servants are out of control, you have to keep a sharp lookout to see that nothing goes wrong. Last night at midnight I was walking through the dining room and there was a candle burning. Who lit it, I never did manage to find out. (Puts down the candle.) What time is it?

NDREY (after a look at his watch). Quarter past eight.

NATASHA. And Olga and Irina not back yet. They aren't here. Still at work, poor things. Olga at the faculty meeting, Irina at the telegraph office... (Sighs.) Just this morning I was saying to your sister, "Take care of yourself," I say, "Irina, love." But she doesn't listen. A quarter past eight, you said? I'm worried our Bobik26 isn't at all well. Why is he so cold? Yesterday he had a fever and today he's cold all over... I'm so worried!

NDREY. It's nothing, Natasha. The boy's healthy.

NATASHA. But even so we'd better put him on a diet. I'm worried. And at nine o'clock tonight, they were saying, the masqueraders27 will be here. It'd be better if they didn't put in an appearance, Andryusha.

NDREY (indecisively). But, after all, that's up to my sisters. They're in charge here.

NATASHA. Oh, they are too, I'll tell them. They're considerate... (Walks around.) For supper I ordered some yogurt. Doctor says you shouldn't eat anything but yogurt, otherwise you won't lose weight. (Stops.) Bobik is cold. I'm worried, it's too cold for him in his room, most likely. At least until the weather gets warmer we should put him in another room. For instance, Irina's room is just right for a baby, it's dry and sunny all day long. I'll have to tell her, meanwhile she can double up with Olga in the same room... It doesn't matter, she's not at home during the day, only spends the night here... (Pause.) Andryusha sweetie-pie, why don't you say something?

NDREY. No reason, I was thinking... Besides there's nothing to be said...
NATASHA. Right... Something I wanted to tell you... Oh, yes. Ferapont's out there, sent by the council, he's asking to see you.

ANDREY (yawns). Send him in.

NATASHA exits; ANDREY, hunched over the candle she's forgotten, reads a book. Enter FERAPONT; he is wearing an old threadbare overcoat with a turned-up collar, his ears covered by a kerchief.

ANDREY. Evening, old-timer. What have you got to say for yourself?

FERAPONT. Chairman sent a book and a paper of some sort. Here... (Hands over a book and a paper.)

ANDREY. Thanks. Fine. But why didn't you get here earlier? After all, it's past eight already.

FERAPONT. How's that?

ANDREY (Louder). I said, you've come so late, it's already past eight.

FERAPONT. Right you are. When I got here it was still light, but they wouldn't let me in all this time. The master, they say, is busy. Well, that's that. Busy's busy, I got no cause to rush. (Thinking that Andrey is asking him something.) How's that?

ANDREY. Nothing. (Examining the book.) Tomorrow's Friday, we don't meet, but I'll go there all the same... I'll find something to do, it's boring at home...

Pause.

You dear old man, it's funny the way things change, the way life isn't fair! Today out of boredom, with nothing to do, I picked up this book here—my old university lecture notes, and I had to laugh... Good grief, I'm secretary to the County Council, the council Protopopov presides over, I'm secretary and the most I can hope for—is to become a full member of the County Council! Me a member of the local County Council, me, who dreams every night that I'm a professor at Moscow University, a famous scholar, the pride of Russia!

FERAPONT. I couldn't say... I'm hard o' hearing...

ANDREY. If your hearing was good, I probably wouldn't be talking to you. I have to talk to someone, and my wife doesn't understand me, my sisters scare me for some reason, I'm afraid they'll make fun of me, embarrass me...

... I don't drink, I've no great fondness for barrooms, but I'd love to be sitting in Moscow at Testov's tavern right now or the Grand Moscow restaurant, my friend.

FERAPONT. Why, in Moscow, a contractor at the Council was saying the other day, there was some shopkeepers eating pancakes;²⁸ one ate forty pancakes and like to died. May ha' been forty, may ha' been fifty. I don't rec'lect.

ANDREY. You sit in Moscow in the vast main dining room of a restaurant, you don't know anyone and no one knows you, and at the same time you don't feel like a stranger. Whereas here you know everyone and everyone knows you, but you're a stranger, a stranger... A stranger and alone.

FERAPONT. How's that?

Pause.

And that same contractor was saying—lying too, mebbe—as how there's a rope stretched across all Moscow.

ANDREY. What for?

FERAPONT. How do I know? The contractor said so.

ANDREY. Don't be silly. (Reads the book.) Were you ever in Moscow?

FERAPONT (after a pause). I was not. 'Tweren't God's will.

Pause.

Can I go?

ANDREY. You may go. Keep well.

FERAPONT exits.

Keep well. (Reading.) Come back tomorrow morning, pick up the paper... Go on...

Pause.

He's gone. (The doorknell rings.) Yes, business... (Stretches and unhurriedly goes back into his room.)

²⁸ The classical dish for Butter Week is pancakes made of raised flour or buckwheat dough, fried in plenty of butter and filled with cottage cheese. The round shape was to represent the sun, since this was originally a pagan holiday.
Offstage a nursemaid is singing a lullaby to a baby. Enter MASHA and VERSHININ. Later, during their dialogue, the PARLOR MAID lights a lamp and candles.

MASHA. I don’t know. (Pause.) I don’t know. Of course, habit has a lot to do with it. After Father died, for instance, it was a long time before we could get used to not having orderlies any more. But, habit aside, I think I’m being impartial. Maybe it’s not like this in other places, but in our town the most decent, most honorable and cultured people are the military.

VERSHININ. I’d like something to drink. I could use some tea.

MASHA (after a glance at the clock). They’ll bring some soon. They married me off when I was eighteen, and I was afraid of my husband because he was a schoolteacher and at the time I’d just graduated. At the time he seemed to me to be terribly clever, learned, and important. But that’s no longer the case, sad to say.

VERSHININ. Is that so . . . yes.

MASHA. I’m not including my husband, I’m used to him, but among civilians in general there so many crude, ungenial, uncouth people. I get upset, I’m offended by crudeness, it pains me to see a man who’s not as refined or sensitive or congenial as he should be. When I have to be with schoolteachers, my husband’s colleagues, I’m just in agony.

VERSHININ. Yes, ma’am . . . But I don’t think it matters much, civilian or military, they’re equally uninteresting, at least in this town. Makes no difference! If you listen to any educated man in this town, civilian or military, he’s sick and tired of his wife, sick and tired of his home, sick and tired of his estate, sick and tired of his horses. . . . A Russian is highly capable of coming up with advanced ideas, so tell me, why is his aim in life so low? Why?

MASHA. Why?

VERSHININ. Why is he sick and tired of his children, sick and tired of his wife? And why are his wife and children sick and tired of him?

MASHA. You’re in a bad mood today.

VERSHININ. Could be. I haven’t had dinner today. I’ve eaten nothing since this morning. One of my daughters is under the weather, and when my little girls are ill, anxiety gets the better of me. My conscience bothers me for giving them such a mother. Oh, if only you could have seen her today! So petty! We started bickering at seven in the morning, and at nine I slammed the door and went out.

Pause.

I never talk about this, and it’s strange, you’re the only one I complain to. (Kisses her hand.) Don’t be angry with me. Except for you, only you, I have no one, no one . . .

Pause.

MASHA. What a racket in the stove! Not long before Father died, there was a whistling in our stovepipe. It was exactly like that.

VERSHININ. You’re superstitious?

MASHA. Yes.

VERSHININ. ’S funny. (Kisses her hand.) You’re a superb, a marvelous woman. Superb, marvelous woman! It’s dark in here, but I can see the sparkle in your eyes.

MASHA (moves to another chair). There’s more light over here . . .

VERSHININ. I love, love, love . . . I love your eyes, your movements, which come to me in my dreams . . . Superb, marvelous woman!

MASHA (laughing quietly). When you talk to me that way, for some reason I have to laugh, even though I feel terrified. Don’t say it again, please don’t . . . (In an undertone.) Go on, do talk, it doesn’t matter to me . . . (Hides her face in her hands.) To me it doesn’t matter. Someone’s coming in here, talk about something else . . .

IRINA and TUSENBACK enter through the reception room.

TUSENBACK. I have a tripartite name. I’m called Baron Tussenbach-Krons-Altschauer, but I’m a Russian, of the Orthodox faith, same as you. There’s only a bit of German left in me, actually only the dogged obstinacy I pester you with. I escort you home every single night.

IRINA. I’m so tired!

TUSENBACK. And every single night I’ll come to the telegraph office and escort you home, I will for ten, twenty years, until you chase me away . . . (On seeing Masha and Vershinin, gleefully.) Is that you? Good evening.
IRINA. Here I am, home at last. (To Masha.) Just now a lady comes in, wires her brother in Saratov\(^{29}\) to say that her son has died, and she couldn't manage to remember the address. So she sent it without an address, simply to Saratov. Crying the whole time. And I was rude to her for no reason at all. "I haven't got the time," I said. It sounded so stupid. Are the masqueraders dropping by tonight?

MASHA. Yes.

IRINA (sits in an armchair). Have to rest. I'm tired.

TUSENBACK (with a smile). Whenever you come home from work, you look so small, such a tiny little thing . . .

Pause.

IRINA. I'm tired. No, I don't like the telegraph office, I don't like it.

MASHA. You're getting thinner . . . (Whistles under her breath.) And younger, for your face looks just like a sweet little boy's.

TUSENBACK. It's the way she does her hair.

IRINA. I've got to look for another job, this one's not for me. What I so wanted, what I dream of is definitely missing in this one. Drudgery without poetry, without thought . . . (A knock on the floor.) The doctor's knocking. (To Tusenbach.) Knock back, my dear. I can't . . . I'm tired . . . (TUSENBACK knocks on the floor.) He'll be here in a minute. Somebody ought to do something about him. Yesterday the Doctor and Andrey were at the club and lost again. They say Andrey lost two hundred rubles.

MASHA (indifferently). What can you do now?

IRINA. Two weeks ago he lost, back in December he lost. If only he'd hurry up and lose everything, maybe we'd leave this town. Honest to God, I dream of Moscow every night, I'm getting to be a regular obsessive. (Laughs.) We'll move there in June, and till June there's still . . . February, March, April, May . . . almost half a year!

MASHA. Just so long as Natasha hasn't found out about his losses.

IRINA. I shouldn't think it matters to her.

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CHEIBUTYKIN, only just got out of bed—he was napping after dinner—enters the reception room and combs out his beard, then sits there at the table and pulls a newspaper out of his pocket.

MASHA. Here he comes . . . Has he paid his room rent?

IRINA (laughs). No. For eight months not the slightest kopek. Apparently he's forgotten.

MASHA (laughs). How pompously he sits!

They all laugh; pause.

IRINA. Why are you so silent, Colonel?

VERSHININ. I don't know. I'd like some tea. Half my kingdom for a glass of tea!\(^{30}\) I haven't had anything to eat since this morning . . .

CHEIBUTYKIN. Irina Sergeevna!

IRINA. What do you want?

CHEIBUTYKIN. Please come over here. Venez ici\(^{31}\) (IRINA goes and sits at the table.) I can't live without you. (IRINA lays out a game of solitaire.)

VERSHININ. What do you say? If there's no tea, let's at least philosophize.

TUSENBACK. Let's. What about?

VERSHININ. What about? Let's dream a little . . . for instance, about the life to come after us, some two hundred or three hundred years from now.

TUSENBACK. How about this? The people who come after us will fly in hot-air balloons, suit jackets will be cut in a different style, maybe they'll discover a sixth sense and put it to use, but life will stay just the same, life will be hard, full of mysteries, and happy. And a thousand years from now men will sigh in just the same way: "Ah, life is a burden!"—and just as they do now, they'll be scared and resist having to die.

VERSHININ (after giving it some thought). How can I put this? I have the impression that everything on earth should be changing little by little and is already changing before our very eyes. In two hundred, three hundred,

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\(^{29}\) A city on the Volga.


\(^{31}\) French: Come here.
all right, a thousand years—the time span’s of no importance—a new and
happy life will come into being. This life is something we won’t take part
in, of course, but we’re living for it now, we work, oh, and we suffer, we are
creating it—and this is the one and only purpose of our existence and, if
you like, our happiness.

MASHA laughs quietly.

TUSEN BACH. What’s come over you?

MASHA. I don’t know. All day long I’ve been laughing, ever since this
morning.

VERSIN NIN. I finished school at the same grade you did, I didn’t go to the
Military Academy; I read a great deal, but I don’t know how to choose
books and maybe I don’t read what I should, and yet the more I live, the
more I want to know. My hair’s turning gray, any day now I’ll be an old
man, but I know so little, ah, so little! But even so, I think what’s most
important, what really matters I do know, and know it through and
through. If only I could prove to you that there is no happiness, there
shouldn’t be and will not be for any of us . . . All we should do is work and
go on working, as for happiness, that’s the lot of future generations.

Pause.

Not my lot but that of future generations of future generations.

FEDOTIK and RODE appear in the reception room; they sit
down and sing quietly, strumming on the guitar.

TUSEN BACH. To your way of thinking, a person’s not supposed to dream of
happiness! But what if I am happy?

VERSIN NIN. No.

TUSEN BACH (clapping his hands together and laughing). Obviously, we’re
not communicating. Well, how can I convince you? (MASHA laughs qui-
etly.) (Wagging a finger at her.) Go ahead and laugh! (To Vershinin.) Not
just two hundred or three hundred, but even a million years from now, life
will be the same as it’s always been; it won’t change, it will stay constant,
governed by its own laws, which are none of our business or, at least, which
we’ll never figure out. Birds of passage, cranes, for instance, fly on and on,
and whatever thoughts, sublime or trivial, may drift through their heads,
they’ll keep on flying and never know what for or where to. They fly and
will keep on flying, whatever philosopher they may hatch; and let them
philosophize to their heart’s content, so long as they keep on flying . . .

MASHA. Then what’s the point?

TUSEN BACH. The point . . . Look, there’s snow falling. What’s the point of
that?

Pause.

MASHA. It seems to me, a person ought to believe in something or look for
something to believe in; otherwise his life is empty, empty . . . To live and
not know why cranes fly, why children are born, why stars are in the sky . . .
Either you know why you live or else it’s all senseless, gobbledy-gook.

Pause.

VERSIN NIN. Still it’s a pity that youth has flown . . .

MASHA. In one of Gogol’s stories, he says: It’s a sad world, my masters!

TUSEN BACH. And I say: it’s hard to argue with you, my masters! You’re too
much . . .

CHEBUTYKIN (reading the paper). Balzac was married in Biderich.33
(IRINA sings quietly.) That’s something to jot down in the book. (Jots it
down.) Balzac was married in Biderich. (Reads the paper.)

IRINA (laying out a game of solitaire; pensively). Balzac was married in
Biderich.

TUSEN BACH. The die is cast.34 You know, Mariya Sergeevna, I’ve turned in
my resignation.

MASHA. So I’ve heard. And I doubt anything good will come of it. I don’t like
civilians.

32 Masha is quoting the last sentence of Gogol’s “Story of How Ivan Ivanovich and Ivan Niko-
lovich Fell Out” (1832): literally, “It’s boring in this world, gentlemen,” Like Gogol’s heroes,
Tussenbach and Vershinin will never agree.

33 The French novelist Honore de Balzac (1799-1850) married the Polish landowner Ewelina
Hanska in Biderich a few months before he died. Biderich, a city in the Kiev guberniya in
Ukraine, was almost entirely populated by Jews, hence the incongruity.

34 Spoken by Julius Caesar on crossing the Rubicon, as related in Suetonius, Lives of the Twelve
Caesars.
TUZENBACH. Doesn’t matter . . . (Rises.) I’m not good looking, what kind of military figure do I cut? Besides, it doesn’t matter, anyway . . . I’ll go to work. At least once in my life I’ll do some work, so I can come home at night, collapse on my bed exhausted and fall fast asleep in an instant. (Going into the reception room.) I suppose workingmen sleep soundly.

FEDOTIK (to Irina). Just now at Pyzhikov’s on Moscow Street I bought you some colored pencils. And here’s a little penknife.

IRINA. You’re used to treating me like a child, but I really am grown up now . . . (Takes the pencils and penknife; with delight.) What fun!

FEDOTIK. And for myself I bought a jackknife . . . here, have a look at it . . . one blade, then another blade, a third, that’s for cleaning out the ears, this is a tiny scissors, this one’s for trimming nails . . .

RODÉ (loudly). Doctor, how old are you?

CHEBUTYKIN. Me? Thirty-two.

Laughter.

FEDOTIK. Now I’m going to show you another kind of solitaire . . . (Deals out a game of solitaire.)

The samovar is brought in. ANFISA is by the samovar; a bit of a wait and then NATASHA enters and also fusses around the samovar. SOLONYA enters and, after exchanging greetings, sits at the table.

VERSININ. Incidentally, that’s quite a wind!

MASHA. Yes. I’m sick and tired of winter. I’ve already forgot what summer’s like.

IRINA. The solitaire’s coming out, I see. We’ll be in Moscow.

FEDOTIK. No it isn’t. You see, the eight was on top of the deuce of spades. (Laughs.) That means, you won’t be in Moscow.

CHEBUTYKIN (reads the paper). Tsitsikar. Smallpox is raging there.

ANFISA (coming over to Masha). Masha, have some tea, dearie. (To Vershinin.) Please, your honor . . . forgive me, dearie, I’ve forgot your name . . .

VERSININ. A few days ago I was reading the diary of a French cabinet minister, written in prison. The cabinet minister had been sentenced for taking bribes in the Panama scandal. With what intoxication, what ecstasy he recalls the birds he saw from his prison window and which he failed to notice before when he was a cabinet minister. Of course, now that he’s released and at liberty, he’s stopped noticing birds, just as before. And you’ll stop noticing Moscow once you’re living there. We have no happiness, there is none, we only long for it.

TUZENBACH (takes a little box from the table). Where are the chocolates?

IRINA. Solyony ate them.

TUZENBACH. All of ’em?

ANFISA (handing round the tea). There’s a letter for you, dearie.

VERSININ. For me? (Takes the letter.) From my daughters. (Reads.) Yes, naturally . . . Excuse me, Mariya Sergeevna, I’ll leave ever so quietly. I won’t have any tea. (Rises in great agitation.) These everlasting scenes . . .

MASHA. What is it? Not a secret?

36 Impressions cellulaires, by Charles Baudelaire (1834–1905), French Minister for Panama, who was condemned to two years in prison in 1893. Chekhov had read this book during his stay in Nice in 1897. The bankruptcy in 1888 of the company organized to build the Panama canal resulted in the conviction of several French politicians for fraud.

Or Tsitsikar or Qiuphar or Ho-lung-kiang, a province of Chinese Manchuria.
VERSININ (quietly). My wife poisoned herself again. I've got to go. I'll slip out without being noticed. Awfully unpleasant all this. (Kisses Masha's hand.) My dear, wonderful, lovely woman . . . I'll slip out of here ever so quietly . . . (Exits.)

ANFISA. Where's he off to? Why, I gave him tea . . . What a one.

MASHA (losing her temper). Stop it! Forever badgering us, you never give us a moment's peace . . . (Goes with her cup to the table.) I'm sick and tired of you, old woman!

ANFISA. Why are you so touchy? Sweetheart!

ANDREY'S VOICE. Anfisa!

ANFISA (mimics). Anfisa! There he sits . . . (Exits.)

MASHA (in the reception room at the table, angrily). Do let me sit down! (Messes up the cards on the table.) Sprawling all over with your cards. Drink your tea!

IRINA. Mashka, you're being nasty.

MASHA. If I'm nasty, don't talk to me. Don't touch me!

CHEBUTYKIN (laughing). Don't touch her, don't touch . . .

MASHA. You're sixty years old, but you're like a snotty little boy, nobody knows what the hell you're babbling about.

NATASHA (sighs). Masha dear, what's the point of using such expressions in polite conversation? With your lovely looks you'd be simply enchanting in decent society, I'll say that straight to your face, if it weren't for that vocabulary of yours. Je vous prie, pardonnez moi, Marie, mais vous avez des manières un peu grossières.37

TUZENBACH (restraining his laughter). May I . . . may I . . . I think there's some cognac . . .

NATASHA. Il paraît, que mon Bobik déjà ne dort pas,38 he woke up. He isn't well today. I'll go to him, excuse me . . . (Exits.)

IRINA. But where has the Colonel gone?

MASHA. Home. His wife again—something unexpected.

TUZENBACH (goes to Solyony, carrying a decanter of cognac). You always sit by yourself, thinking about something—and you have no idea what. Well, let's make peace. Let's have some cognac. (They drink.) I'll have to tickle the ivories all night tonight, I suppose, play all sorts of trash . . . Come what may!

SOLONY. Why make peace? I haven't quarreled with you.

TUZENBACH. You always make me feel that something has happened between us. You've got a strange personality, you must admit.

SOLONY (declaiming). “Strange I may be, but then who is not?”39 “Contain your wrath, Aleko!”40

TUZENBACH. What's Aleko got to do with it . . .

Pause.

SOLONY. When I'm alone with anyone, it's all right, I'm like everybody else, but in company I'm dejected, inhibited, and . . . I talk all sorts of rubbish. But all the same I'm more honest and decent than lots and lots of people. And I can prove it.

TUZENBACH. I often get angry with you, you're constantly needleling me when we're in public, but all the same for some reason I have an affinity to you. Come what may, I'll get drunk tonight. Let's drink!

SOLONY. Let's drink. (They drink.) I don't have anything against you, Baron. But my temperament is like Lermontov's. (Quietly.) I even look a little like Lermontov41 . . . so they say . . . (Takes the flask of perfume from his pocket and sprinkles it on his hands.)

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37 French: Please, forgive me, Marie, but you have rather rude manners. French was common in Russian intellectual circles, but it is pretentious on the part of Natasha, who makes frequent mistakes. Correctly, it would be “je vous en prie.”

38 Bad French: It seems my Bobik is already not asleep.

39 Quotation from the classic comedy Woe from Wit by Aleksandr Griboedov, a line of the protagonist Chatsky (Act V, scene 1), who is in opposition to Moscow's high society and its blind Francophilia.

40 Aleko is the hero of the romantic verse tale “The Gypsies,” by Aleksandr Pushkin (1824), heavily influenced by Byronic romanticism. A Russian depressed by civilization, Aleko turns his back on elegant Petersburg and lives with gypsies; he falls in love with a gypsy girl and commits a murder out of jealousy. Rachmaninov turned it into an opera (1892).

41 Mikhail Yurevich Lermontov (1814–1841), after Pushkin the most important lyric poet of Russian Romanticism. As an officer, Lermontov was twice exiled to the Caucasus, then killed in a
TUSENBACK. I've turned in my resignation. Basta! For five years I kept turning it over in my mind and finally I came to a decision. I shall go to work.

SOLONY (declaiming). “Contain your wrath, Aleko... Forget, forget your dreams...”

While they talk, ANDREY enters with a book and sits by the candles.

TUSENBACK. I shall go to work.

CHEBUTYKIN (going into the drawing-room with IRINA). And the refreshments were also authentic Caucasian dishes: onion soup and for the roast—chekhartma, a meat dish.

SOLONY. Cheremsha42 isn’t meat at all, but a vegetable related to our onion.

CHEBUTYKIN. No sir, angel mine. Chekhartma is not an onion, but roast mutton.

SOLONY. And I tell you, cheremsha is onion.

CHEBUTYKIN. And I tell you, chekhartma is mutton.

SOLONY. And I tell you, cheremsha is onion.

CHEBUTYKIN. Why should I argue with you? You were never in the Caucasus and never ate chekhartma.

SOLONY. I never ate it, because I can’t stand it. Cheremsha reeks as badly as garlic.

ANDREY (pleading). That’s enough, gentlemen! For pity’s sake!

TUSENBACK. When do the masqueraders get here?

IRINA. They promised to be here by nine, which means any minute now.

TUSENBACK (embracing Andrey). “Ah, you gates, my gates, new gates...”

duel. “Actually, Solyony does think that he looks like Lermontov, but of course he doesn’t—it’s ridiculous just to think of... He should be made up to look like Lermontov. The resemblance to Lermontov is enormous, but only in Solyony’s mind” (Chekhov to I. A. Tikhomirov, January 14, 1901).

42 Chekhartma, correctly, chekherimta, is a Caucasian soup of lamb or chicken, flavored with coriander and saffron. Cheremsha may refer to either cherimota (masculine; Allium angulosum), the sharp-edged leek, or cheremota (feminine; Allium ursinum), wild garlic.

Three Sisters

ANDREY (dances and sings). “New gates, made of maple...”

CHEBUTYKIN (dances). “Lattice-grates upon my gates!”

Laughter.

TUSENBACK (kisses Andrey). Damn it, let’s have a drink. Andryusha, let’s drink to being old pals. And I’m going with you, Andryusha, to Moscow, to the university.

SOLONY. Which one? In Moscow there are two universities.

ANDREY. In Moscow there is one university.

SOLONY. And I tell you—two.

ANDREY. Make it three. The more the merrier.

SOLONY. In Moscow there are two universities! (Grumbling and hissing.) In Moscow there are two universities: the old one and the new one. And if you don’t enjoy listening to me, if my words annoy you, then I can stop talking. I can even go off into another room... (Exits through one of the doors.)

TUSENBACK. Bravo, bravo! (Laughs.) Gentlemen, proceed, I shall commence to play! Laughable that Solyony... (Sits down at the baby grand, plays a waltz.)

MASHA (dances a waltz by herself). Baron’s drunk, Baron’s drunk, Baron’s drunk!

Enter NATASHA.

NATASHA (to Chebutykin). Ivan Romanych! (Mentions something to Chebutykin, then quietly exits.)

CHEBUTYKIN taps Tusenbach on the shoulder and whispers something to him.

IRINA. What is it?

CHEBUTYKIN. Time for us to go. Be well.

TUSENBACK. Good night. Time to go.

IRINA. Excuse me... But what about the masqueraders?...
ANDREY (embarrassed). There won’t be any masqueraders. You see, my dear, Natasha says that Bobik isn’t very well, and so... To make a long story short, I don’t know anything about it, it doesn’t matter to me in the least.

IRINA (shrugging). Bobik isn’t well!

MASHA. Now we’ve had it! They’re kicking us out, so I suppose we’ve got to go. (To Irina.) It’s not Bobik that’s sick, it’s her... Here! (Taps her forehead with a finger.) Small-town slut!  

ANDREY exits through the door right, to his room, CHEBUTYKIN follows him; those in the reception room say good-bye.

FEDOTIK. What a shame! I’d counted on spending a full night here, but if the little baby’s ill, then, of course... Tomorrow I’ll bring him a little toy...  

RODÉ (loudly). I deliberately took a nap after dinner today, I thought I’d be up all night dancing. After all, it’s only nine o’clock now!

MASHA. Let’s go out in the street and discuss it there. We’ll come up with something to do.

“Good-bye! Keep well!” can be heard, as well as the merry laughter of TUSENBAKH. ANFISA and the PARLOR MAID clear the table and extinguish the lights. The nursemaid can be heard singing. Enter quietly ANDREY in an overcoat and hat and CHEBUTYKIN.

CHEBUTYKIN. I didn’t have a chance to get married, because life flashed by me like a streak of lightning, and besides I was madly in love with your dear mother, who was married already...  

ANDREY. There’s no reason to get married. No reason, because it’s a bore.

CHEBUTYKIN. That may be so, but then there’s the loneliness. However much you philosophize, loneliness is a terrible thing, my boy... Although, basically... Of course, it doesn’t matter!

ANDREY. Let’s go quickly.

CHEBUTYKIN. What’s the rush? We’ve got time.

ANDREY. I’m afraid the wife might stop me.

CHEBUTYKIN. Ah!

ANDREY. I won’t play tonight, I’ll just sit and watch. I don’t feel well... Doctor, what should I take for shortness of breath?

CHEBUTYKIN. Why ask? I don’t remember, my boy. I don’t know.

ANDREY. Let’s go through the kitchen.

They leave.  

The doorbell rings, then rings again: voices and laughter are heard.

IRINA (enters). What’s that?

ANFISA (in a whisper). Masqueraders!

The doorbell.

IRINA. Nanny dear, say no one’s at home. Make excuses.

ANFISA exits. IRINA walks about the room in a reverie; she is on edge. Enter SOLONY.

SOLONY (bewildered). No one’s here... But where are they all?

IRINA. They went home.

SOLONY. Strange. You’re alone here?

IRINA. Alone. (Pause.) Good-bye.

SOLONY. A while ago I behaved without proper restraint and discretion. But you aren’t like the rest, you’re exalted and pure, you can discern the truth... You alone, only you can understand me. I love, I love profoundly, incessantly...  

IRINA. Good-bye! Go away.

SOLONY. I can’t live without you. (Following her around.) Oh, my heaven on earth! (Plaintively.) Oh, happiness! exquisite, wonderful, bewitching eyes, I’ve never seen their like in any other woman...

IRINA (coldly). Stop it, Vasily Vasilich!
SOLONY. This is the first time I'm talking to you of love, and it's exactly like being out of this world, on another planet. (Rub's his forehead.) Well, still, it doesn't matter. You can't be compelled to care for me, of course . . . But I won't tolerate any successful rivals . . . Won't tolerate it . . . I swear to you by all that's holy, I'll kill any rival . . . Oh, wonderful woman!

NATASHA passes through with a candle.

NATASHA (peers through one door, then another, and passes the door leading to her husband's room). Andrey's in there. Let him read. Do forgive me, Vasily Vasilich, I didn't know you were here, I'm in a housecoat.

SOLONY. It doesn't matter to me. Good-by! (Exits.)

NATASHA. And you're tired, darling, my poor little girl. (Kisses Irina.) You should have gone to bed much sooner.

IRINA. Is Bobik asleep?

NATASHA. He's asleep. But he sleeps so restlessly. By the way, darling, I wanted to tell you, but you're never around, or I never have the time . . . Bobik's present nursery seems to me to be cold and damp. But your room is so right for a baby. Dearest, sweetheart, move in with Olya for a while!

IRINA (confused). Where?

A troika with harness bells can be heard pulling up to the house.

NATASHA. You and Olya can be in one room for a while, and your room will go to Bobik. He's such a little darling, today I say to him, "Bobik, you're mine! All mine!" And he stares at me with his pretty little peepers. (Doorbell.) That's Olga, I suppose. Isn't she late! (The PARLOR MAID walks over to Natasha and whispers in her ear.) Protopopov? What a character. Protopopov's here and wants me to go for a ride with him in the troika. (Laughs.) How funny men are . . . (Doorbell.) Someone's ringing . . . Olga's back, I suppose. (Exits.)

The PARLOR MAID runs out; IRINA sits rapt in thought; enter KULYGIN and OLGA, followed by VERSHININ.

KULYGIN. Would you look at this. But they said they'd be having a party.

VERSININ. Strange, I left not long ago, half an hour, and they were waiting for the masqueraders . . .

IRINA. They've all gone.

KULYGIN. Masha's gone too? Where did she go? And why is Protopopov downstairs waiting in a troika? Who's he waiting for?

IRINA. Don't give me a quiz . . . I'm tired.

KULYGIN. My, what a scatterbrain . . .

OLGA. The meeting only just ended. I'm exhausted. Our headmistress is ill, and I'm taking her place now. My head, my head aches, my head . . . (Sits.) Andrey lost two hundred rubles at cards yesterday . . . The whole town's talking about it.

KULYGIN. Yes, the meeting wore me out too. (Sits.)

VERSININ. My wife just now took it into her head to give me a scare, she all but poisoned herself. It's all blown over, and I'm relieved, I can take it easy now . . . So, I suppose, we've got to go? Well then, let me wish you all the best. Fyodor Ilyich, walk somewhere with me! I can't stay at home, I simply cannot . . . Let's go for a walk!

KULYGIN. I'm tired. I'm going nowhere. (Rises.) I'm tired. Did my wife go home?

IRINA. I suppose so.

KULYGIN (kisses Irina's hand). Good-bye. Tomorrow and the day after I've got the whole day to relax. All the best! (Goes.) I'd really like some tea. I counted on spending the evening in congenial company and — o, fallacem hominum spem! Accusative case, used in the vocative . . .

VERSININ. Which means, I'm on my own. (Exits with KULYGIN, whistling.)

OLGA. My head aches, my poor head . . . Andrey lost . . . the whole town's talking . . . I'll go lie down. (Goes.) Tomorrow I'm free . . . Oh, goodness, how nice it'll be! Free tomorrow, free the day after . . . My head aches, my poor head . . . (Exits.)

45 Sleigh rides, preferably in a troika, decorated with colored ribbons and bells, were a favorite pastime during Maslenitsa. The sleighs would travel in wide semicircles to commemorate the sun's passage.

46 Latin: "oh, vain is human hope!" from Cicero, The Orator (III, ii).
IRINA (alone). They've all gone. No one's left.

In the street there's a concertina, the NURSEMAID sings a song.

NATASHA (wearing a fur coat and hat walks through the reception room, followed by the PARLOR MAID). I'll be back in half an hour. Just going for a little ride. (Exits.)

IRINA (alone, yearning). To Moscow! To Moscow! To Moscow!

Curtain

ACT THREE

Olga's and Irina's room. Beds at left and right, fenced round with screens. Between two and three o'clock in the morning. Offstage an alarm bell is ringing to fight a fire that started much earlier. Quite clearly no one in the house has been to bed yet. On a sofa lies MASHA, dressed, as usual, in black.

Enter OLGA and ANFISA.

ANFISA. They're sitting downstairs now under the staircase . . . And I says, "Please go upstairs," I says, "'tain't right for you to sit here,"—they're crying, "Papa," they says, "we don't know where he's at. God forbid," they says, "he ain't burnt up." Where they'd get a notion like that! And there's some more in the yard . . . undressed too.

OLGA (pulls dresses out of a wardrobe). Here, take this gray one . . . And this one too . . . The housecoat as well . . . And take this skirt, my dear . . . What a thing to happen, dear God! Kirsanov Lane is burnt to the ground, it seems. (Flings the dresses into her arms.) The poor Vershinins are in a panic . . . Their house was nearly burned down. Have them spend the night with us . . . we can't let them go home . . . At poor Fedotik's everything was burnt, nothing was saved . . .

ANFISA. You'd better call Ferapont, Olyushka, otherwise I can't handle it all . . .

OLGA (rings). I'm not getting through . . . (Out the door.) Come in here, somebody!

Three Sisters

Through the open door can be seen a window, red with the glow in the sky, and the fire brigade can be heard driving past the house.

How horrible. And I'm sick and tired of it!

Enter FERAPONT.

Here, take this and carry it downstairs . . . The young Kolotilin ladies are standing under the stairs . . . give it to them. And give them this . . .

FERAPONT. Yes, ma'am. In the year '12 Moscow was burned down too. Lord God almighty! It sure surprised the Frenchies.47

OLGA. Go, go on . . .

FERAPONT. Yes ma'am. (Exits.)

OLGA. Nanny dear, darling, give it all away. We don't need any of it, give it all away, nanny dear . . . I'm worn out, can barely stand on my feet . . . we can't let the Vershinins go home . . . The little girls will sleep in the drawing-room, have the Colonel go to the baron's . . . Fedotik can go to the baron's too, or let him stay here with us in the reception room . . . The Doctor, as if he did it on purpose, is drunk, hideously drunk, and no one can be put in with him. And Vershinin's wife in the drawing-room too.

ANFISA (faintly). Olyushka darling, don't drive me away! Don't drive me away!

OLGA. Don't be silly, Nanny. No one's going to drive you away.

ANFISA (lays her head on Olga's bosom). My love, my precious, I toil, I work . . . I'm getting feeble, everybody says, get out! And where am I to go? Where? In my eighties. My eighty-second year . . .

OLGA. You sit down, Nanny dear . . . You're tired, poor thing . . . (Helps her sit down.) Have a rest, my dear. How pale she is!

NATASHA enters.

NATASHA. Downstairs they're saying somebody ought to hurry and organize a committee in aid of the fire victims. Why not? It's a lovely idea. As a rule

47 Ferapont alludes to the burning of Moscow in 1812 during its occupation by Napoleon's troops. No one knows for sure, but rumor had it that the Russians started the fire.
one ought to help the poor, it's an obligation of the rich. Bobik and Sophie-
kins are asleep, asleep as if nothing had happened. We've got so many peo-
ple all over the place, wherever you go, the house is packed. There's flu
going around town now, I'm worried the children might catch it.

OLGA (not listening to her). You can't see the fire from this room, it's peace-
ful here...

NATASHA. Yes... I suppose I look a mess. (Before a mirror.) They say I'm
putting on weight... it's not true! Not a bit of it! And Masha's asleep, worn
out, poor thing... (To ANFISA, coldly.) Don't you dare sit in my presence!
Stand up! Get out of here! (ANFISA exits; pause.) And why you hold on to
that old woman I cannot understand!

OLGA (startled). Excuse me, I can't understand either...

NATASHA. There's no reason for her to be here. She's a peasant, ought to live
in the country... It's pampering them! I like a house to be in order! There
shouldn't be any useless people in a house. (Stroking Olga's cheek.) You're
tired, poor dear! Our headmistress is tired! Why, when my Sophickins is a
big girl and goes to high school, I'll be afraid of you.

OLGA. I'm not going to be headmistress.

NATASHA. They'll pick you, Olga sweetie. The decision's made.

OLGA. I'll turn it down. I cannot... I haven't the strength for it... (Drinks
some water.) Just now you abused Nanny so rudely... Forgive me, I'm in
no condition to put up with... It's going dark before my eyes...

NATASHA (agitated). Forgive me, Olya, forgive... I didn't mean to upset you.

MASHA gets up, takes a pillow and exits, angrily.

OLGA. Try to understand, dear... Perhaps we've had a strange upbringing,
but I cannot tolerate this. That sort of behavior depresses me, it makes me
ill... My heart just sinks!

NATASHA. Forgive me, forgive me... (Kisses her.)

OLGA. Any coarseness, even the slightest, an indelicately spoken word upsets
me...

NATASHA. I often say too much, that's true, but you must agree, my dear, she
could live in the country.

OLGA. She's been with us thirty years.

NATASHA. But she's incapable of working now! Either I don't understand
you or else you refuse to understand me. She's not fit for housework, she
only sleeps or sits.

OLGA. Then let her sit.

NATASHA (in wonderment). What do you mean, let her sit? Why, she's a ser-
vant, isn't she! (Plaintively.) I don't understand you, Olya. I have a nurse-
maid, I have a wetnurse, I have a parlor maid, a cook... what do we need
this old woman for? What for?

Offstage the alarm bell is rung.

OLGA. I've aged ten years tonight.

NATASHA. We've got to thrash this out, Olya, once and for all... You're at
the high school, I'm at home, you have your teaching, I have my house-
work. And when I put in a word about servants, I know what I'm talking
about; I know what I am talking about... And so tomorrow will see the
last of that thieving old crow, that nasty old hag... (Stamps her foot.) that
witch... Don't you dare provoke me! Don't you dare! (Recollecting her-
self.) Honestly, if you don't move downstairs, why, we'll always be quarre-
ling. It's awful.

Enter KULYGIN. 48

KULYGIN. Where's Masha? It's high time we went home. They say the fire's
dying down. (Stretching.) Only one ward was burnt, but the wind was so
strong that it looked at first as if the whole town would go up in flames. (Sits
down.) I'm worn out. Olechka, my dear... I often think: if it hadn't been
for Masha, I would have married you, Olechka. You're very good... I'm
exhausted. (Heartening to something.)

OLGA. What?

KULYGIN. To make matters even worse, the doctor's on a bender, he's awfully
drunk. To make matters even worse! (Stands up.) There, sounds like he's
coming in here... You hear him? Yes, in here... (Laughs.) What a one,

48 "In Act Three, of course, you can appear in a double-breasted uniform tunic, that's right, but
why in Act Two should you come into the drawing-room in a fur coat?" (Chekhov to Aleksandr Vish-
nevsky, January 17 [30], 1901).
honestly... I'll hide. (Goes in the corner next to the wardrobe.) What a delinquent!

OLGA. For two years he hasn't touched a drop, and now all of a sudden he goes and gets drunk... (Goes with NATASHA to the back of the room.)

CHEBUTYKIN enters; not staggering, seemingly sober, he crosses the room, stops, looks, then walks over to the washbasin and starts to wash his hands.

CHEBUTYKIN (surly). Damn 'em all to hell... ram 'em all... 49 They think I'm a doctor, know how to treat all sorts of ailments, but I don't know a blessed thing, forgot anything I ever knew, don't remember a thing, not a blessed thing.

OLGA and NATASHA leave, unnoticed by him.

To hell with 'em. Last Wednesday I treated a woman at Zasyp—she died, and it's my fault she died. Yes... I did know something twenty-five years ago or so, but now I don't remember a thing. Not a thing... My head's empty, my soul's frozen. Maybe I'm not even a human being, but just seem to have arms and legs... and a head; maybe I don't even exist at all, but it just seems to me I walk, eat, sleep. (Weeps.) Oh, if only I didn't exist! (Stops weeping, surly.) Who the hell knows... Day before yesterday talk at the club; they're dropping names, Shakespeare, Voltaire... I haven't read 'em, haven't read 'em at all, but I made a face to show I'd read 'em. And the others did the same as me. Shabby and vulgar and vile! And that woman that died on Wednesday, I remembered her... and remembered it all, and my soul turned all twisted, repulsive, foul... I went out, started drinking...

IRINA, VERSHININ, and TUSENBAKH enter; TUSENBAKH is wearing civilian clothes, new and fashionable.

IRINA. Let's sit down here. No one will come in here.

VERSININ. If it hadn't been for the soldiers, the whole town would have burnt down. Fine lads! (Rubs his hands in satisfaction.) Sterling fellows! ah, what fine lads!

KULYGIN (walking over to them). What time is it, gentlemen?

TUSENBAKH. Four o'clock already. Getting light.

IRINA. Everyone's sitting in the reception room, no one will leave. That Solony of yours is sitting there too... (To Chebutykin.) You should be in bed, Doctor.

CHEBUTYKIN. Never mind, ma'am... Thank you, ma'am. (Combs out his beard.)

KULYGIN (laughs). You're splashed, Doctor! (Claps him on the shoulder.)

Attaboy! In vino veritas, 50 said the ancients.

TUSENBAKH. They keep asking me to organize a concert on behalf of the fire victims.

IRINA. Why, who could...

TUSENBAKH. A person could organize one, if a person wanted to. Your sister Mariya, for instance, plays the piano marvelously.

KULYGIN. Marvelously is the way she plays!

IRINA. By now she's forgotten. She hasn't played for three years... or four.

TUSENBAKH. Absolutely no one in this town understands music, not a single soul, but I do understand it and I give you my word of honor, your sister Mariya plays magnificently, there's talent there.

KULYGIN. You're right, Baron. I love her very much, my Masha. She's superb.

TUSENBAKH. To be able to play so splendidly and at the same time to realize that no one, absolutely no one understands you!

KULYGIN (sighs). Yes... But is it proper for her to take part in a concert? (Pause.) Of course I know nothing about it, gentlemen. Perhaps it might even be a good thing. Still, I must confess, our headmaster is a good man, a very good man indeed, the most intelligent of men, but the views he holds... Of course, it's none of my business, but even so, if you like, I can probably talk to him about it.

CHEBUTYKIN picks up a porcelain clock in both hands and scrutinizes it.

KULYGIN (sighs). Yes... But is it proper for her to take part in a concert? (Pause.) Of course I know nothing about it, gentlemen. Perhaps it might even be a good thing. Still, I must confess, our headmaster is a good man, a very good man indeed, the most intelligent of men, but the views he holds... Of course, it's none of my business, but even so, if you like, I can probably talk to him about it.

Chebutykin picks up a porcelain clock in both hands and scrutinizes it.

49 Rhyming wordplay in Russian, "chyoat by podret... podret" (May the devil carry you off, may the devil thrust you soundly).

50 Latin: in wine lies truth.
VERSININ. I got covered in filth at the fire, must look a sight. (Pause.) Yes-
terday I heard in passing that they intend to transfer our brigade some-
where far away. Some say, to the Kingdom of Poland, others—possibly to
Chita.51

TUSENBAK. I heard that too. Then what? The town will be quite empty.

IRINA. And we shall go away!

CHEBUTYKIN (drops the clock, which shatters in pieces). Smithereens!

Pause; everyone is distressed and embarrassed.

KULGIN (picks up the fragments). To break such an expensive object—ah,
Ivan Romanych, Ivan Romanych! You get F minus for conduct!52

IRINA. That clock was our poor mama's.

CHEBUTYKIN. Could be ... If it's mama's, then it's mama's. Could be I
didn't break it, it only seems like I broke it. Maybe it only seems to us that
we exist, but as a matter of fact we don't. I don't know anything, nobody
knows anything. (At the door.) What are you staring at? Natasha's having a
cute little affair with Protopopov, and you don't see it ... There you sit and
don't see a thing, while Natasha's having a little affair with Protopopov.

(Sings.) "A fig for you and tell me how you like it ..."53 (Exits.)

VERSININ. Yes ... (Laughs.) How altogether strange this is! When the fire
broke out, I rushed home right away; I get there, take a look—our house is
intact and unharmed and out of danger, but my two little girls are standing
on the doorstep in nothing but their underwear, their mother's missing,
people are milling about, horses running, dogs, and their little girl faces
express alarm, panic, entreaty, I don't know what; my heart clenched when
I saw those faces. My God, I think, what else will those girls have to live
through in the course of a long life! I grab them, run, and keep thinking
that thought: what else will they have to live through in this world!

51 Poland at this time was a vice-regency of the Russian Empire. Chita was far away in the oppo-
site direction, the capital of the region of Transbaikal, Siberia, on the Chinese frontier.

52 In Russian schools, grades ran from five to one, with five being highest. In Chekhov's original
Kulygin gives Chebutykin "Zero minus."

53 "Chebutykin sings only the words 'A fig for you and tell me how you like it ...' They're the words
from an operetta that was once put on at the Hermitage Theatre. I don't remember the name; Chebutykin
shouldn't sing any more than that, otherwise his exit will take too long." (Chekhov to V. A. Tikhomirov,
January 14, 1901).

Three Sisters

Alarm bell; pause.

I get here, and their mother's here, shouting, throwing a tantrum.

MASHA enters with a pillow and sits on the sofa.

And when my little girls were standing on the doorstep in nothing but their
underwear, barefoot, and the street was red with flames, and there was a
terrible racket, it occurred to me that things like that used to happen many
years ago when there'd be a sudden enemy invasion, looting and burning
... And yet, what a fundamental difference there is between how things
are now and how they were then! And a little more time will go by, say two
hundred, three hundred years, and our present life will be regarded in the
same way with horror and contempt, everything that exists now will seem
awkward and clumsy and very uncomfortable and strange. Oh, for all we
know, what a life that's going to be, what a life! (Laughs.) Forgive me, I've
started philosophizing again. Do let me go on, ladies and gentlemen. I very
much want to philosophize, the fit is on me now.

Pause.

Absolutely everyone's asleep. As I was saying: what a life that's going to be!
Can you imagine ... in town now there are only three like you, in genera-
tions to come there'll be more, ever more and more, and there'll come a
time when everything will change to be your way, people will live your
way, and then even you will become obsolete, people will evolve and be
superior to you ... (Laughs.) There's this special fit come over me today.
I want like hell to live ... (Sings.) "All ages bend the knee to love, its pangs
are blessings from above ..."54

MASHA. Trom-tom-tom.

VERSININ. Trom-tom ...

MASHA. Tra-ra-ra?

VERSININ. Tra-tra-ta. (Laughs.)55

54 Vershinin is singing the opening of Glinka's opera in Chaikovsky's opera Yevgeny Onegin (1877),
from Pushkin's verse novel.

55 The word "trom-tom" is pronounced 'from-tom-tom' in the form of a question, and you in the form of an
answer, and this strikes you as such an original joke that you pronounce this 'from-tom' with a

... She would after 'from-tom'—and begin to laugh, but not loudly, just barely. You mustn't
create the same kind of character as [Yelena in Uncle Vanya] at this point, but someone younger and
Enter FEDOTIK.

FEDOTIK (dances). All burned up, all burned up! Every last thing!

Laughter.

IRINA. What’s so funny about that? Everything’s burnt?

FEDOTIK (laughs). Every last thing. Nothing’s left. Even the guitar was burnt, and the camera equipment burnt, and all my letters . . . And the notebook I wanted to give you—burnt too.

Enter SOLYONY.

IRINA. No, please, go away, Vasily Vasilich. You can’t come in here.

SOLYONY. Why can the Baron, and not me?

VERSININ. We’d all better leave, in fact. How’s the fire?

SOLYONY. They say it’s dying down. No, I find this particularly odd, why can the Baron and why can’t I? (Takes out the flask of perfume and sprinkles it about.)

VERSININ. Trom-tom-tom.

MASHA. Trom-tom.

VERSININ (laughs; to Solyony). Let’s go into the reception room.

SOLYONY. All right, sir, but we’re making a note of it. “I’d make my meaning crystal clear, but ’twould upset the geese, I fear . . .”56 (Looking at Tusenbach.) Cheep, cheep, cheep, cheep . . .

He exits with VERSININ and FEDOTIK.

IRINA. That Solyony’s smoked up the place . . . (Startled.) The Baron’s asleep! Baron! Baron!

TUSENBACK (coming to). I was tired, though . . . The brickworks . . . I’m not raving, as a matter of fact I’ll be going to the brickworks soon, I’ll start working there . . . There’s been some talk about it already. (To Irina, ten-

derly.) You’re so pale, beautiful, bewitching . . . I feel as if your pallor brightens the dark atmosphere like a beacon . . . You’re sad, you’re dissatisfied with life . . . Oh, come away with me, come away to work together!

MASHA. Nikolay Lvovich, get out of here.

TUSENBACK (laughing). You’re here? I didn’t see you. (Kisses Irina’s hand.) Good-bye, I’ll be going . . . I look at you now and call to mind how once, long ago, on your saint’s day, you were confident and carefree and talked of the joys of hard work . . . And what a happy life flashed before me then! Where is it? (Kisses her hand.) You’ve got tears in your eyes. Go to bed, it’s daylight already . . . here comes the morning . . . If only I might give my life for you!

MASHA. Nikolay Lvovich, go away! Now really, what . . .

TUSENBACK. I’m going . . . (Exit.)

MASHA (lies down). You asleep, Fyodor?

KULYGIN. Huh?

MASHA. You should go home.

KULYGIN. My dearest Masha, my dearest Masha . . .

IRINA. She’s worn out. You should let her rest, Fedya.

KULYGIN. I’ll go right away . . . My wife’s lovely, splendid . . . I love you, my one and only . . .

MASHA (angrily). Amo, amas, amat, amamus, amatis, amant.57

KULYGIN (laughs). No, really, she’s marvelous. I’ve been married to you for seven years, but it feels as if we were wed only yesterday. Word of honor. No, really, you’re a marvelous woman. I’m content, I’m content, I’m content!

MASHA. I’m sick and tired, sick and tired, sick and tired . . . (Rises to speak in a sitting position.) I just can’t get it out of my head . . . it’s simply appalling. Stuck in my brain like a spike, I can’t keep quiet. I mean about Andrey . . .

56 The moral of Ivan Krylov’s fable The Geese (1811), in which the barnyard fowl boast of their ancestors, the geese who saved Rome, but have no merits of their own.

57 Latin: the basic conjugation of the verb amare, to love: I love, thou lovest, he, she, or it loves, we love, you love, they love.
He’s mortgaged this house to the bank, and his wife snatched all the money, but in fact the house belongs not just to him but to the four of us! He ought to know that, if he’s a decent human being.

KULYGIN. Why bother, Masha! What’s it to you? Andryusha’s in debt all around, so leave him alone.

MASHA. It’s appalling in any case. *(Lies down.)*

KULYGIN. You and I aren’t poor. I work, I’m at the high school, later in the day I give lessons . . . I’m an honest man. A simple man . . . *Omnia mea mecum porto,* 58 as the saying goes.

MASHA. It’s not that I need the money, but the unfairness of it galls me.

*Pause.*

Get going, Fyodor.

KULYGIN *(kisses her).* You’re tired, rest for just half an hour, while I sit outside and wait. Get some sleep . . . *(Goes.)* I’m content, I’m content, I’m content. *(Exits.)*

IRINA. As a matter of fact, our Andrey’s become so shallow, so seedy and old living with that woman! He used to make plans to be a professor, but yesterday he was boasting that he’s finally managed to make member of the County Council. He’s a Council member, but Protopopov’s the chairman . . . The whole town’s talking, laughing, and he’s the only one who sees and knows nothing . . . Here again, everybody runs off to the fire, but he sits by himself in his room and pays no attention. All he does is play the violin. *(On edge.)* Oh, it’s horrible, horrible, horrible! *(Weeps.)* I cannot, cannot stand it any more! . . . I cannot, I cannot! . . .

*OLGA enters and tidies her nighttable.*

*(Sobs loudly.)* Throw me out, throw me out, I can’t stand it any more! . . .

*OLGA *(alarmed).* What’s wrong, what’s wrong? Dearest!

IRINA *(sobbing).* Where? Where has it all gone? Where is it? Oh, my God, my God! I’ve forgotten everything, forgotten . . . It’s all tangled up in my mind . . . I can’t remember the Italian for window or, uh, ceiling . . . I forget everything, every day I forget, and life goes on and won’t ever, ever come back, we’ll never get to Moscow . . . I can see that we won’t . . .

OLGA. Dearest, dearest . . .

IRINA *(under control).* Oh, I’m unhappy . . . I cannot work, I will not go on working. Enough, enough! I used to be a telegraph operator, now I work for the town council and I hate, despise whatever they give me to do . . . I’m twenty-four already, I’ve been working for a long time now, and my brain has dried up. I’ve got skinny and ugly and old, and I’ve got nothing, nothing, no sort of satisfaction, while time marches on, and I keep feeling that I’m moving away from a genuine, beautiful life, moving ever farther and farther into some kind of abyss. I’m desperate, I’m desperate! And why I’m still alive, why I haven’t killed myself before now, I don’t understand . . .

OLGA. Don’t cry, my little girl, don’t cry . . . It pains me.

IRINA. I’m not crying, not crying . . . Enough . . . There, look, I’m not crying any more. Enough . . . Enough!

OLGA. Dearest, I’m speaking to you as a sister, as a friend; if you want my advice, marry the Baron! *(IRINA weeps quietly.)* After all, you do respect him, think highly of him . . . True, he’s not good looking, but he’s so decent, so pure . . . After all, people don’t marry for love, but just to do their duty. At least that’s how I think of it, and I would marry without love. Anyone who came courting, I’d marry him all the same, I mean if he were a decent man. I’d even marry an old man . . .

IRINA. I kept waiting for us to move to Moscow, there my true love would find me, I would dream about him, love him . . . But it’s all turned out to be foolishness, nothing but foolishness.

OLGA *(embraces her sister).* My darling, lovely sister, I understand it all; when the Baron resigned from military service and came calling on us in a suit jacket, he looked so homely I even started to cry . . . He asked me, “What are you crying for?” How could I tell him? But if it were God’s will that he marry you, I’d be very happy. That would make a change, a complete change.

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58 Latin: "I carry all my goods on my person," Cicero in *Paradoxa*. Expression of a member of the family of the philosopher Bias fleeing their country before the Persians and refusing to take any worldly goods with him (ca. 570 B.C.).
NATASHA, carrying a candle, crosses the stage from the door right to the door left, in silence.59

MASHA (sits up). She prowls around as if she was the one who’d set the fire.

OLGA. Don’t be silly, Masha. The silliest in our family, that’s you. Forgive me, please.

Pause.

MASHA. I want to make a confession, dear sisters. My heart is heavy, I’ll confess to you and never again to anyone, ever . . . I’ll speak my piece right now. (Quietly.) This is my secret, but you ought to know it all . . . I can’t keep still . . . (Pause.) I love, love . . . I love that man . . . You just saw him . . . Well, there you have it. In short, I love Vershinin.60

OLGA (goes behind her screen). Stop it. It doesn’t matter, I’m not listening.

MASHA. What can I do? (Clutches her head.) At first he struck me as peculiar, then I felt sorry for him . . . then I fell in love . . .

OLGA (behind the screen). I’m not listening, it doesn’t matter. Whatever silly things you say, it doesn’t matter, I’m not listening.

MASHA. Ay, you’re incredible, Olya. I love—which means, it’s my fate. Which means, such is my lot . . . And he loves me . . . it’s all terrible. Right? It’s no good, is it? (Takes Irina by the hands and draws her to her.) Oh my dear . . . How are we to get through our lives, what’s to become of us . . . When you read a novel, it all seems so trite and so easy to understand, but when you fall in love yourself, you realize that no one knows anything about it and everyone has to decide for herself . . . My dears, my sisters . . . I’ve con-

59 “You write that in Act Three, Natasha, making the rounds of the house at night, puts out the lights and looks under the furniture for burglars. But, it seems to me, it would be better to have her walk across the stage in a straight line, without a glance at anyone or anything, à la Lady Macbeth, with a candle—something a bit tighter and more frightening” (Chekhov to Olga Knipper, January 7 [February 15], 1901).

60 “Masha’s confession in Act Three is not exactly a confession, but only a frank statement. Behave nervously but not despondently, no shouting, even smiling now and then and for the most part behave so that one can feel the weariness of the night. And so that one can feel that you are more intelligent than your sisters, you think yourself more intelligent, at least. As to ‘trom-tom-tom,’ do it your way” (Chekhov to Olga Knipper, January 21 [February 5], 1901).

fessed to you, now I’ll keep still . . . Now I’ll be like that madman in Gogol’s story . . .61 still . . . still . . .

Enter ANDREY, followed by FERAPONT.

ANDREY (angrily). What d’you want? I don’t understand.

FERAPONT (in the doorway, indecisively). Andrey Sergeich, I already said ten times or so.

ANDREY. In the first place, I’m not Andrey Sergeich to you, I’m Your Honor!

FERAPONT. The firemen, your highness, want to know if you’ll let ’em drive across the garden to the river. Otherwise they got to ride round and round in a circle—wears the daylight out of ’em.

ANDREY. All right. Tell them, it’s all right. (FERAPONT exits.) They make me sick. Where’s Olga? (OLGA appears from behind her screen.) I came here to get the key to the bookcase, I’ve lost mine. You’ve got one of those tiny little keys. (OLGA gives him the key in silence. IRINA goes behind her screen; pause.) What a terrific fire, eh? It’s starting to die down now. Dammit, that Feponot got on my nerves, I was talking nonsense . . . Your Honor . . .

Pause.

Why don’t you say something, Olga?

Pause.

It’s about time you stopped being so silly, pouting like this, acting so high and mighty . . . You’re here, Masha, Irina’s here, well, that’s just fine—let’s clear this up right in the open, once and for all. What do you have against me? What?

OLGA. Drop it, Andryusha. We’ll clear it up tomorrow. (Distracted.) What an excruciating night!

ANDREY (he’s very embarrassed). Don’t get upset. I’m asking this perfectly calmly: what do you have against me? Say it straight out.

VERSININ’s voice: “Trom-tom-tom!”

61 Poprishchin, hero of Gogol’s story Diary of a Madman (1835), is a victim of unrequited love. He continually repeats the phrase “Never mind, never mind . . . be still.”
MASHA (rises; loudly). Tra-ta-ta! (To Olga.) Good-by, Olya, God bless you. (Goes behind the screen, kisses Irina.) Sleep in peace... Good-by, Andrey. Go away, they're exhausted... tomorrow you can clear things up... (Leaves.)

OLGA. Really, Andryusha, let's put it off till tomorrow... (Goes behind her screen.) It's time for bed.

ANDREY. I'll just say this and then I'll go. Right away... In the first place, you've got something against Natasha, my wife, and I've noticed it from the very day of our wedding. If you want to know, Natasha is a beautiful, honest person, forthright and upstanding—that's my opinion. I love and respect my wife, understand me, respect her and I demand that she be respected by others as well. I repeat, she's an honest, upstanding person, and all your criticism, if you don't mind my saying so, is simply frivolous...

Pause.

In the second place, you seem to be angry because I'm not a professor, don't have scholarly pursuits. But I serve the county, I'm a member of the County Council and I consider this service of mine just as dedicated and exalted as service to scholarship. I'm a member of the County Council and proud of it, if you want to know...

Pause.

In the third place... I've got something else to say... I mortgaged the house, without asking your permission... There I am at fault, yes, and I beg you to forgive me. I was driven to it by my debts... thirty-five thousand... I've stopped playing cards, I gave it up a long time ago, but the main thing I can say in my defense is that you're girls, you get Father's pension, but I don't have... any income, so to speak...

Pause.

KULYGIN (in the doorway). Masha's not here? (Alarmed.) Where is she? This is odd... (Exits.)

ANDREY. They aren't listening. Natasha is an excellent, honest person... (Paces the stage in silence, then stops.) When I got married, I thought we'd be happy... everybody happy... But my God... (Weeps.) My dear sisters, precious sisters, don't believe me, don't believe me... (Exits.)

KULYGIN (in the doorway, worried). Where's Masha? Isn't Masha here then? Amazing. (Exits.)

Three Sisters

Alarm bell; the stage is empty.

IRINA (behind a screen). Olya! Who's that knocking on the floor?

OLGA. It's the Doctor. He's drunk.

IRINA. What a crazy night!

Pause.

Olya! (Peers out from behind her screen.) Did you hear? They're taking the brigade away from us, they're transferring it somewhere far away.

OLGA. That's mere rumor.

IRINA. We'll be here all alone then... Olya!

OLGA. Well?

IRINA. Dearest, precious, I respect, I think highly of the Baron, he's a fine man, I will marry him, agreed, only let's go to Moscow! Only please, please, let's go! There's nothing on earth better than Moscow! Let's go, Olya! Let's go!

Curtain

ACT FOUR

An old garden attached to the Prozorov's house. A long path lined with fir trees, at whose end a river can be seen. On the farther bank of the river is a forest. To the right, the veranda of the house; here on a table are bottles and glasses; apparently someone has been drinking champagne. Twelve o'clock noon. Passersby occasionally cut through the garden from the street to the river; five or so soldiers pass quickly by.

CHEBUTYKIN, in an affable mood that stays with him throughout the whole act, is sitting in an armchair in the garden, waiting to be called; he wears a forage cap and has a walking stick. IRINA, KULYGIN with a medal around his neck and without his moustache, and TUZENBAKH, sitting on the veranda, are seeing off PEDOTIK and RODÉ, who are coming down the steps, both officers in field kit.
TUSENBACH (exchanging kisses with FEDOTIK). You’re a good man, we were such friends. (Exchanges kisses with RODÉ.) One more time... Good-bye, my dear friend!

IRINA. See you soon!

FEDOTIK. It isn’t see-you-soon, it’s good-bye, we’ll never meet again!

KULYGIN. Who knows! (Wipes his eyes, smiles.) Look, I’m starting to cry.

IRINA. We’ll meet some day.

FEDOTIK. In, say, ten or fifteen years? But then we’ll barely recognize one another, we’ll say a formal how-d’you-do. (Takes a snapshot.) Hold still... Once more, the last time.

RODÉ (embraces TUSENBACH). We won’t meet again... (Kisses IRINA’S hand.) Thanks for everything, everything!

FEDOTIK (annoyed). Just hold still!

TUSENBACH. God willing, we shall meet. Do write to us. Be sure and write.

RODÉ (casts a glance round the garden). Good-bye, trees! (Shouts.) Hop to it! (Pause.) Good-bye, echo!

KULYGIN. You’ll get married out there in Poland, perish the thought... Your Polish wife will throw her arms around you and say, “Kochan!”

(Laughs.)

FEDOTIK (after a glance at his watch). There’s less than an hour left. Solonyo’s the only one from our battery going on the barge, we’re with the line unit. Three batteries are leaving today in battalions, another three tomorrow—and the town will surrender to peace and quiet.

TUSENBACH. And godawful boredom.

RODÉ. And where’s Mariya Sergeevna?

KULYGIN. Masha’s in the garden.

FEDOTIK. Have to say good-bye to her.

RODÉ. Good-bye, got to go, or else I’ll start bawling... (Quickly embraces TUSENBACH and KULYGIN, kisses IRINA’S hand.) We had a wonderful time here...
KULYGIN. So what! It’s comfortable this way, it’s the modus vivendi. Our headmaster never lets his moustache grow, and so, when I was made school inspector, I shaved mine off. Nobody likes it, but it doesn’t matter to me. I’m content. Moustache or no, I’m just as content . . . (Sits down.)

Far upstage ANDREY is wheeling a sleeping infant in a baby carriage.

IRINA. Ivan Romanyak, my dear, my darling, I’m awfully worried. You were downtown yesterday, tell me, what happened there?


KULYGIN. The story goes that Solyony and the Baron met yesterday downtown outside the theater . . .

TUSENBACH. Stop! Well, really . . . (Waves his hand in dismissal and goes inside the house.)

KULYGIN. Outside the theater . . . Solyony started needling the Baron, and the Baron wouldn’t stand for it, and said something insulting . . .

CHEBUTYKIN. I wouldn’t know. ‘S all hokum.

KULYGIN. In a seminary once a teacher wrote “Hokum” on a composition, and the student thought it was Latin, started to conjugate it—hokum, hokium, hokii, hokia. (Laughs.) Wonderfully funny. They say Solyony’s in love with Irina and sort of developed a hatred for the Baron . . . That’s understandable. Irina’s a very nice girl. She even resembles Masha, the same sort of moodiness. Only you’ve got the milder temper, Irina. Although Masha has a very nice temper too, of course. I do love her, my Masha.

Offstage, at the bottom of the garden: “Yoo-hoo! Hop to it!”

IRINA (startled). Somehow everything frightens me today.

Pause.

All my things are already packed, after dinner I’ll send them off. Tomorrow the Baron and I will be married, tomorrow we move to the brickworks, and by the day after tomorrow I’ll be in school, starting a new life. Somehow God will help me. When I took the qualifying exam for the teaching certificate, I even wept for joy, at the integrity of it . . .

Pause.

Any minute now the horse and wagon will come by for my things . . .

KULYGIN. Well, that’s how it goes, but somehow it isn’t serious. Nothing but abstract idealism, and very little seriousness. Still, I wish you good luck from the bottom of my heart.

CHEBUTYKIN (affectionately). My miracle, my dearest . . . My treasure . . . You’ve moved far away from me, I can’t catch up with you. I’m left far behind, like a bird of passage that’s too old to fly. Fly away, my darlings, fly and God bless you!

Pause.

It was a mistake to shave off your moustache, Fyodor Ilyich.

KULYGIN. That’s enough out of you! (Sighs.) So today the military departs and everything will go on again as it did in the past. Say what you like, Masha’s a good, honorable woman, I love her very much and thank my lucky stars. People have such different fates . . . There’s a certain Kozyryov who works for internal revenue. He went to school with me, was expelled his senior year in high school because he could never manage to learn the ut consecutivum construction. Now he’s awfully poor, ill, and whenever we meet, I say to him, “Greetings, ut consecutivum”—“Yes,” he says, “consecutivum indeed . . .” and then he coughs. But I’ve been lucky all my life, I’m happy, look, I’ve even got the Order of Stanislas second class and now I’m teaching others that same ut consecutivum. Of course, I’m a clever man, cleverer than a great many others, but that’s not what happiness is all about . . .

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64 Latin: a means of living, a temporary compromise.

65 The Russian joke is that chepukha (“nonsense,” “rot”) written out in Cyrillic script looks like a nonexistent but ostensible Latin word revina.

66 A speaking name, since kozyr means "ace."

67 The rule in Latin grammar that demands the use of the subjunctive mood in subordinate clauses beginning with the conjunction ut (that, so that). Chekhov had trouble with it as a schoolboy.

68 One of the decorations bestowed in pre-Revolutionary Russia on civil servants and military men. The least important, the Stanislas 3rd Class, was bestowed on Chekhov in 1899 for his work in educating the peasants.
In the house “The Maiden’s Prayer” is played on the piano.

IRINA. And tomorrow night I won’t have to listen to “The Maiden’s Prayer,” I won’t have to meet Protopopov . . .

Pause.

There’s Protopopov sitting in the drawing-room; he came by again today . . .

KULYGIN. The headmistress still isn’t here?

Far upstage MASHA saunters quietly across the stage.

IRINA. No. She’s been sent for. If only you knew how hard it is for me to live here alone, without Olya . . . She lives at the high school; she’s headmistress, busy with her work all day, while I’m alone, I’m bored, nothing to do, and the hateful room I live in . . . So I came to a decision: if it’s not my fate to live in Moscow, so be it. After all, it must be fate. Nothing to be done about it . . . Everything is God’s will, true enough. The Baron proposed to me . . . Then what? I thought it over and decided. He’s a good man, a wonderful man really, so good . . . And suddenly, just as if my heart had sprouted wings, I cheered up, I felt relieved and once again I started wanting to work, work . . . Only something happened yesterday, a kind of mystery has been hanging over me . . .

CHEBUTYKIN. Hokium. Hokum.

NATASHA (out the window). The headmistress!

KULYGIN. The headmistress is here . . . Let’s go in.

Exits into the house with IRINA.

CHEBUTYKIN (reads the papers and sings softly). Tarara . . . boom de-ay . . .

I sit in gloom all day . . .

MASHA comes up; upstage ANDREY wheels the baby carriage.

MASHA. Sitting by himself, taking it easy . . .

CHEBUTYKIN. So what?

MASHA (sits down). Nothing . . .

Pause.

Did you love my mother?

CHEBUTYKIN. Very much.

MASHA. And she loved you?

CHEBUTYKIN (after a pause). I can’t remember any more.

MASHA. Is my man here? That’s how our cook Marfa used to refer to her policeman: my man. Is my man here?

CHEBUTYKIN. Not yet.

MASHA. When you get happiness in bits and pieces, in snatches, and then you lose it, as I do, you gradually toughen up, you get bitchy. (Points to her bosom.) I’m seething inside . . . (Looking at her brother Andrey, wheeling the baby carriage.) Look at our Andrey, our baby brother . . . All hope is lost. Thousands of people were hoisting a bell, a lot of energy and money was expended, and all of a sudden it fell to the ground and smashed. All of a sudden, without rhyme or reason. ’S just the same with Andrey . . .

ANDREY. When will the house finally quiet down? Such a rumpus.

CHEBUTYKIN. Soon. (Looks at his watch, then winds it; the watch chimes.) I’ve got an antique watch, with a chime . . . The first, second, and fifth batteries are leaving at one on the dot.

Pause.

And I go tomorrow.

ANDREY. Forever?

CHEBUTYKIN. I don’t know. Maybe I’ll be back within the year. Who the hell knows, though . . . Doesn’t matter . . .

Somewhere far away a harp and a fiddle can be heard playing.

ANDREY. The town’s emptying out. Just as if a dust-cover had been dropped over it.

Pause.

Something happened yesterday outside the theater: they’re all talking about it, but I don’t know what it was.
CHEBUTYKIN. Nothing. Trivia. Solony started needling the Baron, so the Baron flared up and insulted him, and what with one thing and another in the end Solony was obliged to challenge him to a duel. (*Looks at his watch.*) It's about time now, I think ... Half past twelve, in the state forest preserve, that one over there, the one you can see on the far side of the river ... Bing-bang. (*Laughs.*) Solony imagines he's Lemontov, and even writes poetry. Look, a joke's a joke, but this is his third duel by now.

MASHA. Whose?

CHEBUTYKIN. Solony's!

MASHA. And what about the Baron?

CHEBUTYKIN. What about the Baron?

*Pause.*

MASHA. My thoughts are all snarled ... Even so, I say it's not right to let him do it. He might wound the Baron or even kill him.

CHEBUTYKIN. The Baron's all right, but one baron more or less—does it really matter? Let it be! It doesn't matter! (*Beyond the garden a shout: "Yoo-hoo! Hop to it!") You wait. That's Skvortsov shouting, one of the seconds. He's sitting in a rowboat.

ANDREY. In my opinion, even taking part in a duel, even being present at one, if only in the capacity of a medical man, is simply immoral.

CHEBUTYKIN. It only seems that way ... There's nothing on this earth, we aren't here, we don't exist, but it only seems that we exist ... So what does it matter?

MASHA. So they waste the whole day here talking and talking ... (*Walks.*) You live in a climate like this, expecting it to snow any minute, and you still carry on these conversations ... (*Stops.*) I won't go inside the house, I can't go in there ... When Vershinin comes, let me know ... (*Walks up the path.*) And the birds of passage are already on the wing ... (*Looks upward.*) Swans, or geese ... My beauties, my happy creatures ... (*Exits.*)

ANDREY. Our house is emptying out. The officers are going, you're going, sister's getting married, and I'll be left alone in the house.

CHEBUTYKIN. What about your wife?

FERAFONT enters with papers...

ANDREY. A wife is a wife. She's honest, decent, oh, and kind, but for all that there's something in her that reduces her to a petty, blind sort of bristly animal. In any case, she's not human. I'm talking to you as a friend, the only person I can open my heart to. I love Natasha, I do, but sometimes she seems to me incredibly vulgar, and then I get mixed up, I don't understand how and why I love her so or, at least, loved her ..."
Three Sisters

TUSENBACH. I didn't sleep all night. There's never been anything in my life so terrible that it could frighten me, and yet this lost key tears my heart to pieces, won't let me sleep. Tell me something.

Pause.

Tell me something . . .

IRINA. What? What? Everything around us is so mysterious, the old trees stand in silence . . . (Puts her head on his chest.)

TUSENBACH. Tell me something.

IRINA. What? What am I to say? What?

TUSENBACH. Something.

IRINA. Stop it! Stop it!

Pause.

TUSENBACH. What trivia, what foolish trifles sometimes start to matter in our lives, all of a sudden, for no good reason. At first you laugh at them, treat them as trifles, and all the same you go on and feel you haven't the power to stop. Oh, let's not talk about it! I feel cheerful, as if I'm seeing those spruces, maples, birches for the first time in my life, and they all stare curiously at me and wait. What beautiful trees, and, really, the life we lead in their shade ought to be so beautiful! (A shout: "Yoo-hoo! Hop to it!") I have to go, it's time now . . . There's a tree that's withered and dead, but all the same it sways with the others in the breeze. So, I guess, if I die too, I'll still take part in life one way or another. Good-bye, my dear . . . (Kisses her hand.) Those papers you gave me are in my desk, under the almanac.

IRINA. I'll go with you.

TUSENBACH (alarmed). No, no. (Goes quickly, stops on the path.) Irina!

IRINA. What?

TUSENBACH (not knowing what to say). I haven't had any coffee today. Ask them to make me some . . . (Exits quickly.)

IRINA stands rapt in thought, then walks far upstage and sits on a swing. Enter ANDREY with the baby carriage;

FERAPONT appears.
FERAPONT. Andrey Sergeich, these here papers ain't mine, they're official. I didn't dream 'em up.

ANDREY. Oh, where is it, where has my past gone to, when I was young, cheerful, intelligent, when my dreams and thoughts were refined, when my present and future glistened with hope? Why, when we've barely begun to live, do we get boring, gray, uninteresting, lazy, apathetic, useless, unhappy ... Our town has existed for two hundred years, it contains a hundred thousand inhabitants, and not one who isn't exactly like the others, not one dedicated person, past or present, not one scholar, not one artist, not one even faintly remarkable person who might stir up envy or a passionate desire to emulate him. All they do is eat, drink, sleep, then die ... others are born and they too eat, drink, sleep and, to keep from being stultified by boredom, vary their lives with vicious gossip, vodka, cards, crooked deals, and the wives cheat on the husbands while the husbands lie, pretend to notice nothing, hear nothing, and an irresistibly vulgar influence is brought to bear on the children, and the divine spark in them flickers out, and they become the same miserable, identical dead things as their fathers and mothers ... ? (To Ferapont, angrily.) What d'you want?

FERAPONT. How's that? Papers to sign.

ANDREY. You make me sick.

FERAPONT (handing him the papers). A while ago the doorman at the town hall was saying ... Looks like, says he, this winter in Petersburg there was ten degrees o' frost.

ANDREY. The present is repulsive, but when, on the other hand, I think of the future, it's so fine! I start to feel so relieved, so expansive; and a light begins to dawn in the distance, I can see freedom, I can see how my children and I will be freed from idleness, from beer drinking, from goose and cabbage, from after-dinner naps, from degrading sloth . . .

FERAPONT. Two thousand people froze, seems like. The common folks, says he, was scared to death. Either Petersburg or Moscow—I don't rec'lect.

ANDREY (caught up in a feeling of tenderness). My dear sisters, my wonderful sisters! (Plaintively.) Masha, sister dear . . .

NATASHA (out the window). Who's talking so loudly out there? Is that you, Andryushka? You'll wake up Sophickins. Il ne faut pas faire du bruit, la Sophie est dormée déjà. Vous êtes un ours. (? (Losing her temper.) If you want to talk, then give the buggy and the baby to somebody else. Ferapont, take the baby buggy from the master!

FERAPONT. Yes'm. (Takes the carriage.)

ANDREY (embarrassed). I'm talking softly.

NATASHA (back of the window, petting her little boy). Bobik! Cunning Bobik! Naughty Bobik!

ANDREY (glancing at the papers). All right, I'll look them over and sign what's necessary, and you take them back to the council . . .

Exits into the house, reading the papers; FERAPONT wheels the carriage.

NATASHA (back of the window). Bobik, what's your mommy's name? Cutie, cutie! And who's this? It's Auntie Olya. Say to auntie: Afternoon, Olya! Itinerant MUSICIANS, a MAN and a GIRL, play the fiddle and the harp. Out of the house come VERSHININ, OLGa, and ANFISA and listen a moment in silence; IRINA comes up to them.

OLGA. Our garden's like an empty lot, people walk and drive right through it. Nanny, give those musicians something! . . .

ANFISA (gives something to the musicians). God bless you, sweethearts. (The MUSICIANS bow and leave.) Hard-luck folks. When your belly's full, you don't have to play. (To Irina.) Afternoon, Arisha! (Kisses her.) My, my, child, lookit the way I live now! The way I live! In the high school in government housing, grand rooms, along with Olyushka—the Lord decreed that for my old age. I've not lived like that in all my born days, sinner that I am . . . The housing's big, on the government money, and I've got a whole little room and a little bed to myself. All on the government. I wake up at night and—oh Lord, oh Mother o' God, there's nobody happier'n me!

VERSCHININ (after a glance at his watch). We'll be leaving any minute, Olga Sergeyevna. My time's up.

71 "[Chekhov] demanded that in the last monologue Andrey be very excited. 'He should almost threaten the audience with his fists!' " (V. V. Luzhsky, Solitude Rossi 228/25 [1914]).

72 Bad French for "Don't make any noise. Sophie is already asleep. You are a beast!"
PLAYS

Pause.

I wish you the best of luck, the best . . . Where's Mariya Sergeevna?

IRINA. She's somewhere in the garden. I'll go find her.

VERSININ. Please do. I'm in a hurry.

ANFISA. I'll go and look too. (Shouts.) Mashenka, yoo-hoo! (Goes with IRINA to the bottom of the garden.) Yoo-hoo, yoo-hoo!

VERSININ. Everything must come to an end. Here we are saying good-bye. (Looks at his watch.) The town gave us a kind of lunch, we drank champagne, the mayor made a speech, I ate and listened, but in spirit I was here with you . . . (Looks around the garden.) I've grown accustomed to you.

OLGA. Will we ever meet again?

VERSININ. I don't suppose so.

Pause.

My wife and both my little girls will stay on here another two months or so; please, if anything happens or if anything's needed . . .

OLGA. Yes, yes, of course. Don't worry.

Pause.

Tomorrow there won't be a single military man left in town, it will all have turned into a memory, and, of course, a new life will begin for us . . .

Pause.

Nothing works out the way we'd like it to. I didn't want to be a headmistress, but even so I am one. Which means, not being in Moscow.

VERSININ. Well . . . Thank you for everything. Forgive me, if anything wasn't right . . . I talked a lot, an awful lot—and forgive me for it, don't think badly of me.

OLGA (wipes away tears). What's keeping Masha . . .

VERSININ. What more is there to say at parting? How about philosophizing? . . . (Laughs.) Life is hard. It appears to many of us to be lackluster and hopeless, but even so, you must admit, it will grow ever brighter and easier, and apparently the time's not far off when it will be very bright. (Looks at his watch.) My time's up, it's time! In olden days humanity was preoccu-
OLGA. Calm down, Masha . . . Calm down . . . Get her some water.

MASHA. I'm not crying any more.

KULYGIN. She's not crying any more . . . she's being considerate . . .

A muffled shot is heard in the distance.

MASHA. On the curved seashore a green oak stands, a golden chain wound round that oak . . . A golden chain wound round that oak . . . A green cat stands . . . A green oak stands . . . I'm raving . . . (Drinks some water.) Life's a failure . . . I don't want anything now . . . I'll be all right presently . . . Doesn't matter . . . What does that mean, on the curved seashore? Why is that phrase in my head? My thoughts are running wild.

IRINA enters.

The harp- and fiddle-playing can be heard far away down the street.

OLGA. Calm down, Masha. Now, there's a good girl . . . Let's go inside.

MASHA (angrily). I will not go in there. (Sobs, but instantly stops.) I don't go in that house any more and I won't go . . .

IRINA. Let's sit down together, at least let's not say anything. After all, I'm going away tomorrow . . .

Pause.

KULYGIN. Yesterday in the sophomore class I took this moustache and beard away from some smart-aleck . . . (Puts on the moustache and beard.) Looks like the German teacher . . . (Laughs.) Doesn't it? Those kids are a caution.

MASHA. Actually it does look like your German.

OLGA (laughs). Yes.

. . .

MASHA weeps.

IRINA. That's enough, Masha!

KULYGIN. A lot like him . . .

Enter NATASHA.

NATASHA (to the Parlor Maid). What? Protopopov's going to sit with Sophiekins for a while—Mikhail Ivanych—and Andrey Sergeich can take Bobik for an airing. So much fuss over children . . . (To Irina.) You're going away tomorrow, Irina—such a shame. Do stay just another little week at least. (Shrieks on seeing Kulygin; he laughs and removes the moustache and beard.) Why, you gave me quite a shock! (To Irina.) I've got used to you and do you think parting from you is easy for me? I've told them to move Andrey and his fiddle into your room—he can saw away in there!—and we'll put Sophiekins in his room. A wonderful, fantastic baby! Such a little cutie! Today she stared at me with her little peepers and went—"Mama."

KULYGIN. A beautiful baby, true enough.

NATASHA. In other words, I'll be all on my own here tomorrow. (Sighs.) First of all I'll have them chop down that row of fir trees, then that maple over there. In the evenings it's so eerie, unattractive . . . (To Irina.) Dear, that belt doesn't suit your coloring at all . . . it's in bad taste. You need something perkier. And then I'll have them plant posies everywhere, posies, and they'll give off such a fragrance . . . (Sternly.) Why is there a fork lying on this bench? (Crossing into the house, to the Parlor Maid.) Why is there a fork lying on a bench, I'm asking you? (Shouts.) Hold your tongue!

KULYGIN. She's on the warpath again!

Offstage the music plays a march; everyone listens.

OLGA. They're leaving.

Enter CHEBUTYKIN.

MASHA. Our boys are leaving. Well, that's that . . . Happy journey to them! (To her husband.) We ought to go home . . . Where's my hat and cape . . .

KULYGIN. I took them into the house . . . I'll fetch 'em right away. (Exits into the house.)

OLGA. Yes, now we can head for home. It's time.

CHEBUTYKIN. Olga Sergeevna!

OLGA. What?

Pause.

What?

CHEBUTYKIN. Nothing . . . I don't know how to tell you . . . (Whispers in her ear.)
OLGA (in shock). That's impossible!

CHEBUTYKIN. Yes . . . what a fuss . . . I'm worn out, exhausted, that's all I'll say . . . (Annoyed.) Anyway, it doesn't matter!

MASHA. What happened?

OLGA (embraces Irina). Today is a dreadful day . . . I don't know how to tell you, my precious . . .

IRINA. What? Tell me quickly, what? For God's sake! (Weeps.)

CHEBUTYKIN. The Baron was just killed in a duel.

IRINA. I knew it, I knew it . . .

CHEBUTYKIN (sits far upstage on a bench). I'm worn out . . . (Pulls a newspaper out of his pocket.) Let 'em have a good cry . . . (Sings quietly.) Terra boom-de-ay . . . I sit in gloom all day . . . What does it matter!

_The three sisters stand, clutching one another._

MASHA. Oh, how the music plays! They're leaving us, one of them has gone forever and ever, we're left alone to begin our life anew. One has to go on living . . . One has to go on living . . .

IRINA (lays her head on Olga's bosom). A time will come when everyone will realize why all this is, what these sufferings are for, there won't be any mysteries, but in the meantime a person has to live . . . has to work, nothing but work! Tomorrow I'll go away by myself, I'll teach school and I'll devote my whole life to anyone who may possibly need it. It's autumn now, winter will be here soon, the snow will cover everything up, but I shall work, I shall work . . .

OLGA (embraces both sisters). The music is playing so gaily, cheerfully, and I feel like living! Oh, dear Lord! Time will pass, and we'll be gone forever, people will forget us, they'll forget our faces, voices and how many of us there were, but our suffering will turn to joy for those who live after us, happiness and peace will come into being on this earth, and those who live now will be remembered with a kind word and a blessing. Oh, dear sisters,

74 "Irina does not know that Tirenbach is off to fight a duel; but she supposes that something untoward happened the day before, which might have serious and therefore evil consequences. And whenever a woman supposes, she says 'I knew it, I knew it.'" (Chekhov to I. A. Tikhomirov, January 14 [27], 1901).

this life of ours is not over yet. Let's go on living! The music plays so gaily, so cheerfully, and it seems as if, just a little while longer and we shall learn why we're alive, why we suffer . . . If only we knew, if only we knew!

The music plays ever more quietly; KULYGIN, smiling cheerfully, brings in the hat and cape, ANDREY wheels a different baby carriage, in which Bobik is sitting.

CHEBUTYKIN (sings quietly). Terra . . . ra . . . boom-de-ay . . . I sit in gloom all day . . . (Reads the paper.) Doesn't matter! Doesn't matter!

OLGA. If only we knew, if only we knew!

_Curtain_

**VARIANTS TO**

**Three Sisters**

Lines come from the censor's copies (Cens.), the fair copy (A), the publication in Russian Thought (Russkaya Mysl) (RT), and separate publication as Three Sisters (1901) (TS).

**ACT ONE**

page 883 / Replace: you've gone back to wearing white, your face is beaming. with: you're in white, there's a smile on your face. (A)

page 885 / After: such thoughts! — I'm twenty, already grown up, how nice it is! (Cens.)

page 887 / Replace: from hard work. And they just about managed it, only just! . . . a bracing, mighty tempest with: from hard work, but they haven't protected us from the influence of this massive thing advancing on all of us, this glorious healthy tempest (Cens.)