

Two plays by Anton Chekhov

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THE PROPOSAL (1889)

CHARACTERS

STEPAN STEPANOVITCH CHUBUKOV, a landowner

NATALYA STEPANOVNA, his daughter, twenty-five years old

IVAN VASSILEVITCH LOMOV, a neighbour of Chubukov, a large and hearty, but very suspicious landowner

The scene is laid at CHUBUKOV's country-house

A drawing-room in CHUBUKOV'S house.

[LOMOV enters, wearing a dress-jacket and white gloves. CHUBUKOV rises to meet him.]

CHUBUKOV. My dear fellow, whom do I see! Ivan Vassilevitch! I am extremely glad! [Squeezes his hand] Now this is a surprise, my darling... How are you?

LOMOV. Thank you. And how may you be getting on?

CHUBUKOV. We just get along somehow, my angel, to your prayers, and so on. Sit down, please do.... Now, you know, you shouldn't forget all about your neighbours, my darling. My dear fellow, why are you so formal in your get-up? Evening dress, gloves, and so on. Can you be going anywhere, my treasure?

LOMOV. No, I've come only to see you, honoured Stepan Stepanovitch.

CHUBUKOV. Then why are you in evening dress, my precious? As if you're paying a New Year's Eve visit!

LOMOV. Well, you see, it's like this. [Takes his arm] I've come to you, honoured Stepan Stepanovitch, to trouble you with a request. Not once or twice have I already had the privilege of applying to you for help, and you have always, so to speak... I must ask your pardon, I am getting excited. I shall drink some water, honoured Stepan Stepanovitch. [Drinks.]

CHUBUKOV. [Aside] He's come to borrow money! Shan't give him any! [Aloud] What is it, my beauty?

LOMOV. You see, Honour Stepanitch... I beg pardon, Stepan Honouritch... I mean, I'm awfully excited, as you will please notice.... In short, you alone can help me, though I don't deserve it, of course... and haven't any right to count on your assistance....

CHUBUKOV. Oh, don't go round and round it, darling! Spit it out! Well?

LOMOV. One moment... this very minute. The fact is, I've come to ask the hand of your daughter, Natalya Stepanovna, in marriage.

CHUBUKOV. [Joyfully] By Jove! Ivan Vassilevitch! Say it again—I didn't hear it all!

LOMOV. I have the honour to ask...

CHUBUKOV. [Interrupting] My dear fellow... I'm so glad, and so on.... Yes, indeed, and all that sort of thing. [Embraces and kisses LOMOV] I've been hoping for it for a long

time. It's been my continual desire. [Sheds a tear] And I've always loved you, my angel, as if you were my own son. May God give you both His help and His love and so on, and I did so much hope... What am I behaving in this idiotic way for? I'm off my balance with joy, absolutely off my balance! Oh, with all my soul... I'll go and call Natasha, and all that.

LOMOV. [Greatly moved] Honoured Stepan Stepanovitch, do you think I may count on her consent?

CHUBUKOV. Why, of course, my darling, and... as if she won't consent! She's in love; egad, she's like a love-sick cat, and so on.... Shan't be long! [Exit.]

LOMOV. It's cold... I'm trembling all over, just as if I'd got an examination before me. The great thing is, I must have my mind made up. If I give myself time to think, to hesitate, to talk a lot, to look for an ideal, or for real love, then I'll never get married.... Brr!... It's cold! Natalya Stepanovna is an excellent housekeeper, not bad-looking, well-educated.... What more do I want? But I'm getting a noise in my ears from excitement. [Drinks] And it's impossible for me not to marry.... In the first place, I'm already 35—a critical age, so to speak. In the second place, I ought to lead a quiet and regular life.... I suffer from palpitations, I'm excitable and always getting awfully upset.... At this very moment my lips are trembling, and there's a twitch in my right eyebrow.... But the very worst of all is the way I sleep. I no sooner get into bed and begin to go off when suddenly something in my left side—gives a pull, and I can feel it in my shoulder and head.... I jump up like a lunatic, walk about a bit, and lie down again, but as soon as I begin to get off to sleep there's another pull! And this may happen twenty times....

[NATALYA STEPANOVNA comes in.]

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. Well, there! It's you, and papa said, "Go; there's a merchant come for his goods." How do you do, Ivan Vassilevitch!

LOMOV. How do you do, honoured Natalya Stepanovna?

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. You must excuse my apron and *négligé*... we're shelling peas for drying. Why haven't you been here for such a long time? Sit down. [They seat themselves] Won't you have some lunch?

LOMOV. No, thank you, I've had some already.

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. Then smoke.... Here are the matches.... The weather is splendid now, but yesterday it was so wet that the workmen didn't do anything all day. How much hay have you stacked? Just think, I felt greedy and had a whole field cut, and now I'm not at all pleased about it because I'm afraid my hay may rot. I ought to have waited a bit. But what's this? Why, you're in evening dress! Well, I never! Are you going to a ball, or what?—though I must say you look better. Tell me, why are you got up like that?

LOMOV. [Excited] You see, honoured Natalya Stepanovna... the fact is, I've made up my mind to ask you to hear me out.... Of course you'll be surprised and perhaps even angry, but a... [Aside] It's awfully cold!

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. What's the matter? [Pause] Well?

LOMOV. I shall try to be brief. You must know, honoured Natalya Stepanovna, that I have long, since my childhood, in fact, had the privilege of knowing your family. My late aunt and her husband, from whom, as you know, I inherited my land, always had the greatest respect for your father and your late mother. The Lomovs and the Chubukovs have always had the most friendly, and I might almost say the most affectionate, regard

for each other. And, as you know, my land is a near neighbour of yours. You will remember that my Oxen Meadows touch your birchwoods.

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. Excuse my interrupting you. You say, “my Oxen Meadows....” But are they yours?

LOMOV. Yes, mine.

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. What are you talking about? Oxen Meadows are ours, not yours!

LOMOV. No, mine, honoured Natalya Stepanovna.

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. Well, I never knew that before. How do you make that out?

LOMOV. How? I’m speaking of those Oxen Meadows which are wedged in between your birchwoods and the Burnt Marsh.

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. Yes, yes.... They’re ours.

LOMOV. No, you’re mistaken, honoured Natalya Stepanovna, they’re mine.

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. Just think, Ivan Vassilevitch! How long have they been yours?

LOMOV. How long? As long as I can remember.

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. Really, you won’t get me to believe that!

LOMOV. But you can see from the documents, honoured Natalya Stepanovna. Oxen Meadows, it’s true, were once the subject of dispute, but now everybody knows that they are mine. There’s nothing to argue about. You see, my aunt’s grandmother gave the free use of these Meadows in perpetuity to the peasants of your father’s grandfather, in return for which they were to make bricks for her. The peasants belonging to your father’s grandfather had the free use of the Meadows for forty years, and had got into the habit of regarding them as their own, when it happened that...

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. No, it isn’t at all like that! Both my grandfather and great-grandfather reckoned that their land extended to Burnt Marsh—which means that Oxen Meadows were ours. I don’t see what there is to argue about. It’s simply silly!

LOMOV. I’ll show you the documents, Natalya Stepanovna!

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. No, you’re simply joking, or making fun of me.... What a surprise! We’ve had the land for nearly three hundred years, and then we’re suddenly told that it isn’t ours! Ivan Vassilevitch, I can hardly believe my own ears.... These Meadows aren’t worth much to me. They only come to five dessiatins [Note: 13.5 acres], and are worth perhaps 300 roubles [Note: £30.], but I can’t stand unfairness. Say what you will, but I can’t stand unfairness.

LOMOV. Hear me out, I implore you! The peasants of your father’s grandfather, as I have already had the honour of explaining to you, used to bake bricks for my aunt’s grandmother. Now my aunt’s grandmother, wishing to make them a pleasant...

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. I can’t make head or tail of all this about aunts and grandfathers and grandmothers! The Meadows are ours, and that’s all.

LOMOV. Mine.

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. Ours! You can go on proving it for two days on end, you can go and put on fifteen dress-jackets, but I tell you they’re ours, ours, ours! I don’t want anything of yours and I don’t want to give up anything of mine. So there!

LOMOV. Natalya Ivanovna, I don't want the Meadows, but I am acting on principle. If you like, I'll make you a present of them.

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. I can make you a present of them myself, because they're mine! Your behaviour, Ivan Vassilevitch, is strange, to say the least! Up to this we have always thought of you as a good neighbour, a friend: last year we lent you our threshing-machine, although on that account we had to put off our own threshing till November, but you behave to us as if we were gipsies. Giving me my own land, indeed! No, really, that's not at all neighbourly! In my opinion, it's even impudent, if you want to know....

LOMOV. Then you make out that I'm a land-grabber? Madam, never in my life have I grabbed anybody else's land, and I shan't allow anybody to accuse me of having done so.... [Quickly steps to the carafe and drinks more water] Oxen Meadows are mine!

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. It's not true, they're ours!

LOMOV. Mine!

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. It's not true! I'll prove it! I'll send my mowers out to the Meadows this very day!

LOMOV. What?

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. My mowers will be there this very day!

LOMOV. I'll give it to them in the neck!

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. You dare!

LOMOV. [Clutches at his heart] Oxen Meadows are mine! You understand? Mine!

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. Please don't shout! You can shout yourself hoarse in your own house, but here I must ask you to restrain yourself!

LOMOV. If it wasn't, madam, for this awful, excruciating palpitation, if my whole inside wasn't upset, I'd talk to you in a different way! [Yells] Oxen Meadows are mine!

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. Ours!

LOMOV. Mine!

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. Ours!

LOMOV. Mine!

[Enter CHUBUKOV.]

CHUBUKOV. What's the matter? What are you shouting at?

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. Papa, please tell to this gentleman who owns Oxen Meadows, we or he?

CHUBUKOV. [To LOMOV] Darling, the Meadows are ours!

LOMOV. But, please, Stepan Stepanitch, how can they be yours? Do be a reasonable man! My aunt's grandmother gave the Meadows for the temporary and free use of your grandfather's peasants. The peasants used the land for forty years and got as accustomed to it as if it was their own, when it happened that...

CHUBUKOV. Excuse me, my precious.... You forget just this, that the peasants didn't pay your grandmother and all that, because the Meadows were in dispute, and so on. And now everybody knows that they're ours. It means that you haven't seen the plan.

LOMOV. I'll prove to you that they're mine!

CHUBUKOV. You won't prove it, my darling.

LOMOV. I shall!

CHUBUKOV. Dear one, why yell like that? You won't prove anything just by yelling. I don't want anything of yours, and don't intend to give up what I have. Why should I? And you know, my beloved, that if you propose to go on arguing about it, I'd much sooner give up the meadows to the peasants than to you. There!

LOMOV. I don't understand! How have you the right to give away somebody else's property?

CHUBUKOV. You may take it that I know whether I have the right or not. Because, young man, I'm not used to being spoken to in that tone of voice, and so on: I, young man, am twice your age, and ask you to speak to me without agitating yourself, and all that.

LOMOV. No, you just think I'm a fool and want to have me on! You call my land yours, and then you want me to talk to you calmly and politely! Good neighbours don't behave like that, Stepan Stepanitch! You're not a neighbour, you're a grabber!

CHUBUKOV. What's that? What did you say?

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. Papa, send the mowers out to the Meadows at once!

CHUBUKOV. What did you say, sir?

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. Oxen Meadows are ours, and I shan't give them up, shan't give them up, shan't give them up!

LOMOV. We'll see! I'll have the matter taken to court, and then I'll show you!

CHUBUKOV. To court? You can take it to court, and all that! You can! I know you; you're just on the look-out for a chance to go to court, and all that.... You pettifogger! All your people were like that! All of them!

LOMOV. Never mind about my people! The Lomovs have all been honourable people, and not one has ever been tried for embezzlement, like your grandfather!

CHUBUKOV. You Lomovs have had lunacy in your family, all of you!

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. All, all, all!

CHUBUKOV. Your grandfather was a drunkard, and your younger aunt, Nastasya Mihailovna, ran away with an architect, and so on.

LOMOV. And your mother was hump-backed. [Clutches at his heart] Something pulling in my side.... My head.... Help! Water!

CHUBUKOV. Your father was a guzzling gambler!

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. And there haven't been many backbiters to equal your aunt!

LOMOV. My left foot has gone to sleep.... You're an intriguer.... Oh, my heart!... And it's an open secret that before the last elections you bri... I can see stars.... Where's my hat?

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. It's low! It's dishonest! It's mean!

CHUBUKOV. And you're just a malicious, double-faced intriguer! Yes!

LOMOV. Here's my hat.... My heart!... Which way? Where's the door? Oh!... I think I'm dying.... My foot's quite numb.... [Goes to the door.]

CHUBUKOV. [Following him] And don't set foot in my house again!

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. Take it to court! We'll see!

[LOMOV staggers out.]

CHUBUKOV. Devil take him! [Walks about in excitement.]

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. What a rascal! What trust can one have in one's neighbours after that!

CHUBUKOV. The villain! The scarecrow!

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. The monster! First he takes our land and then he has the impudence to abuse us.

CHUBUKOV. And that blind hen, yes, that turnip-ghost has the confounded cheek to make a proposal, and so on! What? A proposal!

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. What proposal?

CHUBUKOV. Why, he came here so as to propose to you.

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. To propose? To me? Why didn't you tell me so before?

CHUBUKOV. So he dresses up in evening clothes. The stuffed sausage! The wizen-faced frump!

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. To propose to me? Ah! [Falls into an easy-chair and wails] Bring him back! Back! Ah! Bring him here.

CHUBUKOV. Bring whom here?

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. Quick, quick! I'm ill! Fetch him! [Hysterics.]

CHUBUKOV. What's that? What's the matter with you? [Clutches at his head] Oh, unhappy man that I am! I'll shoot myself! I'll hang myself! We've done for her!

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. I'm dying! Fetch him!

CHUBUKOV. Tfoo! At once. Don't yell!

[Runs out. A pause. NATALYA STEPANOVNA wails.]

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. What have they done to me! Fetch him back! Fetch him! [A pause.]

[CHUBUKOV runs in.]

CHUBUKOV. He's coming, and so on, devil take him! Ouf! Talk to him yourself; I don't want to....

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. [Wails] Fetch him!

CHUBUKOV. [Yells] He's coming, I tell you. Oh, what a burden, Lord, to be the father of a grown-up daughter! I'll cut my throat! I will, indeed! We cursed him, abused him, drove him out, and it's all you... you!

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. No, it was you!

CHUBUKOV. I tell you it's not my fault. [LOMOV appears at the door] Now you talk to him yourself [Exit.]

[LOMOV enters, exhausted.]

LOMOV. My heart's palpitating awfully.... My foot's gone to sleep.... There's something keeps pulling in my side.

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. Forgive us, Ivan Vassilevitch, we were all a little heated.... I remember now: Oxen Meadows really are yours.

LOMOV. My heart's beating awfully.... My Meadows.... My eyebrows are both twitching....

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. The Meadows are yours, yes, yours.... Do sit down.... [They sit] We were wrong....

LOMOV. I did it on principle.... My land is worth little to me, but the principle...

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. Yes, the principle, just so.... Now let's talk of something else.

LOMOV. The more so as I have evidence. My aunt's grandmother gave the land to your father's grandfather's peasants...

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. Yes, yes, let that pass.... [Aside] I wish I knew how to get him started.... [Aloud] Are you going to start shooting soon?

LOMOV. I'm thinking of having a go at the blackcock, honoured Natalya Stepanovna, after the harvest. Oh, have you heard? Just think, what a misfortune I've had! My dog Guess, whom you know, has gone lame.

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. What a pity! Why?

LOMOV. I don't know.... Must have got twisted, or bitten by some other dog.... [Sighs] My very best dog, to say nothing of the expense. I gave Mironov 125 roubles for him.

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. It was too much, Ivan Vassilevitch.

LOMOV. I think it was very cheap. He's a first-rate dog.

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. Papa gave 85 roubles for his Squeezer, and Squeezer is heaps better than Guess!

LOMOV. Squeezer better than. Guess? What an idea! [Laughs] Squeezer better than Guess!

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. Of course he's better! Of course, Squeezer is young, he may develop a bit, but on points and pedigree he's better than anything that even Volchanetsky has got.

LOMOV. Excuse me, Natalya Stepanovna, but you forget that he is overshot, and an overshot always means the dog is a bad hunter!

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. Overshot, is he? The first time I hear it!

LOMOV. I assure you that his lower jaw is shorter than the upper.

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. Have you measured?

LOMOV. Yes. He's all right at following, of course, but if you want him to get hold of anything...

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. In the first place, our Squeezer is a thoroughbred animal, the son of Harness and Chisels, while there's no getting at the pedigree of your dog at all.... He's old and as ugly as a worn-out cab-horse.

LOMOV. He is old, but I wouldn't take five Squeezers for him.... Why, how can you?... Guess is a dog; as for Squeezer, well, it's too funny to argue.... Anybody you like has a dog as good as Squeezer... you may find them under every bush almost. Twenty-five roubles would be a handsome price to pay for him.

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. There's some demon of contradiction in you to-day, Ivan Vassilevitch. First you pretend that the Meadows are yours; now, that Guess is better than Squeezer. I don't like people who don't say what they mean, because you know perfectly well that Squeezer is a hundred times better than your silly Guess. Why do you want to say it isn't?

LOMOV. I see, Natalya Stepanovna, that you consider me either blind or a fool. You must realize that Squeezer is overshot!

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. It's not true.

LOMOV. He is!

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. It's not true!

LOMOV. Why shout, madam?

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. Why talk rot? It's awful! It's time your Guess was shot, and you compare him with Squeezer!

LOMOV. Excuse me; I cannot continue this discussion: my heart is palpitating.

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. I've noticed that those hunters argue most who know least.

LOMOV. Madam, please be silent.... My heart is going to pieces.... [Shouts] Shut up!

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. I shan't shut up until you acknowledge that Squeezer is a hundred times better than your Guess!

LOMOV. A hundred times worse! Be hanged to your Squeezer! His head... eyes... shoulder...

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. There's no need to hang your silly Guess; he's half-dead already!

LOMOV. [Weeps] Shut up! My heart's bursting!

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. I shan't shut up.

[Enter CHUBUKOV.]

CHUBUKOV. What's the matter now?

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. Papa, tell us truly, which is the better dog, our Squeezer or his Guess.

LOMOV. Stepan Stepanovitch, I implore you to tell me just one thing: is your Squeezer overshot or not? Yes or no?

CHUBUKOV. And suppose he is? What does it matter? He's the best dog in the district for all that, and so on.

LOMOV. But isn't my Guess better? Really, now?

CHUBUKOV. Don't excite yourself, my precious one.... Allow me.... Your Guess certainly has his good points.... He's pure-bred, firm on his feet, has well-sprung ribs, and all that. But, my dear man, if you want to know the truth, that dog has two defects: he's old and he's short in the muzzle.

LOMOV. Excuse me, my heart.... Let's take the facts.... You will remember that on the Marusinsky hunt my Guess ran neck-and-neck with the Count's dog, while your Squeezer was left a whole verst behind.

CHUBUKOV. He got left behind because the Count's whipper-in hit him with his whip.

LOMOV. And with good reason. The dogs are running after a fox, when Squeezer goes and starts worrying a sheep!

CHUBUKOV. It's not true!... My dear fellow, I'm very liable to lose my temper, and so, just because of that, let's stop arguing. You started because everybody is always jealous of everybody else's dogs. Yes, we're all like that! You too, sir, aren't blameless! You no sooner notice that some dog is better than your Guess than you begin with this, that... and the other... and all that.... I remember everything!

LOMOV. I remember too!

CHUBUKOV. [Teasing him] I remember, too.... What do you remember?

LOMOV. My heart... my foot's gone to sleep.... I can't...

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. [Teasing] My heart.... What sort of a hunter are you? You ought to go and lie on the kitchen oven and catch blackbeetles, not go after foxes! My heart!

CHUBUKOV. Yes really, what sort of a hunter are you, anyway? You ought to sit at home with your palpitations, and not go tracking animals. You could go hunting, but you only go to argue with people and interfere with their dogs and so on. Let's change the subject in case I lose my temper. You're not a hunter at all, anyway!

LOMOV. And are you a hunter? You only go hunting to get in with the Count and to intrigue.... Oh, my heart!... You're an intriguer!

CHUBUKOV. What? I an intriguer? [Shouts] Shut up!

LOMOV. Intriguer!

CHUBUKOV. Boy! Pup!

LOMOV. Old rat! Jesuit!

CHUBUKOV. Shut up or I'll shoot you like a partridge! You fool!

LOMOV. Everybody knows that—oh my heart!—your late wife used to beat you.... My feet... temples... sparks.... I fall, I fall!

CHUBUKOV. And you're under the slipper of your housekeeper!

LOMOV. There, there, there... my heart's burst! My shoulder's come off.... Where is my shoulder? I die. [Falls into an armchair] A doctor! [Faints.]

CHUBUKOV. Boy! Milksop! Fool! I'm sick! [Drinks water] Sick!

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. What sort of a hunter are you? You can't even sit on a horse! [To her father] Papa, what's the matter with him? Papa! Look, papa! [Screams] Ivan Vassilevitch! He's dead!

CHUBUKOV. I'm sick!... I can't breathe!... Air!

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. He's dead. [Pulls LOMOV'S sleeve] Ivan Vassilevitch! Ivan Vassilevitch! What have you done to me? He's dead. [Falls into an armchair] A doctor, a doctor! [Hysterics.]

CHUBUKOV. Oh!... What is it? What's the matter?

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. [Wails] He's dead... dead!

CHUBUKOV. Who's dead? [Looks at LOMOV] So he is! My word! Water! A doctor! [Lifts a tumbler to LOMOV'S mouth] Drink this!... No, he doesn't drink.... It means he's dead, and all that.... I'm the most unhappy of men! Why don't I put a bullet into my brain?

Why haven't I cut my throat yet? What am I waiting for? Give me a knife! Give me a pistol! [LOMOV moves] He seems to be coming round.... Drink some water! That's right....

LOMOV. I see stars... mist.... Where am I?

CHUBUKOV. Hurry up and get married and—well, to the devil with you! She's willing! [He puts LOMOV'S hand into his daughter's] She's willing and all that. I give you my blessing and so on. Only leave me in peace!

LOMOV. [Getting up] Eh? What? To whom?

CHUBUKOV. She's willing! Well? Kiss and be damned to you!

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. [Wails] He's alive... Yes, yes, I'm willing....

CHUBUKOV. Kiss each other!

LOMOV. Eh? Kiss whom? [They kiss] Very nice, too. Excuse me, what's it all about? Oh, now I understand... my heart... stars... I'm happy. Natalya Stepanovna.... [Kisses her hand] My foot's gone to sleep....

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. I... I'm happy too....

CHUBUKOV. What a weight off my shoulders.... Ouf!

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. But... still you will admit now that Guess is worse than Squeezer.

LOMOV. Better!

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. Worse!

CHUBUKOV. Well, that's a way to start your family bliss! Have some champagne!

LOMOV. He's better!

NATALYA STEPANOVNA. Worse! worse! worse!

CHUBUKOV. [Trying to shout her down] Champagne! Champagne!

Curtain.

THE BEAR (1890)

CHARACTERS

ELENA IVANOVNA POPOVA, a landowning little widow, with dimples on her cheeks

GRIGORY STEPANOVITCH SMIRNOV, a middle-aged landowner

LUKA, Popova's aged footman

[A drawing-room in POPOVA'S house.]

[POPOVA is in deep mourning and has her eyes fixed on a photograph. LUKA is haranguing her.]

LUKA. It isn't right, madam.... You're just destroying yourself. The maid and the cook have gone off fruit picking, every living being is rejoicing, even the cat understands how to enjoy herself and walks about in the yard, catching midges; only you sit in this room all day, as if this was a convent, and don't take any pleasure. Yes, really! I reckon it's a whole year that you haven't left the house!

POPOVA. I shall never go out.... Why should I? My life is already at an end. He is in his grave, and I have buried myself between four walls.... We are both dead.

LUKA. Well, there you are! Nicolai Mihailovitch is dead, well, it's the will of God, and may his soul rest in peace.... You've mourned him—and quite right. But you can't go on weeping and wearing mourning for ever. My old woman died too, when her time came. Well? I grieved over her, I wept for a month, and that's enough for her, but if I've got to weep for a whole age, well, the old woman isn't worth it. [Sighs] You've forgotten all your neighbours. You don't go anywhere, and you see nobody. We live, so to speak, like spiders, and never see the light. The mice have eaten my livery. It isn't as if there were no good people around, for the district's full of them. There's a regiment quartered at Riblov, and the officers are such beauties—you can never gaze your fill at them. And, every Friday, there's a ball at the camp, and every day the soldier's band plays.... Eh, my lady! You're young and beautiful, with roses in your cheek—if you only took a little pleasure. Beauty won't last long, you know. In ten years' time you'll want to be a peahen yourself among the officers, but they won't look at you, it will be too late.

POPOVA. [With determination] I must ask you never to talk to me about it! You know that when Nicolai Mihailovitch died, life lost all its meaning for me. I vowed never to the end of my days to cease to wear mourning, or to see the light.... You hear? Let his ghost see how well I love him.... Yes, I know it's no secret to you that he was often unfair to me, cruel, and... and even unfaithful, but I shall be true till death, and show him how I can love. There, beyond the grave, he will see me as I was before his death....

LUKA. Instead of talking like that you ought to go and have a walk in the garden, or else order Toby or Giant to be harnessed, and then drive out to see some of the neighbours.

POPOVA. Oh! [Weeps.]

LUKA. Madam! Dear madam! What is it? Bless you!

POPOVA. He was so fond of Toby! He always used to ride on him to the Korchagins and Vlasovs. How well he could ride! What grace there was in his figure when he pulled at

the reins with all his strength! Do you remember? Toby, Toby! Tell them to give him an extra feed of oats.

LUKA. Yes, madam. [A bell rings noisily.]

POPOVA. [Shaking] Who's that? Tell them that I receive nobody.

LUKA. Yes, madam. [Exit.]

POPOVA. [Looks at the photograph] You will see, Nicolas, how I can love and forgive.... My love will die out with me, only when this poor heart will cease to beat. [Laughs through her tears] And aren't you ashamed? I am a good and virtuous little wife. I've locked myself in, and will be true to you till the grave, and you... aren't you ashamed, you bad child? You deceived me, had rows with me, left me alone for weeks on end....

[LUKA enters in consternation.]

LUKA. Madam, somebody is asking for you. He wants to see you....

POPOVA. But didn't you tell him that since the death of my husband I've stopped receiving?

LUKA. I did, but he wouldn't even listen; says that it's a very pressing affair.

POPOVA. I do not receive!

LUKA. I told him so, but the... the devil... curses and pushes himself right in.... He's in the dining-room now.

POPOVA. [Annoyed] Very well, ask him in.... What manners! [Exit LUKA] How these people annoy me! What does he want of me? Why should he disturb my peace? [Sighs] No, I see that I shall have to go into a convent after all. [Thoughtfully] Yes, into a convent.... [Enter LUKA with SMIRNOV.]

SMIRNOV. [To LUKA] You fool, you're too fond of talking.... Ass! [Sees POPOVA and speaks with respect] Madam, I have the honour to present myself, I am Grigory Stepanovitch Smirnov, landowner and retired lieutenant of artillery! I am compelled to disturb you on a very pressing affair.

POPOVA. [Not giving him her hand] What do you want?

SMIRNOV. Your late husband, with whom I had the honour of being acquainted, died in my debt for one thousand two hundred roubles, on two bills of exchange. As I've got to pay the interest on a mortgage to-morrow, I've come to ask you, madam, to pay me the money to-day.

POPOVA. One thousand two hundred.... And what was my husband in debt to you for?

SMIRNOV. He used to buy oats from me.

POPOVA. [Sighing, to LUKA] So don't you forget, Luka, to give Toby an extra feed of oats. [Exit LUKA] If Nicolai Mihailovitch died in debt to you, then I shall certainly pay you, but you must excuse me to-day, as I haven't any spare cash. The day after to-morrow my steward will be back from town, and I'll give him instructions to settle your account, but at the moment I cannot do as you wish.... Moreover, it's exactly seven months to-day since the death of my husband, and I'm in a state of mind which absolutely prevents me from giving money matters my attention.

SMIRNOV. And I'm in a state of mind which, if I don't pay the interest due to-morrow, will force me to make a graceful exit from this life feet first. They'll take my estate!

POPOVA. You'll have your money the day after to-morrow.

SMIRNOV. I don't want the money the day after tomorrow, I want it to-day.

POPOVA. You must excuse me, I can't pay you.

SMIRNOV. And I can't wait till after to-morrow.

POPOVA. Well, what can I do, if I haven't the money now!

SMIRNOV. You mean to say, you can't pay me?

POPOVA. I can't.

SMIRNOV. Hm! Is that the last word you've got to say?

POPOVA. Yes, the last word.

SMIRNOV. The last word? Absolutely your last?

POPOVA. Absolutely.

SMIRNOV. Thank you so much. I'll make a note of it. [Shrugs his shoulders] And then people want me to keep calm! I meet a man on the road, and he asks me "Why are you always so angry, Grigory Stepanovitch?" But how on earth am I not to get angry? I want the money desperately. I rode out yesterday, early in the morning, and called on all my debtors, and not a single one of them paid up! I was just about dead-beat after it all, slept, goodness knows where, in some inn, kept by a Jew, with a vodka-barrel by my head. At last I get here, seventy versts from home, and hope to get something, and I am received by you with a "state of mind"! How shouldn't I get angry.

POPOVA. I thought I distinctly said my steward will pay you when he returns from town.

SMIRNOV. I didn't come to your steward, but to you! What the devil, excuse my saying so, have I to do with your steward!

POPOVA. Excuse me, sir, I am not accustomed to listen to such expressions or to such a tone of voice. I want to hear no more. [Makes a rapid exit.]

SMIRNOV. Well, there! "A state of mind."... "Husband died seven months ago!" Must I pay the interest, or mustn't I? I ask you: Must I pay, or must I not? Suppose your husband is dead, and you've got a state of mind, and nonsense of that sort.... And your steward's gone away somewhere, devil take him, what do you want me to do? Do you think I can fly away from my creditors in a balloon, or what? Or do you expect me to go and run my head into a brick wall? I go to Grusdev and he isn't at home, Yaroshevitch has hidden himself, I had a violent row with Kuritsin and nearly threw him out of the window, Mazugo has something the matter with his bowels, and this woman has "a state of mind." Not one of the swine wants to pay me! Just because I'm too gentle with them, because I'm a rag, just weak wax in their hands! I'm much too gentle with them! Well, just you wait! You'll find out what I'm like! I shan't let you play about with me, confound it! I shall jolly well stay here until she pays! Brr!... How angry I am to-day, how angry I am! All my inside is quivering with anger, and I can't even breathe.... Foo, my word, I even feel sick! [Yells] Waiter!

[Enter LUKA.]

LUKA. What is it?

SMIRNOV. Get me some kvass or water! [Exit LUKA] What a way to reason! A man is in desperate need of his money, and she won't pay it because, you see, she is not disposed to attend to money matters!... That's real silly feminine logic. That's why I never did like, and don't like now, to have to talk to women. I'd rather sit on a barrel of gunpowder than talk to a woman. Brr!... I feel quite chilly—and it's all on account of

that little bit of fluff! I can't even see one of these poetic creatures from a distance without breaking out into a cold sweat out of sheer anger. I can't look at them. [Enter LUKA with water.]

LUKA. Madam is ill and will see nobody.

SMIRNOV. Get out! [Exit LUKA] Ill and will see nobody! No, it's all right, you don't see me.... I'm going to stay and will sit here till you give me the money. You can be ill for a week, if you like, and I'll stay here for a week.... If you're ill for a year—I'll stay for a year. I'm going to get my own, my dear! You don't get at me with your widow's weeds and your dimpled cheeks! I know those dimples! [Shouts through the window] Simeon, take them out! We aren't going away at once! I'm staying here! Tell them in the stable to give the horses some oats! You fool, you've let the near horse's leg get tied up in the reins again! [Teasingly] "Never mind...." I'll give it you. "Never mind." [Goes away from the window] Oh, it's bad.... The heat's frightful, nobody pays up. I slept badly, and on top of everything else here's a bit of fluff in mourning with "a state of mind."... My head's aching.... Shall I have some vodka, what? Yes, I think I will. [Yells] Waiter!

[Enter LUKA.]

LUKA. What is it?

SMIRNOV. A glass of vodka! [Exit LUKA] Ouf! [Sits and inspects himself] I must say I look well! Dust all over, boots dirty, unwashed, unkempt, straw on my waistcoat.... The dear lady may well have taken me for a brigand. [Yawns] It's rather impolite to come into a drawing-room in this state, but it can't be helped.... I am not here as a visitor, but as a creditor, and there's no dress specially prescribed for creditors....

[Enter LUKA with the vodka.]

LUKA. You allow yourself to go very far, sir....

SMIRNOV [Angrily] What?

LUKA. I... er... nothing... I really...

SMIRNOV. Whom are you talking to? Shut up!

LUKA. [Aside] The devil's come to stay.... Bad luck that brought him.... [Exit.]

SMIRNOV. Oh, how angry I am! So angry that I think I could grind the whole world to dust.... I even feel sick.... [Yells] Waiter!

[Enter POPOVA.]

POPOVA. [Her eyes downcast] Sir, in my solitude I have grown unaccustomed to the masculine voice, and I can't stand shouting. I must ask you not to disturb my peace.

SMIRNOV. Pay me the money, and I'll go.

POPOVA. I told you perfectly plainly; I haven't any money to spare; wait until the day after to-morrow.

SMIRNOV. And I told you perfectly plainly I don't want the money the day after to-morrow, but to-day. If you don't pay me to-day, I'll have to hang myself to-morrow.

POPOVA. But what can I do if I haven't got the money? You're so strange!

SMIRNOV. Then you won't pay me now? Eh?

POPOVA. I can't.

SMIRNOV. In that case I stay here and shall wait until I get it. [Sits down] You're going to pay me the day after to-morrow? Very well! I'll stay here until the day after to-

morrow. I'll sit here all the time.... [Jumps up] I ask you: Have I got to pay the interest to-morrow, or haven't I? Or do you think I'm doing this for a joke?

POPOVA. Please don't shout! This isn't a stable!

SMIRNOV. I wasn't asking you about a stable, but whether I'd got my interest to pay to-morrow or not?

POPOVA. You don't know how to behave before women!

SMIRNOV. No, I do know how to behave before women!

POPOVA. No, you don't! You're a rude, ill-bred man! Decent people don't talk to a woman like that!

SMIRNOV. What a business! How do you want me to talk to you? In French, or what? [Loses his temper and lisps] *Madame, je vous prie....* How happy I am that you don't pay me.... Ah, pardon. I have disturbed you! Such lovely weather to-day! And how well you look in mourning! [Bows.]

POPOVA. That's silly and rude.

SMIRNOV. [Teasing her] Silly and rude! I don't know how to behave before women! Madam, in my time I've seen more women than you've seen sparrows! Three times I've fought duels on account of women. I've refused twelve women, and nine have refused me! Yes! There was a time when I played the fool, scented myself, used honeyed words, wore jewellery, made beautiful bows. I used to love, to suffer, to sigh at the moon, to get sour, to thaw, to freeze.... I used to love passionately, madly, every blessed way, devil take me; I used to chatter like a magpie about emancipation, and wasted half my wealth on tender feelings, but now—you must excuse me! You won't get round me like that now! I've had enough! Black eyes, passionate eyes, ruby lips, dimpled cheeks, the moon, whispers, timid breathing—I wouldn't give a brass farthing for the lot, madam! Present company always excepted, all women, great or little, are insincere, crooked, backbiters, envious, liars to the marrow of their bones, vain, trivial, merciless, unreasonable, and, as far as this is concerned [taps his forehead] excuse my outspokenness, a sparrow can give ten points to any philosopher in petticoats you like to name! You look at one of these poetic creatures: all muslin, an ethereal demi-goddess, you have a million transports of joy, and you look into her soul—and see a common crocodile! [He grips the back of a chair; the chair creaks and breaks] But the most disgusting thing of all is that this crocodile for some reason or other imagines that its chef d'oeuvre, its privilege and monopoly, is its tender feelings. Why, confound it, hang me on that nail feet upwards, if you like, but have you met a woman who can love anybody except a lapdog? When she's in love, can she do anything but snivel and slobber? While a man is suffering and making sacrifices all her love expresses itself in her playing about with her scarf, and trying to hook him more firmly by the nose. You have the misfortune to be a woman, you know from yourself what is the nature of woman. Tell me truthfully, have you ever seen a woman who was sincere, faithful, and constant? You haven't! Only freaks and old women are faithful and constant! You'll meet a cat with a horn or a white woodcock sooner than a constant woman!

POPOVA. Then, according to you, who is faithful and constant in love? Is it the man?

SMIRNOV. Yes, the man!

POPOVA. The man! [Laughs bitterly] Men are faithful and constant in love! What an idea! [With heat] What right have you to talk like that? Men are faithful and constant! Since we are talking about it, I'll tell you that of all the men I knew and know, the best was my late husband.... I loved him passionately with all my being, as only a young and

imaginative woman can love, I gave him my youth, my happiness, my life, my fortune, I breathed in him, I worshipped him as if I were a heathen, and... and what then? This best of men shamelessly deceived me at every step! After his death I found in his desk a whole drawerful of love-letters, and when he was alive—it's an awful thing to remember!—he used to leave me alone for weeks at a time, and make love to other women and betray me before my very eyes; he wasted my money, and made fun of my feelings.... And, in spite of all that, I loved him and was true to him. And not only that, but, now that he is dead, I am still true and constant to his memory. I have shut myself for ever within these four walls, and will wear these weeds to the very end....

SMIRNOV. [Laughs contemptuously] Weeds!... I don't understand what you take me for. As if I don't know why you wear that black domino and bury yourself between four walls! I should say I did! It's so mysterious, so poetic! When some junker [Note: So in the original.] or some tame poet goes past your windows he'll think: "There lives the mysterious Tamara who, for the love of her husband, buried herself between four walls." We know these games!

POPOVA. [Exploding] What? How dare you say all that to me?

SMIRNOV. You may have buried yourself alive, but you haven't forgotten to powder your face!

POPOVA. How dare you speak to me like that?

SMIRNOV. Please don't shout, I'm not your steward! You must allow me to call things by their real names. I'm not a woman, and I'm used to saying what I think straight out! Don't you shout, either!

POPOVA. I'm not shouting, it's you! Please leave me alone!

SMIRNOV. Pay me my money and I'll go.

POPOVA. I shan't give you any money!

SMIRNOV. Oh, no, you will.

POPOVA. I shan't give you a farthing, just to spite you. You leave me alone!

SMIRNOV. I have not the pleasure of being either your husband or your fiancé, so please don't make scenes. [Sits] I don't like it.

POPOVA. [Choking with rage] So you sit down?

SMIRNOV. I do.

POPOVA. I ask you to go away!

SMIRNOV. Give me my money.... [Aside] Oh, how angry I am! How angry I am!

POPOVA. I don't want to talk to impudent scoundrels! Get out of this! [Pause] Aren't you going? No?

SMIRNOV. No.

POPOVA. No?

SMIRNOV. No!

POPOVA. Very well then! [Rings, enter LUKA] Luka, show this gentleman out!

LUKA. [Approaches SMIRNOV] Would you mind going out, sir, as you're asked to! You needn't...

SMIRNOV. [Jumps up] Shut up! Who are you talking to? I'll chop you into pieces!

LUKA. [Clutches at his heart] Little fathers!... What people!... [Falls into a chair] Oh, I'm ill, I'm ill! I can't breathe!

POPOVA. Where's Dasha? Dasha! [Shouts] Dasha! Pelageya! Dasha! [Rings.]

LUKA. Oh! They've all gone out to pick fruit.... There's nobody at home! I'm ill! Water!

POPOVA. Get out of this, now.

SMIRNOV. Can't you be more polite?

POPOVA. [Clenches her fists and stamps her foot] You're a boor! A coarse bear! A Bourbon! A monster!

SMIRNOV. What? What did you say?

POPOVA. I said you are a bear, a monster!

SMIRNOV. [Approaching her] May I ask what right you have to insult me?

POPOVA. And suppose I am insulting you? Do you think I'm afraid of you?

SMIRNOV. And do you think that just because you're a poetic creature you can insult me with impunity? Eh? We'll fight it out!

LUKA. Little fathers!... What people!... Water!

SMIRNOV. Pistols!

POPOVA. Do you think I'm afraid of you just because you have large fists and a bull's throat? Eh? You Bourbon!

SMIRNOV. We'll fight it out! I'm not going to be insulted by anybody, and I don't care if you are a woman, one of the "softer sex," indeed!

POPOVA. [Trying to interrupt him] Bear! Bear! Bear!

SMIRNOV. It's about time we got rid of the prejudice that only men need pay for their insults. Devil take it, if you want equality of rights you can have it. We're going to fight it out!

POPOVA. With pistols? Very well!

SMIRNOV. This very minute.

POPOVA. This very minute! My husband had some pistols.... I'll bring them here. [Is going, but turns back] What pleasure it will give me to put a bullet into your thick head! Devil take you! [Exit.]

SMIRNOV. I'll bring her down like a chicken! I'm not a little boy or a sentimental puppy; I don't care about this "softer sex."

LUKA. Gracious little fathers!... [Kneels] Have pity on a poor old man, and go away from here! You've frightened her to death, and now you want to shoot her!

SMIRNOV. [Not hearing him] If she fights, well that's equality of rights, emancipation, and all that! Here the sexes are equal! I'll shoot her on principle! But what a woman! [Parodying her] "Devil take you! I'll put a bullet into your thick head." Eh? How she reddened, how her cheeks shone!... She accepted my challenge! My word, it's the first time in my life that I've seen....

LUKA. Go away, sir, and I'll always pray to God for you!

SMIRNOV. She is a woman! That's the sort I can understand! A real woman! Not a sour-faced jellybag, but fire, gunpowder, a rocket! I'm even sorry to have to kill her!

LUKA. [Weeps] Dear... dear sir, do go away!

SMIRNOV. I absolutely like her! Absolutely! Even though her cheeks are dimpled, I like her! I'm almost ready to let the debt go... and I'm not angry any longer.... Wonderful woman!

[Enter POPOVA with pistols.]

POPOVA. Here are the pistols.... But before we fight you must show me how to fire. I've never held a pistol in my hands before.

LUKA. Oh, Lord, have mercy and save her.... I'll go and find the coachman and the gardener.... Why has this infliction come on us.... [Exit.]

SMIRNOV. [Examining the pistols] You see, there are several sorts of pistols.... There are Mortimer pistols, specially made for duels, they fire a percussion-cap. These are Smith and Wesson revolvers, triple action, with extractors.... These are excellent pistols. They can't cost less than ninety roubles the pair.... You must hold the revolver like this.... [Aside] Her eyes, her eyes! What an inspiring woman!

POPOVA. Like this?

SMIRNOV. Yes, like this.... Then you cock the trigger, and take aim like this.... Put your head back a little! Hold your arm out properly.... Like that.... Then you press this thing with your finger—and that's all. The great thing is to keep cool and aim steadily.... Try not to jerk your arm.

POPOVA. Very well.... It's inconvenient to shoot in a room, let's go into the garden.

SMIRNOV. Come along then. But I warn you, I'm going to fire in the air.

POPOVA. That's the last straw! Why?

SMIRNOV. Because... because... it's my affair.

POPOVA. Are you afraid? Yes? Ah! No, sir, you don't get out of it! You come with me! I shan't have any peace until I've made a hole in your forehead... that forehead which I hate so much! Are you afraid?

SMIRNOV. Yes, I am afraid.

POPOVA. You lie! Why won't you fight?

SMIRNOV. Because... because you... because I like you.

POPOVA. [Laughs] He likes me! He dares to say that he likes me! [Points to the door] That's the way.

SMIRNOV. [Loads the revolver in silence, takes his cap and goes to the door. There he stops for half a minute, while they look at each other in silence, then he hesitatingly approaches POPOVA] Listen.... Are you still angry? I'm devilishly annoyed, too... but, do you understand... how can I express myself?... The fact is, you see, it's like this, so to speak.... [Shouts] Well, is it my fault that I like you? [He snatches at the back of a chair; the chair creaks and breaks] Devil take it, how I'm smashing up your furniture! I like you! Do you understand? I... I almost love you!

POPOVA. Get away from me—I hate you!

SMIRNOV. God, what a woman! I've never in my life seen one like her! I'm lost! Done for! Fallen into a mousetrap, like a mouse!

POPOVA. Stand back, or I'll fire!

SMIRNOV. Fire, then! You can't understand what happiness it would be to die before those beautiful eyes, to be shot by a revolver held in that little, velvet hand.... I'm out of my senses! Think, and make up your mind at once, because if I go out we shall never see each other again! Decide now.... I am a landowner, of respectable character, have an income of ten thousand a year. I can put a bullet through a coin tossed into the air as it comes down.... I own some fine horses.... Will you be my wife?

POPOVA. [Indignantly shakes her revolver] Let's fight! Let's go out!

SMIRNOV. I'm mad.... I understand nothing. [Yells] Waiter, water!

POPOVA. [Yells] Let's go out and fight!

SMIRNOV. I'm off my head, I'm in love like a boy, like a fool! [Snatches her hand, she screams with pain] I love you! [Kneels] I love you as I've never loved before! I've refused twelve women, nine have refused me, but I never loved one of them as I love you.... I'm weak, I'm wax, I've melted.... I'm on my knees like a fool, offering you my hand.... Shame, shame! I haven't been in love for five years, I'd taken a vow, and now all of a sudden I'm in love, like a fish out of water! I offer you my hand. Yes or no? You don't want me? Very well! [Gets up and quickly goes to the door.]

POPOVA. Stop.

SMIRNOV. [Stops] Well?

POPOVA. Nothing, go away.... No, stop.... No, go away, go away! I hate you! Or no.... Don't go away! Oh, if you knew how angry I am, how angry I am! [Throws her revolver on the table] My fingers have swollen because of all this.... [Tears her handkerchief in temper] What are you waiting for? Get out!

SMIRNOV. Good-bye.

POPOVA. Yes, yes, go away!... [Yells] Where are you going? Stop.... No, go away. Oh, how angry I am! Don't come near me, don't come near me!

SMIRNOV. [Approaching her] How angry I am with myself! I'm in love like a student, I've been on my knees.... [Rudely] I love you! What do I want to fall in love with you for? To-morrow I've got to pay the interest, and begin mowing, and here you.... [Puts his arms around her] I shall never forgive myself for this....

POPOVA. Get away from me! Take your hands away! I hate you! Let's go and fight!

[A prolonged kiss. Enter LUKA with an axe, the GARDENER with a rake, the COACHMAN with a pitchfork, and WORKMEN with poles.]

LUKA. [Catches sight of the pair kissing] Little fathers! [Pause.]

POPOVA. [Lowering her eyes] Luka, tell them in the stables that Toby isn't to have any oats at all to-day.

Curtain.