

***ANTON
CHEKHOV***



PLAYS

Anton Chekhov

Plays

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Introduction:

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Biography by Marian Fell

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The last years of the nineteenth century were for Russia tinged with doubt and gloom. The high-tide of vitality that had risen during the Turkish war ebbed in the early eighties, leaving behind it a dead level of apathy which lasted until life was again quickened by the high interests of the Revolution. During these grey years the lonely country and stagnant provincial towns of Russia buried a peasantry which was enslaved by want and toil, and an educated upper class which was enslaved by idleness and tedium. Most of the "Intellectuals," with no outlet for their energies, were content to forget their ennui in vodka and card-playing; only the more idealistic gasped for air in the stifling atmosphere, crying out in despair against life as they saw it, and looking forward with a pathetic hope to happiness for humanity in "two or three hundred years." It is the inevitable tragedy of their existence, and the pitiful humour of their surroundings, that are portrayed with such insight and sympathy by Anton Tchekoff who is, perhaps, of modern writers, the dearest to the Russian people.

Anton Tchekoff was born in the old Black Sea port of Taganrog on January 17, 1860. His grandfather had been a serf; his father married a merchant's daughter and settled in Taganrog, where, during Anton's boyhood, he carried on a small and unsuccessful trade in provisions. The young Tchekoff was soon impressed into the services of the large, poverty-stricken family, and he spoke regretfully in after years of his hard-worked childhood. But he was obedient

and good-natured, and worked cheerfully in his father's shop, closely observing the idlers that assembled there, and gathering the drollest stories, which he would afterward whisper in class to his laughing schoolfellows. Many were the punishments which he incurred by this habit, which was incorrigible.

His grandfather had now become manager of an estate near Taganrog, in the wild steppe country of the Don Cossacks, and here the boy spent his summers, fishing in the river, and roving about the countryside as brown as a gipsy, sowing the seeds of that love for nature which he retained all his life. His evenings he liked best to spend in the kitchen of the master's house among the work people and peasants who gathered there, taking part in their games, and setting them all laughing by his witty and telling observations.

When Tchekoff was about fourteen, his father moved the family to Moscow, leaving Anton in Taganrog, and now, relieved of work in the shop, his progress at school became remarkable. At seventeen he wrote a long tragedy, which was afterward destroyed, and he already showed flashes of the wit that was soon to blaze into genius.

He graduated from the high school at Taganrog with every honour, entered the University of Moscow as a student of medicine, and threw himself headlong into a double life of student and author, in the attempt to help his struggling family.

His first story appeared in a Moscow paper in 1880, and after some difficulty he secured a position connected with several of the smaller periodicals, for which, during his student years, he poured forth a succession of short stories and sketches of Russian life with incredible rapidity. He wrote, he tells us, during every spare minute, in crowded

rooms where there was "no light and less air," and never spent more than a day on any one story. He also wrote at this time a very stirring blood-and-thunder play which was suppressed by the censor, and the fate of which is not known.

His audience demanded laughter above all things, and, with his deep sense of the ridiculous, Tchekoff asked nothing better. His stories, though often based on themes profoundly tragic, are penetrated by the light and subtle satire that has won him his reputation as a great humourist. But though there was always a smile on his lips, it was a tender one, and his sympathy with suffering often brought his laughter near to tears.

This delicate and original genius was at first subjected to harsh criticism, which Tchekoff felt keenly, and Trigorin's description in "The Sea-Gull" of the trials of a young author is a cry from Tchekoff's own soul. A passionate enemy of all lies and oppression, he already foreshadows in these early writings the protest against conventions and rules, which he afterward put into Treplieff's reply to Sorin in "The Sea-Gull": "Let us have new forms, or else nothing at all."

In 1884 he took his degree as doctor of medicine, and decided to practise, although his writing had by now taken on a professional character. He always gave his calling a high place, and the doctors in his works are drawn with affection and understanding. If any one spoke slightingly of doctors in his presence, he would exclaim: "Stop! You don't know what country doctors do for the people!"

Tchekoff fully realised later the influence which his profession had exercised on his literary work, and sometimes regretted the too vivid insight it gave him, but, on the other hand, he was able to write: "Only a doctor can know what value my knowledge of science has been to me,"

and "It seems to me that as a doctor I have described the sicknesses of the soul correctly." For instance, Trigorin's analysis in "The Sea-Gull" of the state of mind of an author has well been called "artistic diagnosis."

The young doctor-writer is described at this time as modest and grave, with flashes of brilliant gaiety. A son of the people, there was in his face an expression that recalled the simple-hearted village lad; his eyes were blue, his glance full of intelligence and kindness, and his manners unaffected and simple. He was an untiring worker, and between his patients and his desk he led a life of ceaseless activity. His restless mind was dominated by a passion of energy and he thought continually and vividly. Often, while jesting and talking, he would seem suddenly to plunge into himself, and his look would grow fixed and deep, as if he were contemplating something important and strange. Then he would ask some unexpected question, which showed how far his mind had roamed.

Success was now rapidly overtaking the young author; his first collection of stories appeared in 1887, another one in the same year had immediate success, and both went through many editions; but, at the same time, the shadows that darkened his later works began to creep over his light-hearted humour.

His impressionable mind began to take on the grey tinge of his time, but much of his sadness may also be attributed to his ever-increasing ill health.

Weary and with an obstinate cough, he went south in 1888, took a little cottage on the banks of a little river "abounding in fish and crabs," and surrendered himself to his touching love for nature, happy in his passion for fishing, in the quiet of the country, and in the music and gaiety of the peasants. "One would gladly sell one's soul," he writes,

"for the pleasure of seeing the warm evening sky, and the streams and pools reflecting the darkly mournful sunset." He described visits to his country neighbours and long drives in gay company, during which, he says, "we ate every half hour, and laughed to the verge of colic."

His health, however, did not improve. In 1889 he began to have attacks of heart trouble, and the sensitive artist's nature appears in a remark which he made after one of them. "I walked quickly across the terrace on which the guests were assembled," he said, "with one idea in my mind, how awkward it would be to fall down and die in the presence of strangers."

It was during this transition period of his life, when his youthful spirits were failing him, that the stage, for which he had always felt a fascination, tempted him to write "Ivanoff," and also a dramatic sketch in one act entitled "The Swan Song," though he often declared that he had no ambition to become a dramatist. "The Novel," he wrote, "is a lawful wife, but the Stage is a noisy, flashy, and insolent mistress." He has put his opinion of the stage of his day in the mouth of Treplieff, in "The Sea-Gull," and he often refers to it in his letters as "an evil disease of the towns" and "the gallows on which dramatists are hanged."

He wrote "Ivanoff" at white-heat in two and a half weeks, as a protest against a play he had seen at one of the Moscow theatres. Ivanoff (from Ivan, the commonest of Russian names) was by no means meant to be a hero, but a most ordinary, weak man oppressed by the "immortal commonplaces of life," with his heart and soul aching in the grip of circumstance, one of the many "useless people" of Russia for whose sorrow Tchekoff felt such overwhelming pity. He saw nothing in their lives that could not be explained and pardoned, and he returns to his ill-fated,

"useless people" again and again, not to preach any doctrine of pessimism, but simply because he thought that the world was the better for a certain fragile beauty of their natures and their touching faith in the ultimate salvation of humanity.

Both the writing and staging of "Ivanoff" gave Tchekoff great difficulty. The characters all being of almost equal importance, he found it hard to get enough good actors to take the parts, but it finally appeared in Moscow in 1889, a decided failure! The author had touched sharply several sensitive spots of Russian life—for instance, in his warning not to marry a Jewess or a blue-stocking—and the play was also marred by faults of inexperience, which, however, he later corrected. The critics were divided in condemning a certain novelty in it and in praising its freshness and originality. The character of Ivanoff was not understood, and the weakness of the man blinded many to the lifelike portrait. Tchekoff himself was far from pleased with what he called his "literary abortion," and rewrote it before it was produced again in St. Petersburg. Here it was received with the wildest applause, and the morning after its performance the papers burst into unanimous praise. The author was enthusiastically feted, but the burden of his growing fame was beginning to be very irksome to him, and he wrote wearily at this time that he longed to be in the country, fishing in the lake, or lying in the hay.

His next play to appear was a farce entitled "The Boor," which he wrote in a single evening and which had a great success. This was followed by "The Demon," a failure, rewritten ten years later as "Uncle Vanya."

All Russia now combined in urging Tchekoff to write some important work, and this, too, was the writer's dream; but his only long story is "The Steppe," which is, after all, but a

series of sketches, exquisitely drawn, and strung together on the slenderest connecting thread. Tchekoff's delicate and elusive descriptive power did not lend itself to painting on a large canvas, and his strange little tragicomedies of Russian life, his "Tedious Tales," as he called them, were always to remain his masterpieces.

In 1890 Tchekoff made a journey to the Island of Saghalien, after which his health definitely failed, and the consumption, with which he had long been threatened, finally declared itself. His illness exiled him to the Crimea, and he spent his last ten years there, making frequent trips to Moscow to superintend the production of his four important plays, written during this period of his life.

"The Sea-Gull" appeared in 1896, and, after a failure in St. Petersburg, won instant success as soon as it was given on the stage of the Artists' Theatre in Moscow. Of all Tchekoff's plays, this one conforms most nearly to our Western conventions, and is therefore most easily appreciated here. In *Trigorin* the author gives us one of the rare glimpses of his own mind, for Tchekoff seldom put his own personality into the pictures of the life in which he took such immense interest.

In "The Sea-Gull" we see clearly the increase of Tchekoff's power of analysis, which is remarkable in his next play, "The Three Sisters," gloomiest of all his dramas.

"The Three Sisters," produced in 1901, depends, even more than most of Tchekoff's plays, on its interpretation, and it is almost essential to its appreciation that it should be seen rather than read. The atmosphere of gloom with which it is pervaded is a thousand times more intense when it comes to us across the foot-lights. In it Tchekoff probes the depths of human life with so sure a touch, and lights them with an insight so piercing, that the play made a deep

impression when it appeared. This was also partly owing to the masterly way in which it was acted at the Artists' Theatre in Moscow. The theme is, as usual, the greyness of provincial life, and the night is lit for his little group of characters by a flash of passion so intense that the darkness which succeeds it seems well-nigh intolerable.

"Uncle Vanya" followed "The Three Sisters," and the poignant truth of the picture, together with the tender beauty of the last scene, touched his audience profoundly, both on the stage and when the play was afterward published.

"The Cherry Orchard" appeared in 1904 and was Tchekoff's last play. At its production, just before his death, the author was feted as one of Russia's greatest dramatists. Here it is not only country life that Tchekoff shows us, but Russian life and character in general, in which the old order is giving place to the new, and we see the practical, modern spirit invading the vague, aimless existence so dear to the owners of the cherry orchard. A new epoch was beginning, and at its dawn the singer of old, dim Russia was silenced.

In the year that saw the production of "The Cherry Orchard," Tchekoff, the favourite of the Russian people, whom Tolstoi declared to be comparable as a writer of stories only to Maupassant, died suddenly in a little village of the Black Forest, whither he had gone a few weeks before in the hope of recovering his lost health.

Tchekoff, with an art peculiar to himself, in scattered scenes, in haphazard glimpses into the lives of his characters, in seemingly trivial conversations, has succeeded in so concentrating the atmosphere of the Russia of his day that we feel it in every line we read, oppressive as the mists that hang over a lake at dawn, and, like those mists, made visible to us by the light of an approaching day.

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ON THE HIGH ROAD

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A DRAMATIC STUDY

CHARACTERS

TIHON EVSTIGNEYEV, the proprietor of a inn on the main road

SEMYON SERGEYEVITCH BORTSOV, a ruined landowner

MARIA EGOROVNA, his wife

SAVVA, an aged pilgrim

NAZAROVNA and EFIMOVNA, women pilgrims

FEDYA, a labourer

EGOR MERIK, a tramp

KUSMA, a driver

POSTMAN

BORTSOV'S WIFE'S COACHMAN

PILGRIMS, CATTLE-DEALERS, ETC.

The action takes place in one of the provinces of Southern Russia

[The scene is laid in TIHON'S bar. On the right is the bar-counter and shelves with bottles. At the back is a door leading out of the house. Over it, on the outside, hangs a

dirty red lantern. The floor and the forms, which stand against the wall, are closely occupied by pilgrims and passersby. Many of them, for lack of space, are sleeping as they sit. It is late at night. As the curtain rises thunder is heard, and lightning is seen through the door.]

[TIHON is behind the counter. FEDYA is half-lying in a heap on one of the forms, and is quietly playing on a concertina. Next to him is BORTSOV, wearing a shabby summer overcoat. SAVVA, NAZAROVNA, and EFIMOVNA are stretched out on the floor by the benches.]

EFIMOVNA. [*To NAZAROVNA*] Give the old man a nudge dear! Can't get any answer out of him.

NAZAROVNA. [Lifting the corner of a cloth covering of SAVVA'S face] Are you alive or are you dead, you holy man?

SAVVA. Why should I be dead? I'm alive, mother! [*Raises himself on his elbow*] Cover up my feet, there's a saint! That's it. A bit more on the right one. That's it, mother. God be good to us.

NAZAROVNA. [Wrapping up SAVVA'S feet] Sleep, little father.

SAVVA. What sleep can I have? If only I had the patience to endure this pain, mother; sleep's quite another matter. A sinner doesn't deserve to be given rest. What's that noise, pilgrim-woman?

NAZAROVNA. God is sending a storm. The wind is wailing, and the rain is pouring down, pouring down. All down the roof and into the windows like dried peas. Do you hear? The windows of heaven are opened... [*Thunder*] Holy, holy, holy...

FEDYA. And it roars and thunders, and rages, sad there's no end to it! Hoooo... it's like the noise of a forest.... Hoooo.... The wind is wailing like a dog.... [*Shrinking*

back] It's cold! My clothes are wet, it's all coming in through the open door... you might put me through a wringer.... [*Plays softly*] My concertina's damp, and so there's no music for you, my Orthodox brethren, or else I'd give you such a concert, my word! — Something marvellous! You can have a quadrille, or a polka, if you like, or some Russian dance for two.... I can do them all. In the town, where I was an attendant at the Grand Hotel, I couldn't make any money, but I did wonders on my concertina. And, I can play the guitar.

A VOICE FROM THE CORNER. A silly speech from a silly fool.

FEDYA. I can hear another of them. [*Pause.*]

NAZAROVNA. [*To SAVVA*] If you'd only lie where it was warm now, old man, and warm your feet. [*Pause.*] Old man! Man of God! [*Shakes SAVVA*] Are you going to die?

FEDYA. You ought to drink a little vodka, grandfather. Drink, and it'll burn, burn in your stomach, and warm up your heart. Drink, do!

NAZAROVNA. Don't swank, young man! Perhaps the old man is giving back his soul to God, or repenting for his sins, and you talk like that, and play your concertina.... Put it down! You've no shame!

FEDYA. And what are you sticking to him for? He can't do anything and you... with your old women's talk... He can't say a word in reply, and you're glad, and happy because he's listening to your nonsense.... You go on sleeping, grandfather; never mind her! Let her talk, don't you take any notice of her. A woman's tongue is the devil's broom — it will sweep the good man and the clever man both out of the house. Don't you mind.... [*Waves his hands*] But it's thin you are, brother of mine! Terrible! Like a dead skeleton! No life in you! Are you really dying?

SAVVA. Why should I die? Save me, O Lord, from dying in vain.... I'll suffer a little, and then get up with God's help.... The Mother of God won't let me die in a strange land.... I'll die at home.

FEDYA. Are you from far off?

SAVVA. From Vologda. The town itself.... I live there.

FEDYA. And where is this Vologda?

TIHON. The other side of Moscow....

FEDYA. Well, well, well.... You have come a long way, old man! On foot?

SAVVA. On foot, young man. I've been to Tihon of the Don, and I'm going to the Holy Hills. [Note: On the Donetz, south-east of Kharkov; a monastery containing a miraculous ikon.]... From there, if God wills it, to Odessa.... They say you can get to Jerusalem cheap from there, for twenty-ones roubles, they say....

FEDYA. And have you been to Moscow?

SAVVA. Rather! Five times....

FEDYA. Is it a good town? [*Smokes*] Well-standing?

Sews. There are many holy places there, young man.... Where there are many holy places it's always a good town....

BORTSOV. [Goes up to the counter, to TIHON] Once more, please! For the sake of Christ, give it to me!

FEDYA. The chief thing about a town is that it should be clean. If it's dusty, it must be watered; if it's dirty, it must be cleaned. There ought to be big houses... a theatre... police... cabs, which... I've lived in a town myself, I understand.

BORTSOV. Just a little glass. I'll pay you for it later.

TIHON. That's enough now.

BORTSOV. I ask you! Do be kind to me!

TIHON. Get away!

BORTSOV. You don't understand me.... Understand me, you fool, if there's a drop of brain in your peasant's wooden head, that it isn't I who am asking you, but my inside, using the words you understand, that's what's asking! My illness is what's asking! Understand!

TIHON. We don't understand anything.... Get back!

BORTSOV. Because if I don't have a drink at once, just you understand this, if I don't satisfy my needs, I may commit some crime. God only knows what I might do! In the time you've kept this place, you rascal, haven't you seen a lot of drunkards, and haven't you yet got to understand what they're like? They're diseased! You can do anything you like to them, but you must give them vodka! Well, now, I implore you! Please! I humbly ask you! God only knows how humbly!

TIHON. You can have the vodka if you pay for it.

BORTSOV. Where am I to get the money? I've drunk it all! Down to the ground! What can I give you? I've only got this coat, but I can't give you that. I've nothing on underneath.... Would you like my cap? [Takes it off and gives it to TIHON]

TIHON. [*Looks it over*] Hm.... There are all sorts of caps.... It might be a sieve from the holes in it....

FEDYA. [*Laughs*] A gentleman's cap! You've got to take it off in front of the mam'selles. How do you do, goodbye! How are you?

TIHON. [*Returns the cap to BORTSOV*] I wouldn't give anything for it. It's muck.

BORTSOV. If you don't like it, then let me owe you for the drink! I'll bring in your five copecks on my way back

from town. You can take it and choke yourself with it then! Choke yourself! I hope it sticks in your throat!
[Coughs] I hate you!

TIHON. *[Banging the bar-counter with his fist]* Why do you keep on like that? What a man! What are you here for, you swindler?

BORTSOV. I want a drink! It's not I, it's my disease! Understand that!

TIHON. Don't you make me lose my temper, or you'll soon find yourself outside!

BORTSOV. What am I to do? *[Retires from the bar-counter]*
What am I to do? *[Is thoughtful.]*

EFIMOVNA. It's the devil tormenting you. Don't you mind him, sir. The damned one keeps whispering, "Drink! Drink!" And you answer him, "I shan't drink! I shan't drink!" He'll go then.

FEDYA. It's drumming in his head.... His stomach's leading him on! *[Laughs]* Your houour's a happy man. Lie down and go to sleep! What's the use of standing like a scarecrow in the middle of the inn! This isn't an orchard!

BORTSOV. *[Angrily]* Shut up! Nobody spoke to you, you donkey.

FEDYA. Go on, go on! We've seen the like of you before! There's a lot like you tramping the high road! As to being a donkey, you wait till I've given you a clout on the ear and you'll howl worse than the wind. Donkey yourself! Fool! *[Pause]* Scum!

NAZAROVNA. The old man may be saying a prayer, or giving up his soul to God, and here are these unclean ones wrangling with one another and saying all sorts of... Have shame on yourselves!

FEDYA. Here, you cabbage-stalk, you keep quiet, even if you are in a public-house. Just you behave like everybody else.

BORTSOV. What am I to do? What will become of me? How can I make him understand? What else can I say to him?
[To TIHON] The blood's boiling in my chest! Uncle Tihon!
[Weeps] Uncle Tihon!

SAWA. *[Groans]* I've got shooting-pains in my leg, like bullets of fire.... Little mother, pilgrim.

EFIMOVNA. What is it, little father?

SAVVA. Who's that crying?

EFIMOVNA. The gentleman.

SAVVA. Ask him to shed a tear for me, that I might die in Vologda. Tearful prayers are heard.

BORTSOV. I'm not praying, grandfather! These aren't tears! Just juice! My soul is crushed; and the juice is running.
[Sits by SAVVA] Juice! But you wouldn't understand! You, with your darkened brain, wouldn't understand. You people are all in the dark!

SAVVA. Where will you find those who live in the light?

BORTSOV. They do exist, grandfather.... They would understand!

SAVVA. Yes, yes, dear friend.... The saints lived in the light.... They understood all our griefs.... You needn't even tell them.... and they'll understand.... Just by looking at your eyes.... And then you'll have such peace, as if you were never in grief at all — it will all go!

FEDYA. And have you ever seen any saints?

SAVVA. It has happened, young man.... There are many of all sorts on this earth. Sinners, and servants of God.

BORTSOV. I don't understand all this.... *[Gets up quickly]*
What's the use of talking when you don't understand,
and what sort of a brain have I now? I've only an
instinct, a thirst! *[Goes quickly to the counter]* Tihon,
take my coat! Understand? *[Tries to take it off]* My
coat...

TIHON. And what is there under your coat? *[Looks under it]*
Your naked body? Don't take it off, I shan't have it.... I'm
not going to burden my soul with a sin.

[Enter MERIK.]

BORTSOV. Very well, I'll take the sin on myself! Do you
agree?

MERIK. *[In silence takes off his outer cloak and remains in a
sleeveless jacket. He carries an axe in his belt]* A
vagrant may sweat where a bear will freeze. I am hot.
[Puts his axe on the floor and takes off his jacket] You
get rid of a pailful of sweat while you drag one leg out of
the mud. And while you are dragging it out, the other
one goes farther in.

EFIMOVNA. Yes, that's true... is the rain stopping, dear?

MERIK. *[Glancing at EFIMOVNA]* I don't talk to old women. *[A
pause.]*

BORTSOV. *[To TIHON]* I'll take the sin on myself. Do you hear
me or don't you?

TIHON. I don't want to hear you, get away!

MERIK. It's as dark as if the sky was painted with pitch. You
can't see your own nose. And the rain beats into your
face like a snowstorm! *[Picks up his clothes and axe.]*

FEDYA. It's a good thing for the likes of us thieves. When the
cat's away the mice will play.

MERIK. Who says that?

FEDYA. Look and see... before you forget.

MERIN. We'll make a note of it.... [*Goes up to TIHON*] How do you do, you with the large face! Don't you remember me.

TIHON. If I'm to remember every one of you drunkards that walks the high road, I reckon I'd need ten holes in my forehead.

MERIK. Just look at me.... [*A pause.*]

TIHON. Oh, yes; I remember. I knew you by your eyes! [*Gives him his hand*] Andrey Polikarpov?

MERIK. I used to be Andrey Polikarpov, but now I am Egor Merik.

TIHON. Why's that?

MERIK. I call myself after whatever passport God gives me. I've been Merik for two months. [*Thunder*] Rrrr.... Go on thundering, I'm not afraid! [*Looks round*] Any police here?

TIHON. What are you talking about, making mountains out of molehills?... The people here are all right... The police are fast asleep in their feather beds now.... [*Loudly*] Orthodox brothers, mind your pockets and your clothes, or you'll have to regret it. The man's a rascal! He'll rob you!

MERIK. They can look out for their money, but as to their clothes — I shan't touch them. I've nowhere to take them.

TIHON. Where's the devil taking you to?

MERIK. To Kuban.

TIHON. My word!

FEDYA. To Kuban? Really? [*Sitting up*] It's a fine place. You wouldn't see such a country, brother, if you were to fall asleep and dream for three years. They say the birds there, and the beasts are — my God! The grass grows

all the year round, the people are good, and they've so much land they don't know what to do with it! The authorities, they say... a soldier was telling me the other day... give a hundred dessiatins ahead. There's happiness, God strike me!

MERIK. Happiness.... Happiness goes behind you.... You don't see it. It's as near as your elbow is, but you can't bite it. It's all silly.... [Looking round at the benches and the people] Like a lot of prisoners.... A poor lot.

EFIMOVNA. [*To MERIK*] What great, angry, eyes! There's an enemy in you, young man.... Don't you look at us!

MERIK. Yes, you're a poor lot here.

EFIMOVNA. Turn away! [*Nudges SAVVA*] Savva, darling, a wicked man is looking at us. He'll do us harm, dear. [*To MERIK*] Turn away, I tell you, you snake!

SAVVA. He won't touch us, mother, he won't touch us.... God won't let him.

MERIK. All right, Orthodox brothers! [*Shrugs his shoulders*] Be quiet! You aren't asleep, you bandy-legged fools! Why don't you say something?

EFIMOVNA. Take your great eyes away! Take away that devil's own pride!

MERIK. Be quiet, you crooked old woman! I didn't come with the devil's pride, but with kind words, wishing to honour your bitter lot! You're huddled together like flies because of the cold — I'd be sorry for you, speak kindly to you, pity your poverty, and here you go grumbling away! [*Goes up to FEDYA*] Where are you from?

FEDYA. I live in these parts. I work at the Khamonyevsky brickworks.

MERIK. Get up.

FEDYA. [*Raising himself*] Well?

MERIK. Get up, right up. I'm going to lie down here.

FEDYA. What's that.... It isn't your place, is it?

MERIK. Yes, mine. Go and lie on the ground!

FEDYA. You get out of this, you tramp. I'm not afraid of you.

MERIK. You're very quick with your tongue.... Get up, and don't talk about it! You'll be sorry for it, you silly.

TIHON. [*To FEDYA*] Don't contradict him, young man. Never mind.

FEDYA. What right have you? You stick out your fishy eyes and think I'm afraid! [*Picks up his belongings and stretches himself out on the ground*] You devil! [*Lies down and covers himself all over.*]

MERIK. [*Stretching himself out on the bench*] I don't expect you've ever seen a devil or you wouldn't call me one. Devils aren't like that. [*Lies down, putting his axe next to him.*] Lie down, little brother axe... let me cover you.

TIHON. Where did you get the axe from?

MERIK. Stole it.... Stole it, and now I've got to fuss over it like a child with a new toy; I don't like to throw it away, and I've nowhere to put it. Like a beastly wife.... Yes.... [*Covering himself over*] Devils aren't like that, brother.

FEDYA. [*Uncovering his head*] What are they like?

MERIK. Like steam, like air.... Just blow into the air. [*Blows*] They're like that, you can't see them.

A VOICE FROM THE CORNER. You can see them if you sit under a harrow.

MERIK. I've tried, but I didn't see any.... Old women's tales, and silly old men's, too.... You won't see a devil or a ghost or a corpse.... Our eyes weren't made so that we could see everything.... When I was a boy, I used to walk in the woods at night on purpose to see the demon

of the woods.... I'd shout and shout, and there might be some spirit, I'd call for the demon of the woods and not blink my eyes: I'd see all sorts of little things moving about, but no demon. I used to go and walk about the churchyards at night, I wanted to see the ghosts — but the women lie. I saw all sorts of animals, but anything awful — not a sign. Our eyes weren't...

THE VOICE FROM THE CORNER. Never mind, it does happen that you do see.... In our village a man was gutting a wild boar... he was separating the tripe when... something jumped out at him!

SAVVA. [*Raising himself*] Little children, don't talk about these unclean things! It's a sin, dears!

MERIK. Aaa... greybeard! You skeleton! [*Laughs*] You needn't go to the churchyard to see ghosts, when they get up from under the floor to give advice to their relations.... A sin!... Don't you teach people your silly notions! You're an ignorant lot of people living in darkness.... [*Lights his pipe*] My father was peasant and used to be fond of teaching people. One night he stole a sack of apples from the village priest, and he brings them along and tells us, "Look, children, mind you don't eat any apples before Easter, it's a sin." You're like that.... You don't know what a devil is, but you go calling people devils.... Take this crooked old woman, for instance. [*Points to EFIMOVNA*] She sees an enemy in me, but is her time, for some woman's nonsense or other, she's given her soul to the devil five times.

EFIMOVNA. Hoo, hoo, hoo.... Gracious heavens! [*Covers her face*] Little Savva!

TIHON. What are you frightening them for? A great pleasure! [*The door slams in the wind*] Lord Jesus.... The wind, the wind!

MERIK. *[Stretching himself]* Eh, to show my strength! *[The door slams again]* If I could only measure myself against the wind! Shall I tear the door down, or suppose I tear up the inn by the roots! *[Gets up and lies down again]* How dull!

NAZAROVNA. You'd better pray, you heathen! Why are you so restless?

EFIMOVNA. Don't speak to him, leave him alone! He's looking at us again. *[To MERIK]* Don't look at us, evil man! Your eyes are like the eyes of a devil before cockcrow!

SAVVA. Let him look, pilgrims! You pray, and his eyes won't do you any harm.

BORTSOV. No, I can't. It's too much for my strength! *[Goes up to the counter]* Listen, Tihon, I ask you for the last time.... Just half a glass!

TIHON. *[Shakes his head]* The money!

BORTSOV. My God, haven't I told you! I've drunk it all! Where am I to get it? And you won't go broke even if you do let me have a drop of vodka on tick. A glass of it only costs you two copecks, and it will save me from suffering! I am suffering! Understand! I'm in misery, I'm suffering!

TIHON. Go and tell that to someone else, not to me.... Go and ask the Orthodox, perhaps they'll give you some for Christ's sake, if they feel like it, but I'll only give bread for Christ's sake.

BORTSOV. You can rob those wretches yourself, I shan't.... I won't do it! I won't! Understand? *[Hits the bar-counter with his fist]* I won't. *[A pause.]* Hm... just wait.... *[Turns to the pilgrim women]* It's an idea, all the same, Orthodox ones! Spare five copecks! My inside asks for it. I'm ill!

FEDYA. Oh, you swindler, with your “spare five copecks.”
Won’t you have some water?

BORTSOV. How I am degrading myself! I don’t want it! I don’t want anything! I was joking!

MERIK. You won’t get it out of him, sir.... He’s a famous skinflint.... Wait, I’ve got a five-copeck piece somewhere.... We’ll have a glass between us — half each [*Searches in his pockets*] The devil... it’s lost somewhere.... Thought I heard it tinkling just now in my pocket.... No; no, it isn’t there, brother, it’s your luck! [*A pause.*]

BORTSOV. But if I can’t drink, I’ll commit a crime or I’ll kill myself.... What shall I do, my God! [*Looks through the door*] Shall I go out, then? Out into this darkness, wherever my feet take me....

MERIK. Why don’t you give him a sermon, you pilgrims? And you, Tihon, why don’t you drive him out? He hasn’t paid you for his night’s accommodation. Chuck him out! Eh, the people are cruel nowadays. There’s no gentleness or kindness in them.... A savage people! A man is drowning and they shout to him: “Hurry up and drown, we’ve got no time to look at you; we’ve got to go to work.” As to throwing him a rope — there’s no worry about that.... A rope would cost money.

SAVVA. Don’t talk, kind man!

MERIK. Quiet, old wolf! You’re a savage race! Herods! Sellers of your souls! [*To TIHON*] Come here, take off my boots! Look sharp now!

TIHON. Eh, he’s let himself go I [*Laughs*] Awful, isn’t it.

MERIK. Go on, do as you’re told! Quick now! [*Pause*] Do you hear me, or don’t you? Am I talking to you or the wall? [*Stands up*]

TIHON. Well... give over.

MERIK. I want you, you fleecer, to take the boots off me, a poor tramp.

TIHON. Well, well... don't get excited. Here have a glass.... Have a drink, now!

MERIK. People, what do I want? Do I want him to stand me vodka, or to take off my boots? Didn't I say it properly? *[To TIHON]* Didn't you hear me rightly? I'll wait a moment, perhaps you'll hear me then.

[There is excitement among the pilgrims and tramps, who half-raise themselves in order to look at TIHON and MERIK. They wait in silence.]

TIHON. The devil brought you here! *[Comes out from behind the bar]* What a gentleman! Come on now. *[Takes off MERIK'S boots]* You child of Cain...

MERIK. That's right. Put them side by side.... Like that... you can go now!

TIHON. *[Returns to the bar-counter]* You're too fond of being clever. You do it again and I'll turn you out of the inn! Yes! *[To BORTSOV, who is approaching]* You, again?

BORTSOV. Look here, suppose I give you something made of gold.... I will give it to you.

TIHON. What are you shaking for? Talk sense!

BORTSOV. It may be mean and wicked on my part, but what am I to do? I'm doing this wicked thing, not reckoning on what's to come.... If I was tried for it, they'd let me off. Take it, only on condition that you return it later, when I come back from town. I give it to you in front of these witnesses. You will be my witnesses! *[Takes a gold medallion out from the breast of his coat]* Here it is.... I ought to take the portrait out, but I've nowhere to put it; I'm wet all over.... Well, take the portrait, too! Only mind this... don't let your fingers touch that face.... Please... I was rude to you, my dear fellow, I was a fool, but forgive

me and... don't touch it with your fingers.... Don't look at that face with your eyes. *[Gives TIHON the medallion.]*

TIHON. *[Examining it]* Stolen property.... All right, then, drink.... *[Pours out vodka]* Confound you.

BORTSOV. Only don't you touch it... with your fingers. *[Drinks slowly, with feverish pauses.]*

TIHON. *[Opens the medallion]* Hm... a lady!... Where did you get hold of this?

MERIK. Let's have a look. *[Goes to the bar]* Let's see.

TIHON. *[Pushes his hand away]* Where are you going to? You look somewhere else!

FEDYA. *[Gets up and comes to TIHON]* I want to look too!

[Several of the tramps, etc., approach the bar and form a group. MERIK grips TIHON's hand firmly with both his, looks at the portrait, in the medallion in silence. A pause.]

MERIK. A pretty she-devil. A real lady....

FEDYA. A real lady.... Look at her cheeks, her eyes.... Open your hand, I can't see. Hair coming down to her waist.... It is lifelike! She might be going to say something.... *[Pause.]*

MERIK. It's destruction for a weak man. A woman like that gets a hold on one and... *[Waves his hand]* you're done for!

[KUSMA'S voice is heard. "Trrr.... Stop, you brutes!" Enter KUSMA.]

KUSMA. There stands an inn upon my way. Shall I drive or walk past it, say? You can pass your own father and not notice him, but you can see an inn in the dark a hundred versts away. Make way, if you believe in God! Hullo,

there! [Planks a five-copeck piece down on the counter]
A glass of real Madeira! Quick!

FEDYA. Oh, you devil!

TIHON. Don't wave your arms about, or you'll hit somebody.

KUSMA. God gave us arms to wave about. Poor sugary things, you're half-melted. You're frightened of the rain, poor delicate things. *[Drinks.]*

EFIMOVNA. You may well get frightened, good man, if you're caught on your way in a night like this. Now, thank God, it's all right, there are many villages and houses where you can shelter from the weather, but before that there weren't any. Oh, Lord, it was bad! You walk a hundred versts, and not only isn't there a village; or a house, but you don't even see a dry stick. So you sleep on the ground....

KUSMA. Have you been long on this earth, old woman?

EFIMOVNA. Over seventy years, little father.

KUSMA. Over seventy years! You'll soon come to crow's years. *[Looks at BORTSOV]* And what sort of a raisin is this? *[Staring at BORTSOV]* Sir! *[BORTSOV recognizes KUSMA and retires in confusion to a corner of the room, where he sits on a bench]* Semyon Sergejevitch! Is that you, or isn't it? Eh? What are you doing in this place? It's not the sort of place for you, is it?

BORTSOV. Be quiet!

MERIK. *[To KUSMA]* Who is it?

KUSMA. A miserable sufferer. *[Paces irritably by the counter]* Eh? In an inn, my goodness! Tattered! Drunk! I'm upset, brothers... upset.... *[To MERIK, in an undertone]* It's my master... our landlord. Semyon Sergejevitch and Mr. Bortsov.... Have you ever seen such a state? What does he look like? Just... it's the drink that brought him to