

Petty Bourgeois

(1901)

by Maxim Gorky



*Liberated from
capitalist control
to educate the masses
by
Socialist Stories*

CHARACTERS

Vasily Vasilyevich Bessemenov, 58 years old, a well-to-do house painter who is head of his guild

Akulina Ivanovna Bessemenova, 52 years old, his wife

Pyotr Bessemenov, 26 years old, his son, a student expelled from the university

Tatyana Bessemenova, 28 years old, his daughter, a schoolmistress

Nil, 27 years old, his foster-son, an engine-driver

Perchikhin, 50 years old, a distant relative, a bird-man

Polya, 21 years old, Perchikhin's daughter, a seamstress who works by the day for the Bessemenovs

Yelena Krivtsova, 24 years old, a jail warden's widow who has lodgings at the Bessemenovs'

Teterev, a choir singer
Shishkin, a student } lodgers at the Bessemenovs'

Tsvetayeva, 25 years old, a schoolmistress and friend of Tatyana's
Stepanida, the cook

An Old Woman

A Young Boy, a house painter's apprentice

A Doctor

The action takes place in a small provincial town.

SETTING

A room in the house of a prosperous working man. The right corner upstage is partitioned off; this narrows the back of the stage and forms a small room downstage right which is separated from the large one by a wooden archway hung with chintz curtains. A door in the back wall of the large room leads into the entrance hall and the other half of the house, where the lodgers' rooms and the kitchen are. To the left of this door stands a huge sideboard, and in the corner—a trunk. An old-fashioned clock hangs on the wall to the right of the door. Its pendulum, big as a moon, swings slowly in its glass case, and when all is quiet it can be heard to repeat in a cold, detached way: going-gone! going-gone! There are two doors in the left wall, one leading into the room of Bessemenov and his wife, the other into the room of their son Pyotr. Between these doors is a large white-tiled stove. An old sofa upholstered in oilcloth stands in front of the stove, and a big table at which the family dines and has tea stands in the middle of the room. Cheap straight-backed chairs are placed at painfully exact intervals around the walls. A china-closet downstage left contains fancy boxes, Easter eggs, a pair of bronze candlesticks, tea and soup spoons, a few wineglasses and silver goblets. A piano and an étagère with sheet music on it stand against the wall facing the audience in the small room separated by the archway. One corner of this room is taken up by a philodendron in a tub. In the right wall are two windows with potted plants on the sills. A couch is placed under the windows, and beside the couch, downstage, there is a little table.

ACT I

About five o'clock in the afternoon. An autumn twilight glances in at the windows. It is almost dark in the big room. Tatyana, half-reclining on the couch, is reading a book. Polya is sitting at the table sewing.

T a t y a n a (*reading*): "The moon came up. And it was hard to believe that such a sad little moon could throw so much tender, silvery-blue light upon the world." (*Drops the book into her lap.*) It's too dark to read.

P o l y a : Shall I light the lamp?

T a t y a n a : Don't bother. I'm tired of reading.

P o l y a : How nicely he writes! So simply and ... touchingly! Makes you want to cry. (*Pause.*) I'm dying to know how it ends. Do you suppose they'll get married?

T a t y a n a (*vexed*): What difference does it make?

P o l y a : I could never love a man like him.

T a t y a n a : Why not?

P o l y a : He's too tiresome. Always complaining. And sort of—shilly-shally. A man ought to know what he wants.

T a t y a n a (*softly*): Does Nil?

P o l y a : He certainly does.

T a t y a n a : What does he want?

P o l y a : I can't explain—not in the simple way he does. But I know one thing: he'll make it unpleasant for wicked, greedy people. He hates them.

T a t y a n a : Who is bad and who is good?

P o l y a : He can tell you. (*Tatyana says nothing, and does not look at Polya, who, with a smile, takes the book out of her lap.*) It's awfully well written. She's so attractive—so simple and straightforward, and without any airs. When you read about a woman like that, it makes you seem better yourself.

T a t y a n a : You're very naive and amusing, Polya. Stories of this sort simply annoy me. There never was a girl like that. Or a house, or a river, or a moon, either. It's all made up. Books never paint life as it really is—my life and yours, for instance.

P o l y a : They write about what's interesting. As if there was anything interesting about the way we live!

T a t y a n a (*irritably, ignoring what she says*): I often get the

impression that the people who write books hate me and want to pick a quarrel with me. They seem to say: "This is better than you think, and that's worse."

Polya: It seems to me all writers must be good, kind men. What wouldn't I give to set eyes on a writer!

Tatyana (*musingly*): They never describe the nasty, irksome things as I see them. They do something to them—enlarge them—make them seem tragic. And as for the good things—they just make them up. Nobody ever makes love the way the books describe it. And life isn't tragic at all. It just flows on quietly and monotonously, like a big murky river. Your eyes get tired from watching it, and your mind gets so dull that you don't even bother to ask yourself what makes it flow.

Polya (*lost in reverie*): I would love to see a writer. All the while you were reading, I kept thinking to myself: what's he like? young? old? dark?

Tatyana: Who?

Polya: The author.

Tatyana: He's dead.

Polya: What a pity! Has he been dead long? Was he young when he died?

Tatyana: Middle-aged. He drank.

Polya: Poor thing. (*Pause.*) What makes clever people drink? Take that lodger of yours, the choir singer—he's clever and he drinks. I wonder why?

Tatyana: Because he's sick and tired of everything.

Pyotr (*coming out of his room looking the worse for sleep*): It's dark as the grave in here. Who's sitting over there?

Polya: Me. And Tatyana Vasilyevna.

Pyotr: Why don't you light the lamp?

Polya: We're enjoying the twilight.

Pyotr: The smell of icon oil seeps into my room from the old man's room. Maybe that's why I dreamt I was swimming down a gummy sort of river. It was hard going, and I lost my bearings—couldn't make out the shore-line. Bits of things kept floating past, but the minute I caught on to them they crumbled because they were rotten. A crazy dream. (*Walks back and forth whistling.*) Time for tea, isn't it?

Polya (*lighting the lamp*): I'll bring it in. (*Goes out.*)

Pyotr: Somehow this house of ours gets particularly dull and dreary in the evening. All these antediluvian things seem to swell up and get bigger and heavier and fill up space until

there's no air left to breathe. (*Hammers on the sideboard with his fist.*) Take this hippopotamus—it's been standing in one and the same place for eighteen years. Eighteen years! They say life goes rocketing ahead, but this sideboard hasn't budged an inch since the day it was put here. I kept banging my head against it when I was a little chap and I still keep banging into it morally, so to speak. An idiotic piece of furniture. More of a symbol than a sideboard.

T a t y a n a : How tiresome you are, Pyotr! You ought not to live the way you do.

P y o t r : What way?

T a t y a n a : Never going anywhere. Except upstairs to see Yelena. You go there every evening, and that's a great worry to mother and father. (*Pyotr doesn't answer, just keeps walking up and down and whistling.*) You can't imagine how tired I get these days! The noise and disorder at school wear me out. Here at home it's quiet and orderly, although it's noisier since Yelena moved in. I tire so easily. And the winter holiday is still a long way off. November . . . December. . . (*The clock strikes six.*)

B e s s e m e n o v (*putting his head through the door of his room*): Chattering away, chattering away, and I don't suppose you've written that petition yet.

P y o t r : I have so.

B e s s e m e n o v : You certainly took your time about it! Tck, tck, tck. (*Disappears.*)

T a t y a n a : What petition?

P y o t r : Suing merchant Sizov for seventeen rubles fifty kopeks—the cost of painting the roof of his shed.

A k u l i n a I v a n o v n a (*enters with another lamp*): Raining again. (*Goes to the sideboard, takes out the tea things and lays the table.*) It's chilly in here. The stove's been lighted, but it's chilly just the same. The house is old and full of cracks. Oh, Lordy, Lordy! Your father's pettish again, children. Says his back aches. He's getting old. And everything's going wrong—so many cares and expenses!

T a t y a n a (*to her brother*): Were you at Yelena's last night?

P y o t r : Ye-es.

T a t y a n a : Was it lively?

P y o t r : The usual thing. We drank tea, sang songs, got into an argument. . .

T a t y a n a : Who against whom?

P y o t r : Nil and Shishkin against me.

Tat'yana: Naturally.

Pyotr: Nil grew ecstatic, as usual. He gets on my nerves. Prophet of courage and love of life! Absurd. To hear him talk you'd think this uncertain life of ours was a sort of Uncle Sam who at any minute would shower blessings on us. Shishkin expounded on the beneficial effects of milk and the harmful effects of tobacco. And he accused me of having a bourgeois outlook.

Tat'yana: The same old thing.

Pyotr: Quite.

Tat'yana: Do you like Yelena very much?

Pyotr: Not a bad sort—cheery and attractive.

Akulina Ivanovna: A giddy creature, if you ask me. She does nothing but fritter her time away. Company every blessed evening—sipping and munching, singing and dancing. She'd do better to go out and buy herself a wash-stand—washes in a basin and splashes the water all over the floor. The boards'll rot.

Tat'yana: I went to a social at the club last night. Somov was there—you know him, member of the Town Council and patron of our school. He barely nodded to me—barely nodded, mind you, but when Judge Romanov's mistress came into the room he rushed over to her and bowed and kissed her hand as if she were the governor's wife!

Akulina Ivanovna: Think of that, now! Instead of taking the arm of an honest girl and walking proudly down the hall with her for everybody to see!

Tat'yana (*to her brother*): It's the limit! In the eyes of such people a schoolmistress deserves less respect than a loose, painted woman!

Pyotr: Forget it. It's beneath you. As for that woman, she may be loose, but she doesn't paint.

Akulina Ivanovna: How do you know? Have you licked her cheek? A fine thing! Your sister's insulted and you stand up for the woman who's the cause of it!

Pyotr: Please, mother!

Tat'yana: It's impossible to talk in front of mother. (*Heavy steps are heard in the hall.*)

Akulina Ivanovna: Tut-tut! None of your lip! Instead of marching up and down like that, Pyotr, you might carry in the samovar. Stepanida's been complaining it's too heavy for her.

Stepanida (*brings in the samovar, puts it on the floor beside the table, straightens up, and says to her mistress in a*

gasping voice): Like it or lump it, I'm telling you once again I've not got the strength to carry such a weight. My pins won't hold up under it.

Akulina Ivanovna: I suppose you'd like us to hire somebody special to carry in the samovar?

Stepanida: That's your business. Let the choir singer carry it in—won't do him no harm. Pyotr Vasilyevich, be so kind as to lift it up on the table. I just can't.

Pyotr: Here. Umph!

Stepanida: Thanks. (*Goes out.*)

Akulina Ivanovna: That's an idea, Pyotr; you speak to the choir singer. Let him carry in the samovar. It really—

Tatyana (*sighing*): Oh, for goodness' sake, mother!

Pyotr: Perhaps I ought to ask him to fetch the water, scrub the floors, clean the chimney, and wash the clothes while he's at it?

Akulina Ivanovna (*with a disparaging wave of her hand*): Now why should you run on like that? All those things get done in good time and without his help. But as for the samovar—

Pyotr: Every evening you raise the vital question of who is to bring in the samovar. Nothing will be done about it until you hire a man-of-all-work, mark my word!

Akulina Ivanovna: What do we need a man for? Your father looks after the house and yard himself.

Pyotr: That's what I call being stingy. And it's not pretty to be stingy when you've got all that money in the bank.

Akulina Ivanovna: Shh! Hold your tongue! If your father hears you, he'll give you a taste of money in the bank! Was it *you* put it in?

Pyotr: Listen, mother—

Tatyana (*jumping up*): Oh, Pyotr, must you? I can't stand it another minute!

Pyotr (*going up to her*): Sorry. A fellow gets drawn into these squabbles before he knows it.

Akulina Ivanovna: A fine thing to say! As if it was a crime to talk to your mother!

Pyotr: The same thing, day after day! It damps a person's spirits. Makes him feel as if he was lined with soot. Or rust.

Akulina Ivanovna (*calling*): Father! Come and have tea!

Pyotr: When my time's up I'll go back to the university

and never come home for more than a week at a time, as I used to. Three years in Moscow made me forget what life at home was like, with all its fuss over nothing. It's wonderful to live alone, not to be under your parents' roof.

Tat'yana: Unfortunately, I have nowhere to go.

Pyotr: I told you to go away and study.

Tat'yana: Why should I? I don't want to study—I want to live. To live! Can't you understand?

Akulina Ivanovna (*burning her hand as she takes the teapot off the samovar*): Ouch! Devil take it!

Tat'yana (*to her brother*): I don't know what it means to really live. I can't even imagine what it's like. How does one go about living?

Pyotr (*pensively*): It's not easy, and you've got to be cautious.

Bessemenov (*comes out of his room, inspects his son and daughter, sits down at the table*): Have you called the lodgers?

Akulina Ivanovna: Call them, Pyotr.

(Pyotr goes out, Tat'yana walks over to the table.)

Bessemenov: Humph! Lump sugar again. How many times have I told you—?

Tat'yana: Oh, what difference does it make, father?

Bessemenov: I'm not talking to you, I'm talking to your mother. Nothing makes any difference to you, I know that.

Akulina Ivanovna: We only bought a pound, father. There's a whole head of sugar untouched—we didn't have time to break it up. Don't be angry.

Bessemenov: I'm not angry, I'm just saying lump sugar is too heavy and not sweet enough, which means there's no saving in it. You must always buy head sugar and break it into pieces yourself. Crumbs will be left, and the crumbs can be used in cooking. The sugar itself is light and very sweet. (*To his daughter.*) What are you sighing and pulling a face about?

Tat'yana: Nothing.

Bessemenov: Nothing? Then there's no reason to sigh. Or perhaps it's painful for you to listen to what your father has to say? It's not for my own sake I talk, but for the sake of you young folk. I've lived my life; yours is still ahead of you, and when I look at you I can't help wondering how you're ever going to get on in this world. What's your aim? You don't like

our way of living, I can see that plain enough, but what new way have you thought of? That's the question.

T a t y a n a : Father! Do you know how many times you've said the same thing?

B e s s e m e n o v : And I'll say it again, and I'll keep on saying it over and over until I'm in my grave. Because I have no peace—all on your account. A great mistake I made when I gave you an education. Here's Pyotr expelled from the university, and you—an old maid.

T a t y a n a : I have a job, I—

B e s s e m e n o v : So I've heard, but what's the good of it? Nobody needs those twenty-five rubles you earn—not even you. Get married and settle down like a respectable girl ought to, and I'll give you *fifty* rubles a month.

A k u l i n a I v a n o v n a (*throughout the old man's talk she has been fidgeting nervously, now and then attempting to put in a word; at last she says gently*): Would you like some cheese-cake, father? There's some left over from dinner.

B e s s e m e n o v (*turns to her, glares at her a moment, then gives a wily smile*): Very well. Bring in your cheese-cake, we'll have some. (*Akulina Ivanovna hastens to the sideboard and Bessemenov turns to his daughter.*) See how your mother holds me off? Like a goose keeping the dogs off her goslings. Trembles all over for fear something I say may hurt your feelings. Ah, the bird-man! Turned up again after all this time!

P e r c h i k h i n (*appears in the doorway with Polya standing silently behind him*): Peace be unto the greyhaired master of this house, his handsome wife and his respected offspring, now and forevermore.

B e s s e m e n o v : So you've been drinking again?

P e r c h i k h i n : Drowning my troubles.

B e s s e m e n o v : What troubles?

P e r c h i k h i n (*bows to everyone as he talks*): Sold a goldfinch today that sang with a yodel. Had it for three years, and went and sold it. That was a low-down thing to do, and so I took comfort in my cups. Too bad about that birdie. Got used to it. Loved it.

(*Polya smiles and nods to her father.*)

B e s s e m e n o v : Then what did you sell it for?

P e r c h i k h i n (*holds on to the backs of the chairs as he makes his way round the table*): Got a good price for it.

Akulina Ivanovna: What's money to you? You just throw it away.

Perchikhin (*sitting down*): True. Can't hold on to money. True enough.

Bessemenov: And so there was no reason to sell it after all.

Perchikhin: Yes, there was. The birdie was going blind. It would have died soon.

Bessemenov (*chuckling*): So you aren't quite the fool you look.

Perchikhin: You think it was cleverness made me do it? Oh, no—it was the vileness of my nature.

(*Enter Pyotr and Teterev.*)

Tatyana: Where's Nil?

Pyotr: He and Shishkin have gone to a rehearsal.

Bessemenov: Where's the play to be given?

Pyotr: In the riding hall. To the soldiers.

Perchikhin (*to Teterev*): My respects to God's piper. Shall we go and catch titmice, you and me?

Teterev: Let's. When?

Perchikhin: Tomorrow if you like.

Teterev: Not tomorrow. I've got to sing at a funeral.

Perchikhin: Then let's go before mass.

Teterev: That suits me better. Call for me. Akulina Ivanovna, was there anything left over from dinner? Some porridge, or something?

Akulina Ivanovna: There was. Polya, go fetch it.

(*Polya goes out.*)

Teterev: Thank you for that. Today, as you are aware, a funeral and a wedding deprived me of my dinner.

Akulina Ivanovna: I know.

(*Pyotr takes up a glass of tea and goes through the archway into the little room, followed by the piercing eye of his father and the hostile eye of Teterev. For a few seconds all eat and drink in silence.*)

Bessemenov: You must be making a lot of money this month, Terenty Khrisanfovich. Not a day passes but somebody dies.

T e t e r e v : Not bad. A streak of good luck, you might say.

B e s s e m e n o v : And lots of weddings.

T e t e r e v : True, they're marrying hard this month.

B e s s e m e n o v : Save up your money and get married yourself.

T e t e r e v : No, thank you.

(Tatyana joins her brother and they begin talking in undertones.)

P e r c h i k h i n : That's right, don't get married. Marriage is not for queer ducks like us. Let's go and catch bullfinches.

T e t e r e v : Let's.

P e r c h i k h i n : A glorious thing, that bullfinch-catching! Down comes the first snow, decking out the earth like a priest at Eastertide. Everything pure and shining and still as still. If it's sunny in the bargain—ah! then your heart fairly leaps up with joy! The autumn leaves still glinting with gold, the boughs silver with snow, and suddenly in the midst of all that loveliness—whir! whir!—out of the clear sky comes a flock of bright red birds that perch like poppies on the branches—chirp! chirp! chirp! Sweet little birdies, fat little birdies, strutting about like brigadier-generals, peeping and chirping—the prettiest sight you ever saw! Makes you want to be a birdie yourself for the joy of playing in the snow with them, it does indeed.

B e s s e m e n o v : The bullfinch is a foolish bird.

P e r c h i k h i n : I'm foolish myself.

T e t e r e v : A pretty picture you painted.

A k u l i n a I v a n o v n a *(to Perchikhin)*: You've got the mind of a two-year-old.

P e r c h i k h i n : I do love to catch birds. Could anything be prettier than a song-bird?

B e s s e m e n o v : It's a sin to catch birds, don't you know that?

P e r c h i k h i n : I do, but I can't help it. It's the only thing I love to do or know how to do, and any job is made better by loving it, seems to me.

B e s s e m e n o v : Any job?

P e r c h i k h i n : Any at all.

B e s s e m e n o v : And what if you love slipping other people's things into your own pocket?

P e r c h i k h i n : That's not a job; that's thieving.

Bessemenov: Hm. Maybe.

Akulina Ivanovna (*yawning*): Oh-ho-ho! Very tiresome. Funny how long and tiresome the evenings are. You might cheer us up by bringing your guitar and singing something, Terenty Khrisanfovich.

Teterrev (*placidly*): On agreeing to become your lodger, respected Akulina Ivanovna, I did not take upon myself the obligation of supplying you with entertainment.

Akulina Ivanovna (*not catching it*): What's that?

Teterrev: That's that.

Bessemenov (*surprised and exasperated*): I can't understand you, Terenty Khrisanfovich. You're not worth your salt, if you'll excuse my saying it, but you put on the airs of a fine gentleman. Where do you get them?

Teterrev (*placidly*): I was born with them.

Bessemenov: Just what are you so proud of, if you don't mind telling me?

Akulina Ivanovna: He's just showing off. What's there for a man like him to be proud of?

Tatyana: Mother!

Akulina Ivanovna (*with a start*): Eh? What's that?

(Tatyana shakes her head reproachfully.)

Akulina Ivanovna: Have I said something I oughtn't to again? Ah me! Very well, I'll keep my mouth shut if I must!

Bessemenov (*offended*): Watch what you say, mother. There's educated people here. They'll criticize anything and anybody, what with all the learning they've got. You and me are just old and foolish.

Akulina Ivanovna (*placatingly*): That's all right. They really do know a lot.

Perchikhin: It's true what you said, brother. You said it in fun, but it's true just the same.

Bessemenov: I said nothing in fun.

Perchikhin: But old folk really are foolish.

Bessemenov: Especially you.

Perchikhin: I don't count. If you ask me, there wouldn't be no foolishness if there weren't no old folk. An old man thinks the way a damp tree burns—more smoke than fire.

Teterrev (*smiling*): Right you are!

(*Polya gazes affectionately at her father and strokes his shoulder.*)

Bessemenov (*sullenly*): Humph. Well, go on with your fabrications.

(*Pyotr and Tatyana stop talking and watch Perchikhin with a smile on their lips.*)

Perchikhin (*vivaciously*): Old folk are stubborn—that's the main thing. An old man knows he's wrong, and that he don't understand nothing, but he won't admit it. He's too proud. "Is it possible," thinks he, "to have lived all these years and worn out forty pairs of breeches, and still not know nothing? Oh, no!" It's too hurtful to admit a thing like that, so he goes on pounding his fist and shouting: "I'm old! I'm right!" But it don't do no good. His mind's gone groggy. As for the young—their minds are light and quick.

Bessemenov (*rudely*): A liar if there ever was one! But look, if we're so foolish, oughtn't we to be taught sense?

Perchikhin: Oh, no! What's the good of flattening bullets against a rock?

Bessemenov: Wait, don't interrupt—I'm older than you. Here's what I say: why is it the ones with light, quick minds run away from us, the old folk, and hide in corners and make faces at us and don't even want to talk to us? Think that over. And I'll think it over, too—all by myself, beings as I'm too foolish for this company. (*Pushes back his chair with a loud noise, goes to his room and says from the doorway*): Too foolish for my educated offspring.

(*Pause.*)

Perchikhin (*to Pyotr and Tatyana*): What did you have to go and hurt your father's feelings for?

Polya (*smiling*): It's you who did that, father.

Perchikhin: Me? I never hurt a flea!

Akulina Ivanovna: Oh, Lordy, Lordy! What's the matter with us? Why did you offend the old man? You're all so puffed up and peevish. And he's old. All he needs is peace and quiet, and to be paid respect. After all, he's your father. I'll go and speak to him. You wash up the tea-things, Polya.

Tatyana (*going over to the table*): Why should father be angry with us?

Akulina Ivanovna (*from the door*): Because it's so thoughtful of you to avoid him all the time, clever girl!

(*As Polya washes the dishes Teterev puts his elbows on the table and gazes at her heavy-eyed. Perchikhin goes over to Pyotr and sits down at the little table. Tatyana goes slowly to her own room.*)

Polya (*to Teterev*): What makes you look at me like ... like that?

Teterev: Nothing in particular.

Perchikhin: What you thinking about, Pyotr?

Pyotr: How to get away from here.

Perchikhin: There's something I've been wanting to ask you for a long time. What's "sewerage"?

Pyotr: What do you care? I can't be bothered explaining—it would take too long to make you understand.

Perchikhin: Do *you* understand?

Pyotr: Of course.

Perchikhin (*glancing suspiciously into his face*): Hm.

Polya: I wonder what's keeping Nil Vasilyevich so long.

Teterev: What remarkable eyes you've got!

Polya: You told me that yesterday.

Teterev: And I'll tell you tomorrow.

Polya: Why?

Teterev: I don't know. Perhaps you think I'm in love with you?

Polya: Heavens, no! I don't think anything.

Teterev: Don't you? Too bad. Try thinking.

Polya: About what?

Teterev: Oh, anything—why I keep forcing myself upon you, for instance. Think it over and tell me your answer.

Polya: You're very odd.

Teterev: I know. You've told me that before. And so I'll tell you once again: go away from here. You mustn't stay in this house. Go away.

Pyotr: Is this a love scene? Had I better withdraw?

Teterev: Don't bother. I class you among the inanimate objects.

Pyotr: Rather flat.

Polya: (*to Teterev*): How scrappy you are!

(Teterev walks away and begins to listen attentively to what Pyotr and Perchikhin are saying. Tatyana comes out of her room with a shawl wrapped round her and sits down at the piano.)

Tatyana *(as she leafs through the music)*: Hasn't Nil come yet?

Polya: No.

Perchikhin: Not very cheery in this house.... Here's another thing I wanted to ask you, Pyotr: not long ago I read in the paper like as if the English had built a flying boat. Looks like any other boat, but if you get in it and press a certain button—zing!—up it goes like a bird to the very clouds and carries people goodness knows where. They say lots of Englishmen have disappeared this way. Is it true, Pyotr?

Pyotr: Nonsense.

Perchikhin: But it was in the paper.

Pyotr: Lots of nonsense gets in the paper.

Perchikhin: Does it, now?

(Tatyana plays something soft and sad.)

Pyotr *(tetchily)*: Yes, it does.

Perchikhin: Don't be angry. I don't see why all you young folk should be so uppity with us back numbers. You don't even want to talk to us. That's not nice, is it?

Pyotr: What next?

Perchikhin: Why, the next thing is: it's time for me to be going, being as you're sick of me. Are you going home soon, Polya?

Polya: As soon as I tidy up. *(Leaves the room; Teterev follows her with his eyes.)*

Perchikhin: Have you forgot, Pyotr, how you and me used to catch titmice together? You had a soft spot in your heart for me those days.

Pyotr: Even now I—

Perchikhin: Oh, it's clear how you feel now.

Pyotr: I was fond of gingerbread and lollipops in those days, but they make me sick now.

Perchikhin: I see. Eh, Terenty, shall we go and have a mug of beer?

Teterev: I'm not in the mood.

Perchikhin: Then I'll go alone. Nobody's grumpy in the

pub. Nobody puts on airs in the pub. A man could die of the blues with you folk, and it's not to your credit to say so. You don't do nothing, don't want nothing. What if we have a game of cards? There's just four of us. (*Teterev looks at Perchikhin and smiles.*) Don't feel like it? Just as you say. So it's good-bye. (*Walking up to Teterev he goes through the motions of tossing down a drink.*) Come along?

T e t e r e v : No.

(*Perchikhin gives a hopeless wave of his hand and goes out. Silence. The notes of the piece Tatyana is picking out on the piano sound very distinctly. Pyotr, who is lying on the couch, listens and whistles the tune. Teterev gets up and paces the floor. Out in the hall a pail or a samovar-pipe falls with a crash, and Stepanida is heard to say: "Who let you in here?"*)

T a t y a n a (*going on with her playing*): I wonder why Nil doesn't come?

P y o t r : Nobody comes.

T a t y a n a : Are you waiting for Yelena?

P y o t r : For anybody.

T e t e r e v : No one will come and see you.

T a t y a n a : You're always so morbid.

T e t e r e v : No one will come, for you have nothing to offer anyone.

P y o t r : Thus spake Terenty-the-Oracle.

T e t e r e v (*insistently*): Has it ever occurred to you that that "back number," the tipsy bird-man, is alive, body and soul, whereas you two, who are just on the threshold of life, are already half-dead?

P y o t r : And you? What might be your appraisal of yourself?

T a t y a n a (*getting up off the piano stool*): Oh, stop it! The same thing over and over! You've had this out before, you know.

P y o t r : I like your style, Terenty Khrisanfovich. And I like the role you play—the role of our judge. But why have you chosen it? You always sound as if you were administering extreme unction to us.

T e t e r e v : Extreme unction is not administered by such as me.

P y o t r : That's not the point. What I wanted to say was that you dislike us.

T e t e r e v : Very much.

P y o t r : Commendable candour. Thanks.

(Enter Polya.)

T e t e r e v : You're welcome.

P o l y a : To what?

T a t y a n a : Insults.

T e t e r e v : The truth.

P o l y a : I want to go to the theatre. Won't someone come with me?

T e t e r e v : I will.

P y o t r : What's on tonight?

P o l y a : *Second Youth*. Won't you come, too, Tatyana Vasilyevna?

T a t y a n a : No, I'm not going to the theatre this winter. I'm sick of it. I can't stand those melodramas, with all their shooting and shouting and sobbing. (*Teterev strikes a key of the piano with one finger, calling forth a sad clear note.*) It's all so false. Life twists people into knots without any noise and shouting. Without any tears. Imperceptibly.

P y o t r (*morosely*): They dramatize the tortures of love, but nobody gives a damn for the drama of a man torn between duty and desire.

(*Teterev, smiling, goes on striking bass notes.*)

P o l y a (*smiling self-consciously*): I'm just mad on the theatre. Take don César de Bazan, the Spanish grandee—he's simply wonderful! That's my idea of a hero.

T e t e r e v : Am I like him?

P o l y a : Heavens! Not the least little bit!

T e t e r e v (*chuckling*): What a pity!

T a t y a n a : It makes me sick to hear actors make love on the stage. It's never like that in real life. Simply never!

P o l y a : Well, I'm going. Are you coming, Terenty Khrisanfovich?

T e t e r e v (*stops striking the keys*): Not now—after being told I don't resemble a Spanish grandee.

(*Polya goes out laughing.*)

P y o t r (*watching her go*): What's a grandee to her?

T e t e r e v : She finds something wholesome in a grandee.

T a t y a n a : She likes his fine clothes.

T e t e r e v : And his cheerfulness. Good people are always cheerful; rascals rarely are.

P y o t r : According to your theory, you must be the greatest rascal on earth.

T e t e r e v (*again bringing forth soft rich notes from the piano*): I'm just a drunk. Do you know why there are so many drunks in this Russia of ours? Drinking makes life easier. We Russians love a drunk. We hate innovators and people who are daring, but we love a drunk. That's because it's easier to love something petty and worthless than something great and good.

P y o t r (*pacing the floor*): "This Russia of ours"! How strange it sounds! Is Russia really ours? Is it mine? Is it yours? Who are "we"? What are "we"?

T e t e r e v (*singing*): "Free-winged birds are we. . . ."*

T a t y a n a : For heaven's sake, stop pounding on the piano, Terenty Khrisanfovich! It sounds like the tolling of a funeral bell!

T e t e r e v (*continuing*): I'm playing an accompaniment to my mood.

(*Tatyana flounces out into the hall.*)

P y o t r (*reflectively*): Do stop it, it really does get on one's nerves. . . . It seems to me that when a Frenchman or an Englishman says "France" or "England," the word means something real, something concrete and comprehensible. But when I say "Russia," it means nothing at all to me. I'm quite incapable of giving it any clear meaning. (*Pause. Teter ev goes on sounding notes.*) There are lots of words we use by force of habit without taking stock of their meaning—"life," for instance. "My life." What meaning is hidden in those two words? (*He paces the floor in silence. Teter ev softly strikes the keys, filling the room with moaning sound, while he watches Pyotr with a smile frozen on his face.*) What the dickens ever made me get mixed up in that student movement? I went to the university to study, and that's what I was doing. . . . For God's sake, stop your hammering! . . . I was quite unaware that any "regime" was keeping me from studying Roman law—quite unaware of it, to be perfectly frank. But I was aware of the pressure of my comrades, and I yielded to it. And so two years of my life have been struck out.

* A line from Pushkin's poem, "The Prisoner."—Tr.

That's what I call violence—violence done to me; can you deny it? I dreamed of completing my studies, becoming a lawyer, getting a job, reading, studying life—in a word, of living!

T e t e r e v (*prompting him ironically*): To the delight of your parents, and the benefit of church and state, as befits a humble servant of society.

P y o t r: Society? That's the one thing I loathe! It keeps raising the demands made on the individual without giving him an opportunity to develop normally and unimpeded. Society, in the person of my comrades, shouted at me: "A man must be, above all other things, a citizen!" Well, I tried being a citizen, damn them! I have no desire and am under no obligation to submit to the demands of society! I'm an individual, and an individual must be free. I say, stop that damned pounding!

T e t e r e v: I'm accompanying you, most respected bourgeois who made the mistake of being an honest citizen for—how long?—half an hour? (*Noise out in the hall.*)

P y o t r (*irritably*): Don't go too far!

(*With a mocking glance at Pyotr, Teterev goes on striking the keys. Enter Nil, Yelena, Shishkin, Tsvetayeva, and, a bit behind them, Tatyana.*)

Y e l e n a: What's the meaning of the funeral bell? Good evening, Monster. Good evening, Lawyer—or rather, would-be Lawyer. What are you doing here?

P y o t r (*sullenly*): Talking nonsense.

T e t e r e v: And I am tolling the knell of him who has taken leave of life before his time.

N i l (*to Teterev*): Will you do something for me? (*Whispers something in his ear. Teterev nods.*)

T s v e t a y e v a: It was a marvellous rehearsal, simply marvellous!

Y e l e n a: You should have seen how fiercely Lieutenant Bykov flirted with me tonight, Mr. Lawyer!

S h i s h k i n: Bykov's an ass.

P y o t r: What makes you think I care who flirts with you?

Y e l e n a: Oh dear, I didn't know you were so out of sorts.

T s v e t a y e v a: Pyotr Vasilyevich is always out of sorts.

S h i s h k i n: He's that sort.

Y e l e n a: And are you, too, in your usual mood, Tanya? Gloomy as an autumn night?

Tat'yana: Yes, I am.

Yelena: And I'm feeling ever so gay. Why is it I'm always so gay?

Nil: I can't answer that. I'm always gay myself.

Tsvetayeva: So am I.

Shishkin: I'm not *always*, but—

Tat'yana: —all the time.

Yelena: Was that an attempt at being funny, Tanya? Good for you! Tell me this, Monster, why am I always so gay?

Teterev: Oh, thou embodiment of Frivolity!

Yelena: What's that? Very well, I'll remember those words the next time you make love to me!

Nil: I wouldn't mind having something to eat. I've got to go to work in a little while.

Tsvetayeva: And work all night long? Poor dear!

Nil: All night and all day. Twenty-four hours. I think I'll go into the kitchen and pay my respects to Stepanida.

Tat'yana: I'll tell her to feed you. (*Goes out with Nil.*)

Teterev (*to Yelena*): Look here, young lady, am I too supposed to fall in love with you?

Yelena: Yes, you are, you brazen man! Yes, you are, you grouchy monster. You are, you are, you are!

Teterev (*backing away from her*): Then I will. It won't be hard. I was once in love with two young girls and a married woman at the same time.

Yelena (*creeping up on him threateningly*): And what came of it?

Teterev: Nothing. All in vain, alas!

Yelena (*under her breath, nodding in the direction of Pyotr*): What went on between you two? (*Teterev laughs. They talk quietly together.*)

Shishkin (*to Pyotr*): Could you let me have a ruble for three or four days? My boots have burst open.

Pyotr: Here. You owe me seven already.

Shishkin: I haven't forgotten.

Tsvetayeva: Pyotr Vasilyevich! Why don't you take part in our plays?

Pyotr: I can't act.

Shishkin: Do you think we can?

Tsvetayeva: You could at least come to the rehearsals. The soldiers are just darlings. There's one called Shirkov—he's

just too funny for words. So sweet and innocent, with such a shy smile. And so adorably stupid.

Pyotr (*watching Yelena out of the corner of his eye*): How you can find anything interesting in a person who's stupid, is more than I can see!

Shishkin: Shirkov's not the only one—

Pyotr: I don't doubt the whole company's just as bad.

Tsvetayeva: How can you say such a thing? What makes you so nasty? Is that what you call being aristocratic?

Teterev (*suddenly speaking in a loud voice*): I'm incapable of pitying others.

Yelena: Sh!

Pyotr: As you know, I'm a member of the middle-class.

Shishkin: Which makes it all the harder to understand your attitude towards the common people.

Teterev: Nobody ever pitied me.

Yelena (*under her breath*): But you ought to return good for evil.

Teterev: I have nothing to return.

Yelena: Not so loud.

Pyotr (*listening to what Yelena and Teterev are saying*): Why should you pretend to feel sympathy for the common people?

Tsvetayeva: We don't pretend. We share with them whatever we have.

Shishkin: It's not even that. We just find pleasure in being with them. They're unaffected. And there's something wholesome about them, like the air in the woods. Bookworms like us need to fill our lungs with fresh air every once in a while.

Pyotr (*insistently, with suppressed annoyance*): You like deceiving yourselves. You have unacknowledged motives for making up to these soldiers. It's absurd, if you don't mind my bluntness. To seek fresh air among soldiers is . . . er . . . begging your pardon. . . .

Tsvetayeva: But not only among soldiers. We give performances at the railway depot, too.

Pyotr: It's all the same. What I'm saying is that you just deceive yourselves when you try to make some lofty "cause" out of all your fuss and bluster. You're convinced you are helping to develop the individual. Sheer self-deception. Tomorrow some officer or foreman will come along and give your "individual" a sock in the jaw that will knock everything out of his head that you've put into it—if you've really put anything into it.

Tsvetayeva: It's very discouraging to hear you say such things.

Shishkin (*glumly*): And very disagreeable. It's not the first time I've heard you say them, and I like them less each time. One of these days you and I are going to have a good talk, Pyotr—once and for all!

Pyotr (*in a sarcastic drawl*): You alarm me. But I'm dying to have that talk.

Yelena (*vehemently*): What makes you like that? (*To the others*): Why should he want people to think him a beast?

Pyotr: Sheer affectation on my part.

Tsvetayeva: It really is. You're just trying to be different. All men try to be different in front of women. Some of them make themselves out to be pessimists, others Mephistopheles. But really they're just a lot of lazybones.

Teterev: Short and sweet. Very well put.

Tsvetayeva: Perhaps you're fishing for compliments? You'll have a long wait. I know you too well.

Teterev: Which is more than I can say about myself. By the way, if you know so much, maybe you know this: ought one to return good for evil? In other words, do you consider good and evil to be coins of equal value?

Tsvetayeva: Always twisting things into paradoxes!

Shishkin: Wait, don't interrupt. That's an interesting question. I for one am always ready to listen to Teterev. Give him time and he's sure to drive a nail of truth into your head. Most of us think very ordinary thoughts—as flat and worn as old coins.

Pyotr: You're too generous. You credit others with your own virtues.

Shishkin: Come, come, why shouldn't we face the truth? We ought to be honest even in little things. As for me, I frankly confess I've never expressed a single original idea, and oh! how I long to!

Teterev: You've just done it.

Shishkin (*briskly*): What's that? Do you mean it?

Teterev: I do. You've just expressed one, but I'll let you guess what it was.

Shishkin: It slipped out by chance.

Teterev: One can't be original on purpose. I've tried it.

Yelena: Let's hear what you have to say about good and evil, you Inquisitor, you.

Shishkin: Let off some philosophical steam.

Teterev (*striking a pose*): Worthy bipeds! You are greatly mistaken when you say you must return good for evil. Evil is a quality you are born with, and therefore it is of little value. Good is something you yourselves have acquired, and at so great a price that it has become rare and dear and lovelier by far than anything else on earth. Hence the conclusion that there is no point to, and no profit in, returning good for evil. Good must be returned only for good. Never must you give more than you receive, if you would not develop in others the instinct of the usurer. Man is a greedy creature. Once having received more than his due, he will demand more and more ever after. Nor must you give him less than his due, for if you once cheat him (man, mind, never forgets an injury!), he will proclaim that you are bankrupt. He will lose all respect for you and the next time, instead of paying you the good you have earned, he will offer you alms. Be punctilious in returning good for good, brothers, for no one on earth is more piteable and obnoxious than he who gives alms to his neighbour. But when you receive evil, return it many times over. Be cruelly lavish in paying back the evil your neighbour does you. If, when you ask for a crust of bread, he gives you a stone, bring the cliff down on his head.

(Teterev begins his speech in a light vein, but he grows more and more serious as he goes on, ending up in strong, fervent accents. When it is over he walks away with heavy steps. No one speaks, everyone feels uncomfortable, aware of the sincerity and gravity of what he has said.)

Yelena (*softly*): People must have made you suffer horribly.

Teterev (*grinning*): Yes, but I have the hope that in time they will be made to suffer by me. Or rather, for me.

Nil (*entering with a bowl and a slice of bread in his hands. As he speaks he keeps one eye on the bowl to see that he doesn't spill its contents. Tatyana follows him in*): Philosophy, philosophy! You have a bad habit of philosophizing over every trifle, Tanya—the rain, a cut finger, or a smoking stove. When I hear philosophy wasted on such flea-bites I can't help thinking that learning does some people a lot of harm.

Tatyana: You're very rude, Nil!

Nil (*sitting down at the table and beginning to eat*): Am I really? If you're bored, begin to do something. A person who

works has no time to be bored. If you're unhappy living at home, go and live in the country and teach the kids there. Or go to Moscow and study.

Yelena: Good for you, Nil. And scold this wretch too (*indicating Teterev*).

Nil (*throwing him a sidelong glance*): Another specimen. A second Heraclitus.

Teterev: A second Swift, if you don't mind.

Nil: Too good for you.

Pyotr: Much too good.

Teterev: A pity. I'd love to be called a Swift.

Tsvetayeva: You don't want much!

Nil (*without raising his eyes from his bowl*): Come, don't lose your temper. By the way, has ... er ... Polya been here? Or rather, where has she gone?

Tatyana: To the theatre. Why?

Nil: Nothing, I was just asking.

Tatyana: Do you want her for something?

Nil: No. That is, not at the moment, but in general, I ... er ... always want her. Oh, damn it all! What am I saying? (*Everyone but Tatyana smiles.*)

Tatyana (*insistently*): What do you want her for?

(*Nil goes on eating, ignoring her question.*)

Yelena (*quickly, to Tatyana*): What was he scolding you for? Do tell me.

Tsvetayeva: Oh, yes! That ought to be interesting.

Shishkin: I like the way he scolds.

Pyotr: And I—the way he eats.

Nil: Whatever I do, I do well.

Yelena: Come, Tanya, tell us.

Tatyana: I don't want to.

Tsvetayeva: She never wants to do anything.

Tatyana: How do you know? Maybe I want terribly to ... to die.

Tsvetayeva: Ugh! How horrid!

Yelena: Brrr! I can't bear to hear people talk about death!

Nil: What can you say about death until you die?

Teterev: That's true philosophy for you.

Yelena: Let's go up to my room. The samovar must be boiling by this time.

Shishkin: Just the thing—a glass of tea! And something to go with it, I hope?

Yelena: Of course.

Shishkin (*pointing to Nil*): The sight of him has filled me with envy, sinner that I am.

Nil: Nothing to envy any more—I've gobbled everything up. I'm coming too—I have an hour or so to spare.

Tatyana: Hadn't you better take a nap before going to work?

Nil: No, I hadn't.

Yelena: Pyotr Vasilyevich! Are you coming?

Pyotr: If you'll allow me to.

Yelena: With pleasure! Give me your arm!

Tsvetayeva: Form pairs! Nil Vasilyevich, you come with me!

Shishkin (*to Tatyana*): And you with me.

Teterev: They say there are more women than men in the world, but I've lived in many a town in this country, and never, not once, has there been a woman left over for me.

Yelena (*laughing, makes for the door, singing as she goes*): Allons, enfants de la patri—i—i—i—e!

Shishkin (*giving Pyotr a push in the back*): Get a move on, enfant de la patrie.

(They go out noisily, singing and laughing. For a few seconds the room is empty. Then the door of Bessemenov's room opens and Akulina Ivanovna comes out. Yawning, she puts out the lamps. From inside the room comes the voice of the old man droning his prayers. In the darkness the old woman stumbles over chairs as she makes her way back to her room.)

ACT II

THE SAME SETTING

Noon of an autumn day. Bessemenov is sitting at the table. Tatyana is slowly and silently pacing the floor. Pyotr is standing in the archway between the two rooms gazing out of the window.

Bessemenov: For a full hour I've been talking to you, my dear children, but my words don't seem to reach your hearts. One of you stands with his back to me, the other walks back and forth like a crow on a fence.

Tatyana: I'll sit down. *(Does so.)*

Pyotr *(turning to his father):* Come straight out with it: what is it you want of us?

Bessemenov: I want to know what you're like. As for you, Pyotr, I want to see what sort of man you are.

Pyotr: Wait a bit. You'll see in time. You'll see and understand, but first let me finish my studies.

Bessemenov: Hm, studies. Well, go ahead and study! But you don't. You waste your time bucking and balking. You've learned to turn your nose up at everything, but you haven't learned a sense of proportion. They threw you out of the university. Unjustly, you think? Not at all. A student is a student, and it's not up to him to say how things ought to be. If every young whippersnapper tried to lay down the law, everything would be in a muddle and there would be no place in this world for sane and sensible people. First you've got to learn, and when you're an expert at your job it will be time enough to begin criticizing. Until then, anybody has a right to say "bah!" to your criticism. I tell you this not to find fault, but from the bottom of my heart, because you're my son, flesh of my flesh, and all that. I wouldn't say it to Nil, although goodness knows I've tried hard with him, even if he is my foster-son, but he's got different blood in him. He's not my sort, and the older he gets, the less like me he is. I can see he's cut out to be a scoundrel—an actor, or something just as bad. Maybe he'll even be a Socialist. Well, let him. Serves him right.

Akulina Ivanovna (*peeping in at the door and speaking in a meek, plaintive voice*): Isn't it time for dinner, father?

Bessemenov (*sternly*): Get out of here! Don't poke your nose in where it don't belong. (*Akulina Ivanovna shuts the door. Tatyana glances reproachfully at her father, gets up, and begins to pace the floor again.*) See that? Your poor mother hasn't a minute's peace—always on her guard—scared to death I'll hurt your feelings. But you've hurt mine and hurt them deeply. I walk around my own house on tiptoe, as if there was broken glass on the floors. My old friends have stopped coming to see me. "Your children have got to be so educated," they say, "we're afraid they'll laugh at simple folk like us." And you have laughed at them more than once, making me blush with shame. All my friends have dropped me, as if educated children were the plague. You don't pay the least attention to your father, never say a kind word to him, never tell him what's on your mind, never confide your plans to him. I'm like a stranger to you. And yet I love you—yes, love you! Do you understand what that means—to love somebody? They threw you out of the university, and I suffer for it. For no good reason Tatyana is pining away, an old maid, and I resent it. I don't even know what to say to people. Why is my Tatyana any worse than the girls who get married and all the rest? I want to see you a man, Pyotr—not a student. Look at the son of Philip Nazarov—he finished his studies, married a girl with a good dowry, gets a salary of two thousand a year, and is about to be elected a member of the Town Council.

Pyotr: I'll get married too, in time.

Bessemenov: Oh, I don't doubt that! You're ready to get married tomorrow, but who is it you want to marry? A widow. A flighty, loose woman!

Pyotr (*flaring up*): You have no right to call her that!

Bessemenov: Call her what? A widow? Or a loose woman?

Tatyana: Father! Please, oh please! Pyotr, leave the room or else keep quiet. *I* keep quiet, so why can't you? I don't understand anything. When you talk, father, it seems to me you're right. You are right, of course; I don't doubt it, but what is right for you is not right for us—for Pyotr and me. Can't you see that? We have our own way of looking—Wait, father, don't be angry. Both of us are right.

Bessemenov (*jumping up*): That's a lie! Only one of us

is right. I'm right! How can you be right? Show me how!
Prove it!

Pyotr: Don't shout, father. I say the same thing. You're right, but your way of seeing things is a way that's too tight for us. We've grown out of it, as we grew out of our clothes. It stifles us, holds us down. Your way of life won't do for us.

Bessemenov: It won't, won't it? Who do you think you are? Oh, yes—you've had an education, while I? I'm a fool. You're—

Tatyana: It's not that, father.

Bessemenov: Yes, it is. It's just that. Your friends come to see you—the house is so noisy a person can't even get his sleep at night. (*To Pyotr.*) You make eyes at that tart from upstairs in my very face. (*To Tatyana.*) You go about looking as if you'd lost your last friend. Me and your mother get squeezed into the corner—

Akulina Ivanovna (*bursting into the room and crying piteably*): Ah, my dears! As if I— Come, husband, do I ever complain? Me in the corner? I'd gladly stay in the corner, or out in the shed, if only you wouldn't quarrel! Don't snap at each other, dears! Don't, please don't!

Bessemenov (*holding her with one hand, pushing her away with the other*): Get out of here, old woman. They don't need either of us. They're too smart for us. We're not their sort.

Tatyana (*groaning*): How horrible! How simply ghastly!

Pyotr (*white with despair*): Can't you see, father, that this is stupid? Abominably stupid. All of a sudden, out of a clear sky—

Bessemenov: All of a sudden? Oh, no! Not all of a sudden. This has been coming to a head for years deep down inside of me.

Akulina Ivanovna: Let him have his own way, Pyotr. Don't argue with him. Take pity on your father, Tatyana!

Bessemenov: Stupid? Oh no, you fool! Not stupid. Tragic! All of a sudden—father and children—both right! Beasts, that's what you are!

Tatyana: Pyotr, leave the room! Calm yourself, father—do, I beg of you.

Bessemenov: Heartless beasts! Squeezing us out. What are you so proud of? What have you ever done to be proud of? As for us, we've lived. And worked. Built this house—for you. Committed sins—for you. More sins than you'd think—all for you!

Pyotr (*shouting*): Did we ever ask you to?

Akulina Ivanovna: Pyotr! For mercy's sake—!

Tatyana: Leave the room, Pyotr! I can't bear it! I'm going away. (*Sinks into a chair.*)

Bessemenov: Aha! Running away from the truth! Like the devil from incense. The voice of your conscience at last!

(*Nil throws the door wide open and stands in the doorway. He has just come from work. His face is dirty, streaked with dust and soot. His hands, too, are dirty. He is wearing muddy kneeboots and a short belted jacket shiny with dirt and grease. He holds out one hand as he speaks.*)

Nil: Give me twenty kopeks for the izvozhik. (*At his sudden appearance and the sound of his calm voice, everyone instantly stops shouting and stares at him in silence. Noticing the effect his entrance has made, he quickly guesses the reason.*)

Nil (*with a reproachful smile*): Another row?

Bessemenov (*shouting rudely*): You ignoramus! Where do you think you are?

Nil: Why, where am I?

Bessemenov: Your cap! Take off your cap!

Akulina Ivanovna: The very idea! Bursting into the dining-room in those filthy clothes! It's the limit!

Nil: Give me some money, quick!

Pyotr (*in a whisper as he gives him the money*): Come back as quickly as you can.

Nil (*with a smile*): Need my help? Hard going, eh? Be with you in a second.

Bessemenov: Another one who does things in fits and starts, and who's picked up crazy ideas. There's not a soul on earth he has respect for. That's Nil for you!

Akulina Ivanovna (*copying his tone*): Not a soul. A rowdy, that's what he is! Run along, Tatyana, go . . . er . . . go and tell Stepanida we're ready for dinner.

(*Tatyana goes out.*)

Bessemenov (*with a wry smile*): And where will you send Pyotr? Tck, tck, tck, you foolish old woman! Can't you see it's not because I'm mad; it's because I'm worried—worried about *them*. It's not rage, but the pain in my soul, makes me shout like that. Why do you keep chasing them away?

Akulina Ivanovna: I know, husband. I see how things are, but I feel sorry for them. You and me are old. We are what we are, you and me. Oh, Lordy, Lordy! What're we good for any more? Who's got any need of us? But they've got their whole lives ahead of them. All the knocks they'll be taking, poor darlings!

Pyotr: I don't really see why you should upset yourself so, father. You've got this idea in your head—

Bessemenov: I'm afraid. Afraid of the times. Bad times. Everything's cracking up. Breaking down. Life's in an upheaval. I'm afraid for you. What if...? Who'd support us in our old age, then? You're the only arm we've got to lean on. Watch out for that Nil—you can see what he's like. And Teterov too. He's a bird of the same feather. Steer clear of them both. They hate us. Watch out.

Pyotr: Nonsense. Nothing will happen to me. I'll wait a little longer and then I'll write to the university and ask to be pardoned.

Akulina Ivanovna: Do it soon, Pyotr, to set your father's mind at rest.

Bessemenov: I believe in you, Pyotr, when you talk like that—serious and sensible. I'm sure then that you'll live your life no worse than I've lived mine. But at other times—

Pyotr: Let's drop the subject. We've gone over it all again and again.

Akulina Ivanovna: Bless your hearts! You're all I've got in the world!

Bessemenov: And then there's Tatyana. She'd ought to give up that teaching! What good does it do her? Just wears her out.

Pyotr: She really is in need of a rest.

Akulina Ivanovna: So she is, so she is.

Nil (*he has changed into a blue blouse, but has not washed yet*): Dinner ready?

(*On seeing Nil, Pyotr goes quickly out into the hall.*)

Bessemenov: You'd better wash that mug of yours before you ask for food.

Nil: My mug's not so big—I can wash it in a jiffy, but I'm hungry as a wolf. A cold rain and wind and a battered old engine—had a hell of a time last night. I'm worn to a frazzle.

Wouldn't I like to put the boss on that engine and take him for a ride in weather like this!

Bessemenov: Blow off a little more steam. I've noticed you've been talking pretty free about your bosses of late. Look out, or something may happen.

Nil: Not to the bosses.

Akulina Ivanovna: Father wasn't thinking about them, he was thinking about you.

Nil: Ah, about me.

Bessemenov: Yes, about you.

Nil: Uh-huh.

Bessemenov: None of your uh-huhs! You listen to me!

Nil: I'm listening.

Bessemenov: You've got a swelled head.

Nil: Have I had it long?

Bessemenov: And a sharp tongue.

Nil: Have I? (*Sticks out his tongue.*)

Akulina Ivanovna (*shaking her head*): For shame, for shame! Think who you're sticking your tongue out at!

Bessemenov: Wait, mother; don't interrupt. (*Akulina Ivanovna goes out, still shaking her head.*) You're a very smart feller. I'd like to have a little talk with you.

Nil: After dinner?

Bessemenov: No, now.

Nil: Can't you wait till after dinner? I really am tired and hungry and chilled to the bone. Put it off if you don't mind. And then—what's there to talk about? You'll only pick a quarrel, and I don't like to quarrel with you. I'd rather have you ... well ... tell me straight to my face that you can't stand me, and that I'd—

Bessemenov: Go to the devil! (*Goes into his own room, slamming the door behind him.*)

Nil (*mumbling*): Good. I prefer the devil's company to yours. (*Walks about the room humming to himself. Enter Tatyana.*) Had another scrap?

Tatyana: You simply can't imagine—

Nil: Yes, I can. A dramatic scene from the endless comedy: "Neither Here Nor There."

Tatyana: It's easy for you to talk like that. You know how to keep off to one side.

Nil: I push all this fuss off to one side. And very soon I'll be out of it for good. I'm trying to transfer to a mechanic's job

in the depot. I'm sick and tired of driving goods trains night after night. It'd be different if they were passenger trains—expresses—flying through the air, full steam ahead! But this way—crawling along like a snail with no one but your fireman? Dull as ditch-water. I like to be among people.

T a t y a n a : And yet you want to get away from us.

N i l : Forgive me, but anybody'd want to get away from you. I like noise, excitement, work, simple cheery people. Do you think you live? You just hang on the outskirts of life, and for some unknown reason keep groaning and moaning. Who or what you're dissatisfied with is beyond me!

T a t y a n a : Is it really?

N i l : It really is. When a person finds himself lying in an uncomfortable position he turns over on the other side, but when he finds life uncomfortable he does nothing but complain. Why don't you make the effort to turn over?

T a t y a n a : A certain philosopher once said that only fools found life simple.

N i l : Philosophers seem to know a lot about what's foolish. I don't set myself up to be a sage. I simply find living here inexpressibly dull for some reason. It must be because of your endless complaints. Why complain? Who's going to help you? Nobody. There isn't anybody who could do it, and—it would hardly be worth his while if there was.

T a t y a n a : What makes you so hard, Nil?

N i l : Do you call that being hard?

T a t y a n a : Cruel. You've caught the infection from Teterév, who hates everybody for some reason.

N i l : Not everybody. (*Laughing.*) Did it ever strike you that Teterév looks like an axe?

T a t y a n a : An axe? What do you mean?

N i l : An ordinary steel axe with a wooden handle.

T a t y a n a : Stop joking, please do. It's a pleasure to talk to you, you have such original ideas, but you're so . . . so indifferent.

N i l : To what?

T a t y a n a : To people. To me, for instance.

N i l : . . . Hm . . . not to everybody. . . .

T a t y a n a : But to *me*.

N i l : To you? (*Both fall silent. Nil studies the toe of his boot. Tatyana gazes at him expectantly.*) You see, I . . . you (*Tatyana strains towards him, but he doesn't notice it.*) I . . .

er ... like you, and ... respect you, but I don't see why you should be a schoolmistress. You don't like the work. It irritates you and wears you out. And it's a great work, teaching. Children are the men and women of the future. You have to love and appreciate them. You have to love any job if you want to do it well. Take me—I love to work on an anvil. It thrills me to swing the hammer down on a sputtering formless red mass that spits fire at you, trying to put your eyes out and leap out of your hands. It breathes, it's alive, and you come swinging down on it, pounding it into anything you like.

T a t y a n a : One has to be strong to do that.

N i l : And skilful.

T a t y a n a : Don't you ever pity people, Nil?

N i l : Who, for instance?

Y e l e n a (*entering*): You haven't had dinner yet, have you? Good. Come and have it with me. You should see the pie I've baked! Where's the lawyer? A simply heavenly pie!

N i l (*going over to Yelena*): Only too glad to. I'll gobble up your whole heavenly pie. I'm dying of hunger and they're not giving me anything to eat on purpose. They're mad at me for some reason or other.

Y e l e n a : On account of your tongue, I guess. Come along, Tanya.

T a t y a n a : I must let mother know first. (*Goes out.*)

N i l : How did you know I stuck my tongue out at the old man?

Y e l e n a : I didn't. Did you? Tell me all about it.

N i l : I'd much rather have you tell me about your heavenly pie.

Y e l e n a : Don't worry. I'll find out. As for the pie—do you know who taught me to bake pies? A prisoner who was up for murder. My husband let him help in the kitchen. He was such a poor frail little chap—

N i l : Your husband?

Y e l e n a : Good heavens, no! My husband was six foot five!

N i l : Such a little fellow?

Y e l e n a : Very bright, you are. And he had whiskers this long. (*Holds up her fingers.*) Six inches on each side.

N i l : I've never heard of a man's virtues being measured in inches before.

Y e l e n a : Alas! His whiskers were his only virtue.

N i l : Very sad. Go on about the pie.

Yelena: The prisoner was a cook, and he murdered his wife. But I was awfully fond of him. I don't think he really meant to kill her—

Nil: Of course not. Just an accident.

Yelena: Oh, get out of here! I don't want to talk to you! (*Tatyana appears in the doorway and watches them. Pyotr enters by another door.*) Hullo, Lawyer! Come upstairs and taste my pie!

Pyotr: With pleasure.

Nil: His papa scolded him today for not showing proper respect.

Pyotr: Oh, drop it!

Nil: I don't know how he dares call on you without first getting permission.

Pyotr (*glancing nervously at the door of his parents' room*): Let's go if we're going.

Tatyana: Go ahead. I'll come in a minute.

(*Nil, Pyotr, and Yelena go out.*)

Akulina Ivanovna (*just as Tatyana is about to enter her own room*): Tatyana!

Tatyana (*stopping and lifting her shoulders impatiently*): Yes?

Akulina Ivanovna (*in the doorway*): Come here. (*Almost in a whisper.*) Has Pyotr gone up to see that woman again?

Tatyana: Yes. And I'm going too.

Akulina Ivanovna: Lordy, Lordy! She'll catch him in her snare, you see! I feel it in my bones. Speak to him, Tanya. Tell him to keep away from her. Tell him she's no match for him—she hasn't got a kopek over three thousand and her husband's pension. I know it for sure.

Tatyana: Don't interfere, mother. Yelena doesn't show the least interest in Pyotr.

Akulina Ivanovna: She does that on purpose—on purpose, I tell you. To stir him up. She just pretends she isn't interested in him, but all the time she watches him like a cat a mouse.

Tatyana: What do I care? Speak to him yourself if you want to, but leave me alone. I'm tired, can't you see that?

Akulina Ivanovna: You don't have to talk to him this very minute. Lie down, dear, and have a rest.

T a t y a n a (*almost shouting*): Rest! I'm tired for the rest of my life—for the rest of my life, do you hear? Tired of you. Tired of everything.

(*Rushes into the hall. Akulina Ivanovna takes a step as if to stop her, then makes a helpless little gesture and stands still, looking dazed.*)

B e s s e m e n o v (*glancing through the door*): Another tiff?

A k u l i n a I v a n o v n a: No. Nothing to speak of. She just—

B e s s e m e n o v: Just what? Did she answer you back?

A k u l i n a I v a n o v n a (*hastily*): Oh, no! What makes you think so? I just said it was time to have dinner, and she said she didn't want any dinner, and I said why not, and she said—

B e s s e m e n o v: You're not telling the truth, mother.

A k u l i n a I v a n o v n a: Yes, I am, really.

B e s s e m e n o v: All the lies you tell for their sakes! Look me in the eye. You can't, eh? Tck, tck, tck! (*Akulina Ivanovna stands silently before her husband with drooping head, and he stands silently stroking his beard. He sighs.*) We made a mistake when we gave them an education.

A k u l i n a I v a n o v n a (*softly*): It's not that, father. These days simple folk are no better than educated ones.

B e s s e m e n o v: It doesn't do to give children more than you've got yourself. The hardest thing of all is that they've got no backbone, no guts. A person ought to have something that makes him different from others. They don't. They've got no character. Take Nil—he's brazen, he's a scoundrel, but he's got character. He's dangerous, but you can understand him. (*Heaves a deep sigh.*) When I was a young man I loved church music and I loved to gather mushrooms in the forest. Is there anything Pyotr loves?

A k u l i n a I v a n o v n a (*with a meek sigh*): He's visiting the lady upstairs again.

B e s s e m e n o v: He is, is he? Just you wait, I'll show her! (*Enter Teterev, looking more dissolute and sullen than ever. He has a bottle of vodka in one hand and a glass in the other.*) At it again, Terenty Khrisanfovich?

T e t e r e v: Last night, when vespers were over—

B e s s e m e n o v: What's the reason?

T e t e r e v: No reason. Will dinner be ready soon?

Akulina Ivanovna: As soon as I lay the table.
(*Begins laying it.*)

Bessemenov: It's a great pity, Terenty Khrisanfovich! A clever man like you ruining himself with drink!

Teterev: You're wrong, most honourable bourgeois. It's not drink that's ruining me; it's an excess of energy. Too much strength—that's my ruin!

Bessemenov: There's no such thing as too much strength.

Teterev: Wrong again. What's the good of strength these days? It's slyness that's wanted these days. Slipperiness. One has to be slippery as a snake. (*Turning back his sleeve, he exhibits his muscle.*) Look at this: one blow and the table's smashed to smithereens. But what good are such biceps these days? I can chop wood with them, but I can't—let's say—write with them, and it would be foolish to try. What am I to do with so much strength? The only use I could make of it would be to show it off at the fair—lift weights, break iron chains—that sort of thing. But once I was a student, and a bright one at that—for which I was thrown out of the theological seminary. And now I don't want to be turned into a show-thing for people like you to stare at with quiet satisfaction. I want you to stare at me with unquiet dissatisfaction.

Bessemenov: You're a dangerous character.

Teterev: Animals as big as me are never dangerous—you don't know your zoology. Nature is too clever. If, big as I am, I were to be vicious as well, how could you ever escape me?

Bessemenov: I wouldn't try to. Why should I? I'm in my own house, aren't I?

Akulina Ivanovna: Don't talk to him, father.

Teterev: Quite right! You're in your own house. The whole world is your own house. Of your own building. That's why there's no room in it for me, most honourable bourgeois!

Bessemenov: What's the sense in living as you do? No sense. But if you wanted to—

Teterev: I don't want to. I hate everything too profoundly. I find it nobler to drink and go to the dogs than to live and work for the likes of you. Can you picture me sober, decently dressed, and talking to you in the obsequious language of a humble servant? You cannot. (*Polya comes into the room, but on catching sight of Teterev she backs away. He sees her, grins broadly, and holds out his hand.*) Hullo, don't be afraid. I won't say another word because I know everything.

Polya (*embarrassed*): What? You couldn't know.

Akulina Ivanovna: So here you are! Go and tell Stepanida to bring in the soup.

Bessemenov: High time. (*To Teterev.*) I certainly do enjoy hearing you air your ideas, especially when they're about yourself. Just look at you—a fine sight, I must say! The minute you begin to spout I see all your weaknesses. (*He gives a soft, gloating chuckle.*)

Teterev: I like you. You're middling wise and middling stupid, middling good and middling bad, middling honest and middling false, middling brave and middling cowardly—in a word, a model bourgeois. The commonplace finds perfect expression in you, and that is a force which even heroes bow before—a force that lives on and on and is forever triumphant. So let's drink to the cabbage soup, O admirable mole!

Bessemenov: Wait till they bring it in. But why be so rude? You oughtn't to hurt people's feelings without cause. You ought to say what you think modestly, prettily, so that people will be glad to listen. Nobody wants to listen to insults. Nobody, that is, but a fool.

Nil (*entering*): Has Polya come?

Teterev (*with a little laugh*): She has.

Akulina Ivanovna: What do you care?

Nil (*to Teterev, ignoring her question*): At it again? You've been going it pretty strong of late.

Teterev: It's better to drink vodka than human blood, especially now that people's blood has got so thin and bad. There's very little good rich blood left. It's all been sucked up.

(*Enter Stepanida carrying the soup tureen and Polya with a platter of meat.*)

Nil (*going over to Polya*): Hullo. Is your answer ready?

Polya (*under her breath*): Not here, in front of everybody.

Nil: Why not? What have we to be afraid of?

Bessemenov: Who are you talking about?

Nil: Me. And her.

Akulina Ivanovna: What's that?

Bessemenov: I don't get you.

Teterev (*with a little laugh*): I do.

(*Pours himself out a glass of vodka and begins to drink.*)

Bessemenov: What's it all about? What did you say, Poly a?

Poly a (*embarrassed*): Nothing.

Nil (*sitting down at the table*): It's a secret—deep and dark.

Bessemenov: If it's a secret, go off and whisper it in some corner, and not here in front of everybody. Smirking in our very faces! It's enough to drive a man out of his own house. All these secret signs and whispering and plotting, and me sitting there and gaping like a fool. Who do you think I am, Nil?

Akulina Ivanovna: Really, Nil, it's just—

Nil (*calmly*): You are my foster-father. But there's no reason for getting excited and making a scene. Nothing in particular has happened—

Poly a (*getting up*): Nil ... Vasilyevich ... made me ... told me last evening ... asked me. . . .

Bessemenov: Well, out with it!

Nil (*calmly*): Don't try to frighten her. I asked her if she didn't want to marry me.

(Bessemenov, his spoon stopped in mid air, stares incredulously at him and Poly a. Akulina Ivanovna, too, is thunder-struck. Teterev gazes into space, slowly blinking his eyes. The hand on his knee jerks spasmodically. Poly a stands with drooping head.)

Nil (*continuing*): And she said she would give me her answer today. That's all.

Teterev (*with a wave of his hand*): As simple as all that. Very plain and simple.

Bessemenov: So that's it. Hm. Simple indeed. (*Bitterly.*) And very modern. In the latest style. But then, what's it to me?

Akulina Ivanovna: I never heard of such a thing! It's a reckless lad you are. You might have spoken to us about it first.

Nil (*vexed*): Why in the world did I tell them!

Bessemenov: Leave him alone, mother. It's none of our business. Eat your dinner and say nothing. And I won't, either.

Teterev (*getting tipsy*): But I will! Or perhaps I had better hold my tongue for the present.

Bessemenov: All of us had better hold our tongues. But I can't help saying it's a poor return for all I've done for you. Nil. You're always doing underhand things like this.

Nil: I've paid you in work for all you've done for me, and I'll keep on paying, but I have no intention of bowing to your

will. You wanted to marry me to that simpleton of a Sedova because she has a dowry of ten thousand rubles. What do I want with her? It's Polya I love. I've loved her a long time and haven't tried to hide it. I've always lived open and above-board and always will, and you have nothing to reproach me with.

Bessemenov (*with restraint*): I see, I see. Splendid. Well, then, go ahead and get married. We won't stand in your way. But perhaps you wouldn't mind telling us on whose money you intend to live? Do tell us, if it's not a secret.

Nil: We'll work. I'm being transferred to the depot. And she—well, she'll find something to do. You'll keep on getting the thirty rubles a month I've been paying you.

Bessemenov: We'll see. Promises are easily made.

Nil: I'll give you a note of hand if you want it.

Teterév: That's right, bourgeois, make him give you a note of hand.

Bessemenov: Who asked you to butt in?

Akulina Ivanovna: A fine person to offer advice!

Teterév: Make him, by all means. But you won't—you've got too sickly a conscience. Give it to him yourself, Nil. Give him a note saying: I, the undersigned, agree to pay on the first of every month—

Bessemenov: I could make him. I have a right—I've fed him, clothed him, housed him from the age of ten. And now he's twenty-seven.

Nil: Wouldn't it be better to settle our accounts later?

Bessemenov: Just as you like. (*Flaring up.*) But remember one thing, Nil! From this day on, you and me are enemies! I'll never forget the insult of this—never, and you may as well know it!

Nil: What insult? How have I insulted you? You didn't think I was going to marry you, did you?

Bessemenov (*too excited to hear what he has said*): Remember! Thumbing your nose like this at him who has fed and clothed you! Acting in secret. Behind my back. Without so much as asking. (*To Polya.*) And you! Such a meek, quiet little thing! What are you hanging your head for? Nothing to say, eh? Do you know what I can do to you?

Nil (*getting up*): You can't do anything to her. Stop shouting. This is my house too if you want to know it. For ten years I've been working and handing over my pay to you. Not a little of my money has gone into all this. (*Stamps on the floor with*

his foot and indicates the walls with a wide sweep of his arm.)
It's the one who works who's the master.

(While Nil is speaking Polya gets up and goes out. She meets Pyotr and Tatyana in the doorway. Pyotr glances into the room and disappears, but Tatyana stands there holding on to the jamb.)

Bessemenov *(gazing wide-eyed at Nil)*: What's that? You, the master!

Akulina Ivanovna: Come away, father. Come away, do. *(Shaking her fist at Nil.)* Just you wait, Nil! *(Tearfully.)* You'll get what you're looking for!

Nil *(determinedly)*: It's the one who works who's the master, and don't you forget it!

Akulina Ivanovna *(trying to pull her husband after her)*: Come along, old man, come along. Forget them. Don't speak, don't shout, they won't listen to you anyway.

Bessemenov *(yielding to his wife's efforts)*: Try and be the master! We'll see who's the master! We'll see!

(Bessemenov and his wife go into their room. Nil paces the floor excitedly. Somewhere far down the street a barrel-organ is playing.)

Nil: Now I've done it! What the devil made me open my mouth, fool that I am! I just can't keep anything to myself—everything comes out in spite of me!

Teterov: That's all right. A very interesting little scene. I got the greatest enjoyment out of watching and listening. Very interesting, very. Don't you worry, young fellow. You have a gift for being heroic. And at the present moment heroes are needed. They are indeed. In our day all people ought to be divided into two classes: heroes—which is to say fools; and rascals—the clever ones.

Nil: Why did I have to let Polya in for such a disgusting scene? Frightened her, I guess. But she's not one to get frightened easily; more apt to get angry.

(On hearing Polya's name, Tatyana, who is standing in the doorway, gives a start. The barrel-organ stops playing.)

Teterov: It's easy enough to divide people into fools and rascals. The world's full of rascals. Their minds work like

the minds of animals. Strength is the only thing they recognize—not *my* kind of strength—not the strength that's in my chest and my good right arm, but the strength of cunning. The mind of a beast is all cunning.

Nil (*not listening to him*): We'll have to hasten the wedding day now. All the better. She hasn't given me her answer yet, but I know what it will be, bless her heart! How I hate that man! And this house! And the life here—rotten to the core! All the people who live here are freaks. And they don't seem to realize that they themselves are the ones who have made life what it is—turned it into a prison, a torture, a curse. How they have done it is more than I can say, but I hate them for it. I hate anyone who spoils life.

(Tatyana checks herself as she is about to come forward. Soundlessly she goes over to the trunk in the corner and sinks down on it. All hunched over, she looks very small and more pathetic than ever.)

T e t e r e v : It's the fools who make life worth living. There aren't many of them, and what they seek is not just for themselves. It's mostly for others. They're fond of thinking of schemes for achieving universal happiness and such nonsense. They try to find the beginning and the end of all things. In a word, they are very foolish.

Nil (*thoughtfully*): Foolish, I'm the one that's foolish. She's more sensible than I am. She, too, loves life, but hers is a calm, quiet sort of love. We'll get on famously, she and I. We're daring, both of us, and once we set our hearts on a thing, we're sure to get it. She reminds me of a . . . a new-born babe. (*Laughs*). We'll get on famously, she and I!

T e t e r e v : A fool will spend his whole life wondering what makes glass transparent, but a rascal just takes the glass and makes a bottle out of it.

(The barrel-organ begins playing again, now very close, almost under the window.)

Nil : Your mind runs to bottles.

T e t e r e v : No, to fools. A fool asks himself where the fire is before it's lit and where it goes when it's put out, but a rascal just sits down by the fire and warms himself.

Nil (*thoughtfully*): Warms himself. . . .

T e t e r e v : As a matter of fact, both of them are fools. But the foolishness of one is beautiful and heroic, while the foolishness of the other is loutish and beggarly. Their paths are different, but they both lead to the same place: the grave. Nothing but the grave, my friend. (*He laughs. Tatyana slowly shakes her head.*)

N i l (to T e t e r e v) : What's the matter with you?

T e t e r e v : I'm laughing. The fools who remain alive gaze upon their dead brother and ask themselves where he has gone. But the rascals just appropriate the property of the deceased and go on living their warm, comfortable, well-fed lives. (*Laughs.*)

N i l : Drunk as a lord. Hadn't you better go to your room?

T e t e r e v : My room? There's no room for me.

N i l : Enough of your philosophizing. Shall I help you there?

T e t e r e v : You can't help me, friend. I don't belong to either the accused or the accusing. I'm in a class of my own. I'm material evidence of the crime. Life has been spoilt: it's a bad fit—too small for decent folk. Your petty bourgeois has cut it down and taken it in, and now it's too tight. And here am I, material evidence of the fact that a decent man has no room to stretch in; no reason and no excuse for living.

N i l : Come along, come along.

T e t e r e v : Hands off! Are you afraid I'll fall? I fell long ago, you fool! I was about to struggle back to my feet, but you came along and quite unintentionally knocked me down again. That's all right. Keep going, keep going. I'm not complaining. You're well and strong and have a right to go wherever you like, however you like. I, who am fallen, follow you with an approving glance. Keep going.

N i l : What are you raving about? It sounds interesting, but I can't make head or tail of it.

T e t e r e v : Don't try. It's better not to understand some things. Understanding them can't help matters. Keep going, keep going.

N i l : Very well, I'll go. (*Goes out into the hall without noticing Tatyana, who shrinks into the corner.*)

T e t e r e v (*bowing to him*) : Best wishes, Thief. Without knowing it, you have stolen my last hope. Well, to hell with it! (*Goes over to the table where he has left his bottle, and in doing so notices Tatyana.*) And who might this be?

T a t y a n a (*softly*) : Me.

(*The barrel-organ suddenly stops playing.*)

T e t e r e v : You? Hm. And I thought. . . . It seemed to me. . . .

T a t y a n a : No, it's me.

T e t e r e v : I see. But . . . why you? And why here?

T a t y a n a (*softly, but clearly and distinctly*): Because I have no reason and no excuse for living. (*Teterev walks towards her slowly and in silence.*) I don't know why I should be so tired and miserable, but I am. Desperately miserable. I'm only twenty-eight years old. I'm ashamed, I really am—frightfully ashamed to feel like this—so weak and contemptible. I'm all empty inside, dried up, burnt out, and it's very painful. I never noticed how it happened—how this emptiness came to take possession of me. But why should I be telling you this?

T e t e r e v : I don't understand. Too drunk. Don't get you at all.

T a t y a n a : Nobody talks to me the way I want them to. The way I long to have them talk. I hoped *he* would. I waited for a long time—without saying anything. But then all this quarrelling, pettiness, triteness—the stuffiness of it all. It got me down. Little by little. And now I haven't the strength to go on. There's no strength even in my despair. I'm frightened. Now—all of a sudden—I'm frightened.

T e t e r e v (*shaking his head, goes away from her towards the door, and when he has opened it he turns and says thickly*): A curse upon this house! A curse, I say!

(Tatyana gets up and goes slowly into her own room. For a moment the stage is silent and empty. Quickly and soundlessly Polya comes into the room followed by Nil. Without speaking they go over to the window, where Nil seizes her hand and speaks in a low voice.)

N i l : Forgive me for what happened today. It was stupid and disgusting. I don't know how to keep my mouth shut.

P o l y a (*almost in a whisper*): It doesn't matter. Nothing matters now. What do I care for them? It's all the same to me.

N i l : I know you love me. I can see you do. I won't even ask you. You're so funny. Last night you said: "I'll tell you tomorrow, I've got to think it over." What's there to think over, silly? You love me, don't you?

P o l y a : Yes, oh, yes! I have for ever so long. (*Tatyana steals to the door of her room and stands there listening.*)

Nil: We'll get on famously together, you'll see! You're such a good comrade—not afraid of being poor—always making the best of your troubles. . . .

Polya (*simply*): What's there to be afraid of with you? Even by myself I'm not meek. I'm just quiet.

Nil: And stubborn. You're strong, there's no bending you. Well, I'm happy. I knew this was how it would be, and I'm no end happy.

Polya: I knew it too.

Nil: You did? You really did? It's grand to be alive, isn't it?

Polya: It is, dearest. It is, my dearest love.

Nil: What's that? Say it again. How pretty it sounded!

Polya: No compliments, if you please. But we must go. Someone may come.

Nil: Let them!

Polya: No, no, we must go. Here, kiss me again.

(He does, after which she escapes from his arms and runs past Tatyana without noticing her, but Nil, who follows with a smile on his lips, catches sight of her and stops, stunned and indignant. She stares at him in silence with lacklustre eyes and with a crooked little smile on her lips.)

Nil (*contemptuously*): Eavesdropping! Peeping through the keyhole. Ugh! *(He goes out quickly. Tatyana remains standing as if turned to stone. Nil leaves the hall door ajar, and into the room comes the rough voice of Bessemenov, saying: "Stepanida! Who spilled this coal? Are you blind? Sweep it up!")*

ACT III

THE SAME SETTING

Morning. Akulina Ivanovna is washing the tea things, Stepanida is dusting the furniture.

Akulina Ivanovna: Seeings as there's not much fat on today's meat, skim the grease off the gravy from yesterday's roast and put it in the soup. That'll give it the look of being good and fat, hear?

Stepanida: Uh-huh.

Akulina Ivanovna: And when you fry the veal, don't be too free with the butter. I bought five pounds on Wednesday, and yesterday there was scarce a pound left.

Stepanida: We've used it all up.

Akulina Ivanovna: You don't have to tell me that. You've used as much on that hair of yours as would fill a tinker's tin.

Stepanida: Nothing of the sort. I grease my hair with lamp oil—can't you tell by the smell?

Akulina Ivanovna: Can't I just! (*Pause.*) Where did Tatyana send you this morning?

Stepanida: To the chemist's for some ammonia water. Buy me twenty kopeks' worth, she says.

Akulina Ivanovna: Another one of her headaches, I s'pose. (*Sighs.*) She's always ailing.

Stepanida: Why don't you marry her off? She'd get well quick enough then.

Akulina Ivanovna: It's not so easy to marry your daughters off these days—specially, educated ones.

Stepanida: Give her a good dowry and somebody'll take her, education and all.

(Pyotr's head is seen for an instant in the doorway of his room.)

Akulina Ivanovna: I'll never live to see that happy day. Tatyana doesn't want to get married.

Stepanida (*scoffingly*): I'll bet she don't—at her age!

Akulina Ivanovna (*sighs*): Who was at the lady's upstairs last night?

Stepanida: The teacher—the red-headed one.

Akulina Ivanovna: The one whose wife left him?

Stepanida: Him. And then that exciseman—you know, the skinny one with a yellow face.

Akulina Ivanovna: Oh, yes. He's married to the niece of Pimenov, the merchant. He's got consumption.

Stepanida: You don't say! Well, he looks it.

Akulina Ivanovna: Was the choir singer there?

Stepanida: He was, and so was Pyotr Vasilyevich. The choir singer bawled till two o'clock in the morning. Roared like a bull.

Akulina Ivanovna: When did Pyotr come home?

Stepanida: It was getting light when I opened the door for him.

Akulina Ivanovna (*shaking her head*): Dear me!

Pyotr (*entering*): Hurry up, Stepanida, finish what you're doing and get out.

Stepanida: The sooner I finish, the better I'll like it.

Pyotr: Then talk less and work more. (*Stepanida snorts and flounces out.*) Mother! How many times have I told you not to talk to her! Don't you realize it's bad taste—talking your private affairs over with the cook? And asking her about ... er ... all sorts of things. How can you stoop so low?

Akulina Ivanovna (*offended*): And am I to ask you who I can talk to? If my own son don't want to talk to me, nor to his father either, I might be allowed to talk to the cook.

Pyotr: But don't you understand she's not your equal? You won't hear anything but gossip from her.

Akulina Ivanovna: And what do I hear from you? You've been home for six months now, and not an hour have you spent with your mother. Not a word have you told her about Moscow, or about—

Pyotr: But listen—

Akulina Ivanovna: And when you do talk, it's nothing but: "don't do this," and "don't do that." Teaching and scolding and making fun of your poor mother as if she was a school-girl! (*Pyotr gives a disgusted grunt and goes into the hall. Akulina Ivanovna calls after him.*) See that? A nice little chat we've had now, haven't we? (*She whimpers and wipes her eyes on the hem of her apron.*)

(Perchikhin enters wearing an old quilted jacket tied at the waist with a piece of string, and with tufts of cotton-wool peeking out of the holes. He has bast sandals on his feet and a fur cap on his head.)

Perchikhin: What're you snivelling about? Did Pyotr say something he oughtn't? He whizzed past me like a martin. Didn't even say how-d'ye-do. Is my Polya here?

Akulina Ivanovna *(with a sigh)*: She's in the kitchen chopping up cabbage.

Perchikhin: The birds have the right idea: soon's the little ones get their wings, off they fly without any preaching from their parents. S'pose there might be a swallow of tea left over for me?

Akulina Ivanovna: And it's the ideas of the birds you follow, isn't it?

Perchikhin: It is, and mighty fine ideas if you ask me. I own nothing and trouble nobody. It's as if I was living up in the air instead of down on the earth.

Akulina Ivanovna *(contemptuously)*: Nobody respects you for it. Here. *(Placing a glass of tea in front of him.)* But it's cold, and not very strong.

Perchikhin *(holding the glass up to the light)*: Hm, weakish. But we're thankful for each small thing. If it was strong it might get the better of me. As for people's respect—what do I want with it? I don't respect nobody, neither.

Akulina Ivanovna: As if anybody cared about having *your* respect!

Perchikhin: And a very good thing they don't. I've noticed that folk as get their daily bread on the earth, snatch it out of each other's mouths. But my food comes from up above, from the heavenly birds, and so it's pure as the sky.

Akulina Ivanovna: Well, is the wedding to take place soon?

Perchikhin: Whose? Mine? The cuckoo marked as my mate ain't flown into our woods yet, the scamp! If she don't look out, she'll be too late: I'll be dead afore she gets there.

Akulina Ivanovna: Stop talking nonsense and tell me straight: when are you giving her away?

Perchikhin: Giving who away?

Akulina Ivanovna: Your daughter. As if you didn't know!

Perchikhin: Polya? Whenever she wants, if she's got anybody for me to give her to.

Akulina Ivanovna: Have they been planning this long?

Perchikhin: Who? What?

Akulina Ivanovna: Stop pretending. Surely she told you.

Perchikhin: Told me what?

Akulina Ivanovna: About the wedding.

Perchikhin: Whose wedding?

Akulina Ivanovna: Bah! An old man like you ought to be ashamed to make himself out an idiot.

Perchikhin: Come, now, you just tell me plain and simple what's on your mind without getting mad.

Akulina Ivanovna: As if a person could talk to you!

Perchikhin: Well, you're talking, and been doing it a good long time without getting nowhere.

Akulina Ivanovna (*dryly and enviously*): When are you going to marry Polya to Nil?

Perchikhin (*jumping up in amazement*): Polya to Nil?

Akulina Ivanovna: Do you really mean to say she hasn't told you? A fine lot, these young folk! Her own father!

Perchikhin (*joyfully*): Do you mean it? You must be joking. Nil? Crimpety crimpens! Think of that now! The monkeys! What a girl that Polya is! But you're sure you're not fooling? And here was me thinking Nil meant to marry Tatyana. Cross my heart. Everything pointed that way.

Akulina Ivanovna (*offended*): As if we'd let Tatyana marry Nil! A good-for-nothing like him!

Perchikhin: Nil? If I had ten daughters I'd close my eyes and hand the whole lot over to him. Nil? Why he ... he could feed a hundred mouths all by himself. Nil? Ho, ho!

Akulina Ivanovna (*ironically*): When I look at you I think to myself: what a fine father-in-law Nil's getting!

Perchikhin: Father-in-law? Ho, ho! This father-in-law don't want to be a burden to him nor to no-bo-dy! See that? My legs just dance of themselves! I'm free as a bird now! I'll live as I like now! Nobody'll catch a sight of me now! Off to the woods I'll go—farewell, everybody! What a girl that Polya is! Used to be I'd sit and think: what's to become of my poor little girl? It made me feel real bad, it did. I give her birth, but that's all I *could* give her. And now? Now I'll go wherever I please! Right

about face, and off to the ends of the earth in search of the fire-bird!

Akulina Ivanovna: Right about face? People don't turn their backs when luck comes their way.

Perchikhin: Luck? The best luck I could have is to be able to go wherever I please. And Polya will be happy. She's sure to be with Nil. Such a strong, cheerful, simple lad! My brains are jumping for joy and my heart's full of larks. Was there ever such a lucky old man? Tra-la-la! Tra-la-la! Polya caught her Nil, hurrah!

(Bessemenov enters. He is still in his coat and is carrying his cap in his hand.)

Bessemenov: Drunk again!

Perchikhin: Drunk with joy! Have you heard about Polya? *(Laughs gaily.)* She's going to marry Nil! Fine, eh?

Bessemenov *(hard and cold)*: That don't concern us. We'll get what's due us anyhow.

Perchikhin: And here was me thinking Nil meant to marry Tatyana!

Bessemenov: Wha-a-at?

Perchikhin: Cross my heart. Anyone could see Tanya was all for it—first she'd cock one eye at him, then the other—you know how they do. And then all of a sudden—

Bessemenov *(calmly, to hide his fury)*: Here's what I have to say to you, my good man: you may be a fool, but it's high time you knew it's not decent to say such things about a girl. That's the first thing. *(Raising his voice.)* It's no concern of mine who your daughter looks at and how she looks at him and what sort of girl she is, but I do say one thing: If she marries Nil, good riddance, because neither of them are worth their salt, and from this day on I spit on both of them, even if they are both knee-deep in debt to me. That's the second thing. And here's the last: you and me may be distant relatives, but take a look at yourself—what do you look like? A tramp, that's what! Whoever allowed you to come into a respectable house in that state? In those filthy rags and muzhik sandals?

Perchikhin: What's got into you, Vasily Vasilyevich? What are you saying? Is this the first time I've been here?

Bessemenov: I haven't counted the number of times and have no mind to. But one thing I do know: you can't have any respect for the master of this house if you come here looking like

that. Again I say, what are you? A beggar, a tramp, a ragamuffin. That's my say. Get out!

Perchikhin (*dumbfounded*): Vasily Vasilyevich! What have I done? What—

Bessemenov: Get out, I say! None of your talk!

Perchikhin: Think what you're doing! I've never hurt—

Bessemenov: Get out! Get out before I—

Perchikhin (*reproachfully, as he goes out*): For shame, old man! It's sad to see you like this. Makes me feel real sorry for you. Good day to you.

(*Bessemenov squares his shoulders and paces the floor in silence with firm, heavy steps. Akulina Ivanovna watches him furtively as she washes the tea-things. Her hands are shaking and she is muttering something to herself.*)

Bessemenov: What are you muttering? A spell?

Akulina Ivanovna: I'm praying, father, praying.

Bessemenov: Well, looks like I'm not to be mayor after all. Looks like it, damn them!

Akulina Ivanovna: What's that? Good gracious me, how can that be? But maybe you—

Bessemenov: Maybe I what? Fedka Dosekin, head of the locksmith guild, is aiming to be mayor. The upstart! The puppy!

Akulina Ivanovna: Maybe they won't elect him. Don't lose heart yet.

Bessemenov: They will. It's clear they will. When I got there today he was sitting in the office blowing off steam. "Times," he says, "is hard; all of us," he says, "have got to hang together; everything," he says, "has got to be decided by all—all of us artisans, that is. What with the factories springing up," he says, "us workmen can't do things separately." But I says: "It's the Jews are to blame! It's the Jews as have to be kept in check. We ought to write a complaint against them to the Governor—tell him how they don't give us Russians a chance and ask him to send them packing." (*Tatyana opens the door softly and staggers over to her room.*) And he gives that smile of his and says: "And what are we to do with Russians as are worse than the Jews?" And I could tell by his voice it was me he had in mind. I let on I didn't understand, but I could see very well what he meant, the bastard! I listen a little and then I walks off to one side. "Just you wait!" thinks I to myself, "I'll cook your goose for you yet!"

And just then Mikhail Kryukov, the stovemaker, comes up to me and says: "Looks like Dosekin had ought to be mayor," he says, and turns away, ashamed to look me in the eye. I felt like calling him the cheap jelly-boned Judas, he is!

(Enter Yelena.)

Yelena: Good morning, Vasily Vasilyevich! Good morning, Akulina Ivanovna!

Bessemenov (coldly): Ah, so it's you. Come in. What is it?

Yelena: I just wanted to give you the money for my lodgings.

Bessemenov (more civil): Very good. How much is here? Twenty-five rubles? You owe me another forty kopeks for two panes of glass in the hall window, and something—shall we make it twenty kopeks?—for the hinge your cook broke on the woodshed.

Yelena (laughing): How very exact you are! But I'll have to give you three rubles. I have no change.

Akulina Ivanovna: You've had a sack of charcoal from me—that is, your cook has.

Bessemenov: How much does it cost?

Akulina Ivanovna: Charcoal? Thirty-five a sack.

Bessemenov: Which makes, altogether, ninety-five. Two rubles and five kopeks change—here you are. As for being exact, you're quite right, young lady. It's exactness makes the world go round. The sun rises and sets exactly as has been laid down for it since the beginning of time, and once exactness is the law in heaven, it certainly ought to be the law on earth. Take you, for instance—you always pay your rent regular, right on the dot.

Yelena: I don't like to be in debt.

Bessemenov: Very commendable, very commendable. And so everyone trusts you.

Yelena: Well, good-bye. I must be going.

Bessemenov: Good day to you. (Watches her go out.) A pretty piece, drat her! And yet I'd like nothing better than to throw her out.

Akulina Ivanovna: It would be a good thing, father.

Bessemenov: On the other hand, so long as she's here we can keep an eye on her. If she moves, Pyotr's sure to go trailing her, and it'll be easier for her to catch him without us in sight. And you mustn't forget she's regular with her rent and is

always ready to pay these little extras. Hm . . . Pyotr, of course, is a danger, and a big one. . . .

Akulina Ivanovna: Maybe he don't think of marrying her. Maybe he's just—you know.

Bessemenov: If we could only be sure of that we could be easy in our minds, there'd be nothing to worry about. Better to have him here at home than going to brothels.

(A hoarse moan comes from Tatyana's room.)

Akulina Ivanovna *(softly)*: Oh!

Bessemenov *(just as softly)*: What's that?

Akulina Ivanovna *(she speaks under her breath and keeps glancing about as if listening for something)*: Out in the hall, wasn't it?

Bessemenov *(loudly)*: Must be the cat.

Akulina Ivanovna *(hesitantly)*: There's something I wanted to say to you, father. . . .

Bessemenov: Well, go ahead and say it.

Akulina Ivanovna: Don't you think you were a little hard on Perchikhin today? He's an inoffensive soul.

Bessemenov: If he's inoffensive, he won't take offense, and if he does, we haven't lost much. It's no great honour to have him as our friend. *(The moan is repeated—louder this time.)* Who's that? Mother—

Akulina Ivanovna *(flustered)*: I don't know. Who could—what could it be?

Bessemenov *(rushing to Pyotr's room)*: Anybody in here? Pyotr!

Akulina Ivanovna *(rushing after him in horror)*: Pyotr! Pyotr!

Tatyana *(calling hoarsely)*: Save me! Mother! Save me! Save me! *(Bessemenov and Akulina Ivanovna rush out of Pyotr's room and towards Tatyana's without a word, hesitating at the door for a second as if afraid, then pushing it open simultaneously. They are met by Tatyana's cries.)* Oh-h-h-, how it burns! A drink! Save me!

Akulina Ivanovna *(rushes out of the room and shouts into the hall)*: Help! Help, good people! Pyotr! *(From Tatyana's room comes the dull voice of Bessemenov, saying: "What is it, daughter? What is it? What's the matter with you, lovey?")*

Tatyana: Water. I'm dying. Everything's burning up inside me. Oh, God!

Akulina Ivanovna: Hurry! Come quick! Help!

Bessemenov (*from inside the room*): Call the doctor! Quick!

Pyotr (*running up*): What's the matter? What's happened?

Akulina Ivanovna (*clutching his sleeve and gasping*): Tatyana! She's dying!

Pyotr (*wrenching free*): Let me go!

Teterev (*pulling on his jacket as he comes in*): What is it, a fire?

Bessemenov: The doctor! Run for the doctor, Pyotr! Offer him 25 rubles!

Pyotr (*rushing out of Tatyana's room and speaking to Teterev*): The doctor! Go for the doctor! Tell him—poisoning. A young woman. Ammonia. Hurry! Hurry!

(*Teterev runs out into the hall.*)

Stepanida (*running in*): My stars!

Tatyana: Pyotr! I'm burning up! I'm dying! I don't want to die! Save me! A drink!

Pyotr: How much did you take? When did you do it? Speak!

Bessemenov: My own daughter! My little girl!

Akulina Ivanovna: To do such a thing to yourself! My poor little dove!

Pyotr: Go away, mother. Take her out, Stepanida. Go away, I tell you. (*Yelena runs into Tatyana's room.*) Take mother out.

(*An old woman comes into the hall and stands in the doorway glancing furtively into the room and muttering to herself.*)

Yelena (*leading Akulina Ivanovna out of Tatyana's room and whispering to her*): That's all right, don't worry, it's not dangerous.

Akulina Ivanovna: My treasure! My own darling girl! What have I done to her? How have I wronged her?

Yelena: It will pass. Everything will be all right when the doctor comes. What a thing to have happened!

Old Woman (*taking Akulina Ivanovna's other arm*): Don't lose heart. Worse things happen. Merchant Sitanov's coachman, for instance—the horse bashed his whole side in—

Akulina Ivanovna: My darling, my precious. What shall I do? My only one! (*They take her out.*)

(Tatyana's cries mingle with her father's hoarse voice and Pyotr's sharp, nervous interjections. A chair is overturned; there is a clatter of dishes, a squeaking of bed-springs, the thud of a falling pillow. Several times Stepanida, her hair on end, her mouth hanging open, her eyes popping out of her head, rushes out of the room to snatch a cup or a plate out of the sideboard, invariably breaking something. Gaping faces are seen in the doorway of the hall, but no one dares to come into the room. A young lad, a house painter's apprentice, hops through the door, peeks into Tatyana's room and runs back, announcing in a stage-whisper: "She's dying!" A barrel-organ strikes up a tune out in the street, but is instantly hushed. From the hall comes a low murmur of conversation: "Killed her?" "Who?" "Her father?" "He warned her—"You watch your step, young lady," he says." "On the head." "Do you know what with?" "That's a lie—she cut her own throat." A woman's voice asks: "Was she married?" Someone is heard to cluck sympathetically. The Old Woman comes out of Bessemenov's room, snatches up a bun as she passes the table and hides it under her shawl, then joins the crowd out in the hall.)

Old Woman: Sh! She's dying.

Man's Voice: What's her name?

Old Woman: Liza.

Woman's Voice: What made her do it?

Old Woman: Far back as Assumption Day he says to her: "Liza," he says—

(Movement in the crowd. The doctor and Teterev enter. The doctor goes directly to Tatyana's room without taking off his hat or coat. Teterev glances into the room, then walks away frowning. Moans, voices, sounds of people moving about, come from the sick chamber. From Bessemenov's room comes the wailing of Akulina Ivanovna and her cries: "Let me go! I've got to go to her!" Out of the murmur of the crowd in the hall rise individual voices, saying: "He's the choir singer." "You don't say!" "Yes, he is," "From John the Baptist's.")

T e t e r e v (*going toward the hall*): What are you doing here? Get out, all of you!

O l d W o m a n (*at the door*): Move along, good people, move along. This is none of your business. None of your business, this.

T e t e r e v : Who are you? What do you want?

O l d W o m a n : I'm a vegetable vendor—spring onions, cucumbers—

T e t e r e v : What are you doing here?

O l d W o m a n : I was on my way to Semyagina's—she is my son's godmother—

T e t e r e v : What are you doing here, I say?

O l d W o m a n : Just happened to be passing and heard a noise, thought it might be a fire—

T e t e r e v : Well?

O l d W o m a n : And came in. Came to have a look at trouble.

T e t e r e v : Get along with you. Clear the hall.

S t e p a n i d a (*running up to Teterev*): Fetch a pail of water—quick!

(An old greybeard with his face tied up in a handkerchief looks through the door, winks at Teterev, and says: "She stole a bun off your table!" Teterev strides into the hall, pushing people out into the street. Noise and confusion. A boy cries: "Ouch!" Somebody laughs, somebody else says reproachfully: "Stop pushing.")

T e t e r e v (*unseen*): Out you go! Quick!

P y o t r (*poking his head through the door*): Quiet! (*Turning back into the room.*) Go, father. Mother needs you. Do go. (*Calling into the hall.*) Don't let anyone in!

(Bessemenov walks unsteadily out of Tatyana's room. When he reaches the table he sinks into a chair and sits staring dully into space for a few seconds, then gets up and goes into his own room, where Akulina Ivanovna and Yelena can be heard talking.)

A k u l i n a I v a n o v n a : As if I didn't love her! As if I didn't take the best of care of her!

Y e l e n a : Calm yourself.

A k u l i n a I v a n o v n a : Father! Oh, father! What—

(The speech is cut off by the closing of the door. Now the big room is empty. From the left comes the sound of muffled voices in Bessemenov's room, from the right the groans of Tatyana, low talk, and the little noises made by those attending her. Teterov brings in a pail of water, puts it down outside Tatyana's door, and knocks gently. Stepanida opens the door and takes the pail, then comes out into the big room, wiping the sweat off her forehead.)

Teterov: Well?

Stepanida: Looks like everything'll be all right.

Teterov: Is that what the doctor says?

Stepanida: Uh-huh. But—*(Gives a disparaging wave of her hand.)* He says not to let her father and mother in.

Teterov: Is she better?

Stepanida: Who knows? She's stopped moaning. Her face is green as green and her eyes are this big! Lies dead still. *(Reproachfully.)* I told them so! How many times did I tell them to get her a husband! A husband, I says, is what she needs. But they didn't listen to me, and here's what they get for it! As if a girl could go on this long without a husband! And then she didn't believe in God. "None of your prayers for me!" says she. "None of your bowing and crossing for me!" Well, and so here you are!

Teterov: Hold your tongue, you crow!

Yelena *(entering)*: How is she?

Teterov: I don't know. The doctor seems to think there's no danger.

Yelena: What a blow for her father and mother! I feel so sorry for them!

(Teterov shrugs his shoulders without commenting.)

Stepanida *(running out of the room)*: Goodness, I've forgot the stove!

Yelena: Whatever made her do it? What happened? Poor Tatyana! It must have hurt horribly. *(Makes a face and shudders.)* It must have, don't you think?

Teterov: I don't know. Ammonia is one thing I've never drunk.

Yelena: How can you joke at such a time?

Teterov: I'm not joking.

Yelena (*goes over to Pyotr's room and peeps through the door*): Is Pyotr—Pyotr Vasilyevich—still in her room?

Teter ev: Must be if he hasn't come out.

Yelena (*thoughtfully*): I can imagine how hard he's taking it. (*Pause.*) Whenever I . . . if I happen to see something of this sort I . . . oh, I just *hate* misfortune!

Teter ev (*smiling*): Very praiseworthy!

Yelena: Do you understand what I mean? I feel like taking it and stamping on it—trampling it to death!

Teter ev: What? Misfortune?

Yelena: Yes. I'm not afraid of it. I hate it. I like to be happy, to have lots of people around me, and to be always doing something new. I know how to make life pleasant for myself and those around me.

Teter ev: Ultra-praiseworthy!

Yelena: And something else—I'll confess to you: I'm dreadfully hard-hearted! I don't like people who are unfortunate, and some people are always unfortunate, no matter what you do for them. If you put the sun on their heads instead of a hat—could anything be lovelier?—they'd still go about sighing: "Ah, I'm so unlucky! So lonely! Nobody loves me! Life is a bore! Ah! Oh! Oo!" Whenever I meet a person like that I want to make him more miserable than ever.

Teter ev: Bless your heart! Listen, I'll make a confession too: I can't bear to hear women philosophize, but when *you* philosophize I could kiss your hand.

Yelena (*coolly*): Only my hand? And only when I philosophize? (*Catching herself.*) But goodness! What am I doing? Joking—making fun, when in there—someone is suffering—

Teter ev (*nodding towards Bessemenov's door*): And in there, too. And wherever you point your finger someone is suffering. It's a bad habit people have got into.

Yelena: But they really *do* suffer.

Teter ev: They do.

Yelena: And so they ought to be pitied.

Teter ev: Not always. And perhaps never. It's much better to help them than to pity them.

Yelena: You can't help everybody. And you can't help *anybody* if you don't pity him first.

Teter ev: This is how I look at it, young lady: suffering is born of desire, and there are two kinds of desire—that worthy of respect and that unworthy of it. A man should be helped to

satisfy desires that make him well and strong and that, ennobling him, raise him above the animal.

Yelena (not following him): Perhaps. Perhaps you're right. But what's happening in there? Do you suppose she's gone to sleep? It's so quiet. They're whispering. The old folk, too—they've hidden themselves away in their corner. How strange! All of a sudden—noise, confusion, cries, moans! Then, just as suddenly—not a sound, not a movement.

Teterév: That's life for you. People shout until they get tired, then they take a rest. When they've had a rest they start shouting again. Here in this house, everything quiets down very quickly—shouts of pain and shouts of laughter alike. Every shock is like the slapping of a mud puddle with a stick. And the last sound is always the outcry of the Commonplace, the household god of these people. It's she who always has the last word here, be it of triumph or of rage.

Yelena (thoughtfully): I had a better time when I lived in the jail. My husband was a gambler; he drank, too, and often went shooting. Ours was an out-of-the-way little town and most of the people in it were sort of—well, passé. I had lots of free time, but I didn't go anywhere or see anybody but the prisoners. They were fond of me. An amusing lot when you get to know them. Awfully sweet and simple, really they are. Sometimes when I looked at them I couldn't believe they were thieves and murderers and all sorts of criminals. Once I said to one of the murderers: "Did you really kill somebody?" "Yes, I did, Yelena Nikolayevna," he said. "I really did. Can't be helped." And it seemed to me that he—that murderer—had taken somebody else's guilt upon himself, that he was only a stone that somebody else had thrown. I used to buy them books and I saw to it that there were playing cards and draughts-boards in every cell. And I gave them tobacco. And wine, the least bit. When they were let out for exercise they would play ball and ninepins. They were just like children. Whenever I read them funny stories they would roar with laughter—like children. I bought some song-birds and cages and put one in every cell. They loved their birds almost as much as they loved me. They adored to have me wear bright clothes—a red waist or a yellow skirt. They like bright, cheerful colours. I used to dress up for them on purpose. (*Sighs.*) It was very pleasant living with them. Three years went by before I knew it. When my husband was killed by the horse I cried less at losing him than at having to leave the jail. It was such a pity!

And the prisoners were sorry, too. (*Glancing about the room.*) It's not nearly so nice living here. There's something—something sinister about this house. It's not the people who are bad, it's something else. But there, I've got myself into an awful mood—feeling quite low. Here we are talking away, you and I, while in that room a woman may be dying.

T e t e r e v (*serenely*): And we're not sorry.

Y e l e n a (*quickly*): Aren't you sorry?

T e t e r e v : No. And you aren't either.

Y e l e n a : No, I'm not. I suppose it's wrong, but somehow I don't feel that it is. That happens sometimes: you know a thing's wrong, but it doesn't seem to be. Strange as it may seem, I feel more sorry for him—for Pyotr Vasilyevich—than for her. I feel awfully sorry for him. He's miserable here, isn't he?

T e t e r e v : Everybody's miserable here.

P o l y a (*entering*): Hullo!

Y e l e n a (*jumps up and goes over to her*): Sh! Do you know what's happened? Tatyana has taken poison!

P o l y a : Wha-at?

Y e l e n a : Yes, she has. The doctor and her brother are in there with her now.

P o l y a : Is she dying? Is she going to die?

Y e l e n a : Nobody knows.

P o l y a : What did she do it for? Did she say?

Y e l e n a : I don't know. I don't think so.

P y o t r (*thrusting a frowzy head through the door*): Yelena Nikolayevna, just a minute. (*Yelena hurries over.*)

P o l y a (*to Teterev*): Why are you looking at me like that?

T e t e r e v : How many times have you asked me the same thing!

P o l y a : Naturally—if you keep looking at me in the same way. What do you do it for? (*Going over to him and speaking sternly.*) Do you think I'm to blame for this?

T e t e r e v (*with a little laugh*): Do you feel guilty?

P o l y a : I feel that I dislike you more and more—that's what I feel! But tell me, how did it happen?

T e t e r e v : Yesterday she was given a little jolt, and, being rather shaky on her legs, today she fell down. That's all.

P o l y a : It's not true.

T e t e r e v : What's not?

P o l y a : I know what you're hinting at, but it's not true. Nil—

T e t e r e v : Nil? What's Nil got to do with it?

Polya: Nothing. Nor have I. Neither of us has. You—but you're wrong. I know you think it's our fault but what could we do? I love him and he loves me. It began long ago.

Teter ev (*gravely*): I don't blame you in the least. It's you who feel guilty and that makes you try to explain. Why should you? I like you. Who was it told you over and over—constantly, insistently—to get out of this house, to keep away from it? There's something unwholesome here that poisons the spirit. I was the one who told you.

Polya: Well?

Teter ev: Nothing. I just wanted to say that if you had taken my advice, you wouldn't have had to go through what you're going through now. That's all.

Polya: I see. But how could she have done such a thing? Is her life in danger? What did she take?

Teter ev: I don't know.

(Pyotr and the doctor come out of the room.)

Pyotr: Please go and help Yelena Nikolayevna, Polya.

Teter ev (*to Pyotr*): How is she?

Doctor: Nothing serious. If the patient weren't so unstrung there would be hardly any ill effects. She drank very little—burned her oesophagus slightly and some of the alcohol got into her stomach, but it was instantly thrown up.

Pyotr: You must be tired, doctor. Sit down.

Doctor: Thanks. She'll not be feeling herself for a week or so. I had an interesting case the other day: a house painter drank a glass of varnish instead of beer—

(Bessemenov opens the door of his room and stands there without a word, staring in gloomy expectation at the doctor.)

Pyotr: Don't worry, father. There's no danger.

Doctor: No, there isn't, I assure you. In two or three days she'll be back on her feet.

Bessemenov: Do you mean it?

Doctor: I do.

Bessemenov: Thank you. If you mean it, if it's true there's no danger, I'm very grateful to you. Pyotr ... er ... come here.

(Pyotr goes over to him. They both disappear inside the room, from which comes the sound of whispering and the clink of coin.)

Teterev (*to the doctor*): And what happened to the house painter?

Doctor: Eh? What's that?

Teterev: The house painter—what happened to him?

Doctor: Him? Oh, nothing. He got well. Uh . . . it seems to me I've met you before, haven't I?

Teterev: Perhaps.

Doctor: Weren't you once in hospital with typhoid fever?

Teterev: I was.

Doctor (*with satisfaction*): See that? I was sure I had seen you somewhere before. Wait—it was last spring, wasn't it? I think I even remember your name.

Teterev: And I remember you.

Doctor: You do?

Teterev: Yes. When I was getting well I asked you to increase my food rations and you made a face and said: "Be thankful to get this much. There are more than enough tramps and drunks like you in the world."

Doctor (*flabbergasted*): But that's . . . that's . . . I beg your pardon, but you . . . your name . . . that is, I'm Dr. Nikolai Troyerukov, and—

Teterev (*going over to him*): And I'm Terenty-the-Oracle, Cavalier of the Green Bottle. (*The doctor backs away from him.*) Don't be afraid, I won't hurt you.

(Teterev walks past him into the hall. The doctor watches him open-mouthed, fanning himself with his hat. Enter Pyotr.)

Doctor (*glancing furtively towards the hall*): But I must be going. Others are waiting for me. If she complains of pain, repeat the drops. But there shouldn't be any great pain. Good day. Oh . . . er . . . that gentleman who was just here—a very interesting type. Is he . . . er . . . a relative?

Pyotr: No, a lodger.

Doctor: I see. Very interesting. Highly original. Good day. Thank you.

(Pyotr sees him out. Bessemenov and Akulina Ivanovna come out of their room and cautiously tiptoe over to Tatyana's door.)

Bessemenov: Wait. Don't go in. There's not a sound. Maybe she's asleep. We mustn't wake her up. (*Leads Akulina Ivanovna over to the trunk in the corner.*) Well, mother, we've lived to see the gala day! All the talk, all the gossip there'll be now! No end of it!

Akulina Ivanovna: For shame, father. What are you saying? Who cares? Let them talk their heads off so long as she gets well. Let them shout the news from the housetops if it gives them any pleasure.

Bessemenov: Yes, of course. You're right, only ... tck, tck, tck! Don't you see? We're disgraced.

Akulina Ivanovna: Disgraced? Why?

Bessemenov: To have your own daughter take poison! What does that make us, you and me? What did we do to her? How did we treat her? Were we beasts to her? They'll say all sorts of things about us. I don't mind, I can stand anything for the sake of my children, only why should I? What have I done to deserve it? That's what I'd like to know. My children! Not a word can I get out of them. What goes on inside of them? I don't know. What's on their minds? I can't guess. That's what hurts.

Akulina Ivanovna: I know. It hurts me too. After all, I'm their mother. Day after day I wear myself out for them, and not a word of thanks for it. I know. It wouldn't be so bad if they were well and happy, but to have a thing like this happen!

Polya (*coming out of Tatyana's room*): Shh! She's going to sleep.

Bessemenov (*getting up*): How is she? Can we go in to see her?

Akulina Ivanovna: I'll be so quiet! Just her father and me?

Polya: The doctor said not to let anyone see her.

Bessemenov (*suspiciously*): How do you know? You didn't see the doctor.

Polya: Yelena Nikolayevna told me so.

Bessemenov: Is she in there? How do you like that? Strangers can see her, but her own folk can't. Very strange.

Akulina Ivanovna: We'll have dinner in the kitchen, so's not to disturb her, poor dear! And me not allowed so much as a peep at her!

(With a despairing wave of her hand she goes out into the hall. Polya stands leaning against the sideboard gazing at the door of Tatyana's room. Her brows are drawn, her lips compressed, her body taut. Bessemenov sits at the table as if waiting for something.)

P o l y a (*softly*): Was father here today?

B e s s e m e n o v : It's not your father you want. What's your father to you? I know who you want. (*Polya looks at him in amazement.*) Yes, your father was here in his filthy rags, not a trace of decency about him. And still you'd ought to respect him as your father.

P o l y a : I do. Why should you tell me that?

B e s s e m e n o v : To let you know it. Your father's a tramp, but even so it's up to you to bow to his will. But how can you be expected to appreciate what a father is? You have no feelings—none of you young folk have. Look at you—a girl without any means, without so much as a roof over your head. You'd ought to be humble, to be kind and considerate to everybody, and instead of that you air your own opinions and make yourself out to be as good as educated folk. And now you're about to get married, while in that room lies one as almost took her own life—

P o l y a : What do you mean? Why should you say such a thing?

B e s s e m e n o v (*with the irritation of one who has lost the thread of his thought*): Think it over. Try to understand. That's why I'm saying it, so's you'll understand. Who are you? A nobody, and yet—you're getting married. And there's my daughter.... What are you standing there for? Go into the kitchen! Get busy! I'll keep watch, you get out. (*Polya looks at him in perplexity, then turns to go out.*) Just a minute. I ... er ... was sharp with your father today.

P o l y a : Why?

B e s s e m e n o v : None of your business. Run along.

(The amazed Polya goes out. Bessemenov goes softly over to Tatyana's door and opens it a crack to peep in. Yelena comes out and closes the door behind her.)

Y e l e n a : Don't go in, she seems to be sleeping. Don't disturb her.

B e s s e m e n o v : Hm. You can disturb us as much as you like, but we have no right to disturb anybody.

Yelena (*surprised*): But she's ill.

Bessemenov: I know. I know everything.

(*Goes out into the hall. Yelena shrugs her shoulders as she watches him. Then she goes over to the window, sits down on the couch, clasps her hands behind her head, and becomes lost in thought. A smile plays over her lips and she closes her eyes dreamily. Pyotr comes in looking glum and dishevelled. He tosses his head as if to free it of something. On seeing Yelena he stops.*)

Yelena (*without opening her eyes*): Who's there?

Pyotr: Why are you smiling? Strange to see anyone smiling now, after—

Yelena (*glancing at him*): Grumpy? Tired? Poor boy! I feel so sorry for you!

Pyotr (*sitting down beside her*): I feel sorry for myself.

Yelena: You ought to go away somewhere.

Pyotr: I know I ought. What am I doing here? I can't bear this life.

Yelena: What kind of life would you like to live? Do tell me. I often ask you that, but you never answer.

Pyotr: It's hard to be frank.

Yelena: Even with me?

Pyotr: Even with you. How do I know what you think of me? Or how you'll take what I say? Sometimes it seems to me that you....

Yelena: That I what?

Pyotr: That you....

Yelena: That I like you. I do, I do! A lot! You're a dear, darling boy.

Pyotr (*impetuously*): I'm not a boy. I've done a lot of thinking. Listen, tell me honestly—do you approve of all the fuss Nil, Shishkin, Tsvetayeva and all those other loud-mouths make? All this reading aloud of weighty books and this staging of plays for the workers? Do you think it's a sensible way of spending your time? And all their activities—are they really so important? Worth devoting one's whole life to? What do you think?

Yelena: I'm ignorant, darling. I can't judge, I'm so frivolous, you know. They seem nice to me—Nil and Shishkin and all the others. They're bright and cheerful and always doing something. I like cheerful people. I'm cheerful myself. But why do you ask?

Pyotr: Because they get on my nerves. If they enjoy living that way, let them—I don't object; I don't object to anything, but why should they object to the way *I* live? Why should they accord some special significance to what they do? Why should they call me a coward and an egoist?

Yelena (*putting her hand on his head*): Poor dear, you're worn out.

Pyotr: No, I'm not, I'm just annoyed. I have a right to live the way I want to—the way *I* want to!—haven't I?

Yelena (*playing with his hair*): That's much too deep for me. I *do* live the way I want to, according to my own lights, and nobody could talk me into going into a convent for love or money. If they forced me into one I'd run away or jump in the river.

Pyotr: You spend more time with them than with me. You like them better than you do me. I feel it. But what I wanted to tell you was—they're empty barrels.

Yelena (*surprised*): They're what?

Pyotr: Empty barrels. Remember the fable about the empty barrels?

Yelena: Yes. But then—am I an empty barrel too?

Pyotr: Oh, no! You're full of life. You're refreshing, like a cold spring deep in the woods.

Yelena: Brr! Am I really so cold?

Pyotr: Please don't make a joke of it. For me this moment is . . . is . . . ahem. And you find it funny. Why? Am I so amusing? I want to live, to live as I like, as I see fit!

Yelena: Then why don't you? Who's stopping you?

Pyotr: There *is* someone—or something. Whenever I make up my mind to live alone and independent I seem to hear someone say I mustn't.

Yelena: Your conscience?

Pyotr: Oh no. I haven't. . . . Well, I wouldn't think of committing a crime. I only want to be free . . . that is. . . .

Yelena (*bending over him*): That isn't what you want to say. It's so much simpler than you make it. I'll have to help you, poor boy, so that you won't get all tangled up in such simple things.

Pyotr: You're laughing at me, Yelena Nikolayevna! It's cruel of you. What I want to say is: here am I, baring my soul to you. . .

Yelena: That's not it either.

Pyotr: I suppose I'm a weak sort. Life is too much for me. I'm aware of the commonplaceness of my surroundings, but I can't change or improve them. I want to go away, to live alone—

Yelena (*taking his head in her hands*): Repeat what I say after me: "I love you."

Pyotr: Oh, I do, I do! But again you're joking.

Yelena: No, I'm not. I'm perfectly serious. I've had my mind made up for a long time to marry you. Maybe I oughtn't to, but I want to dreadfully.

Pyotr: God, how happy I am! I love you like—(*Tatyana is heard to moan. Pyotr jumps up and looks about him wild-eyed. Yelena, unperturbed, gets up too.*) That must have been Tatyana. And here we are—

Yelena (*going to Tatyana's room*): We aren't doing anything wrong.

Tatyana: A drink. Give me a drink.

Yelena: I'm coming.

(*Smiles at Pyotr and goes out. Pyotr stands clutching his head in his hands and staring in front of him. The hall door opens and Akulina Ivanovna stands in the doorway.*)

Akulina Ivanovna (*in a loud whisper*): Pyotr! Pyotr, where are you?

Pyotr: Here.

Akulina Ivanovna: Come and have dinner.

Pyotr: I don't want any. I'm not coming.

Yelena (*coming out of Tatyana's room*): He's coming with me.

(*Akulina Ivanovna darts a look of displeasure at her and goes out.*)

Pyotr (*throwing himself at Yelena*): How wicked of us! Here we are . . . while she's . . .

Yelena: Come along. What's wicked about it? In the theatre they always give you something light after the heavy scenes. We need it even more in real life.

(*Pyotr presses close to her as she takes his arm and leads him out.*)

Tatyana (*moaning hoarsely*): Yelena! Yelena!

(*Polya comes running in.*)

ACT IV

THE SAME SETTING

Evening. A lamp is lighted on the table. Polya is laying the table for tea. Tatyana, recuperating, is lying on the sofa, almost beyond reach of the lamp light. Tsvetayeva is sitting beside her.

T a t y a n a (*softly, reproachfully*): Do you think I don't want to face life as cheerfully and bravely as you do? I do, but—I can't. I was born without faith. I learned to think.

T s v e t a y e v a : That's it—you think too much. And is it worth while improving your mind just for the sake of pondering things? Thought is a good thing, but you've got to have imagination, too. Otherwise life will be an insufferable bore and a burden. You've got to be able to catch a vision of the future—at least from time to time.

(Polya smiles affectionately as she listens to Tsvetayeva.)

T a t y a n a : And what do you see in that future?

T s v e t a y e v a : Whatever you wish to see.

T a t y a n a : That's it, you've got to have a good imagination.

T s v e t a y e v a : You've got to have faith.

T a t y a n a : In what?

T s v e t a y e v a : In your dream. Whenever I look into the eyes of my schoolboys, I think: here's Novikov—when he finishes school he'll go to the gymnasium and then to the university—probably become a doctor. He's a capable child, very good and serious, with a broad brow. He takes to people easily. He'll work very hard, with no thought of gain, and people will come to love and respect him, I'm sure. And some day, when he's looking back on his childhood, he'll remember how his teacher Tsvetayeva hit him on the nose when she was playing with him during the break. Or maybe he won't. It doesn't matter. But he probably will; he's very fond of me. And then there's that ragged, dirty-faced, absent-minded Klovov. Always arguing and getting into mischief. An orphan—lives with his uncle, a night watchman. They're poor as church mice, but he's a proud, bold little fellow. I think he'll

be a journalist when he grows up. If you ever knew how many interesting boys there are in my class! I'm always guessing what will become of them—what role they're destined to play in life. It's great fun. A mere trifle, Tanya, but you can't imagine what pleasure it gives me!

T a t y a n a : And you yourself? Perhaps your pupils have brilliant futures awaiting them, but you? Where will you be then?

T s v e t a y e v a : Are you hinting that I'll be dead? Oh, no! I mean to live a good long time!

P o l y a (*breathing the words softly*): What a darling you are, Masha!

T s v e t a y e v a (*smiling at Poly*a): Thanks, linnet! I'm not sentimental, Tanya, but when I think of the future, of the people of the future and the sort of lives they'll live, a sweet and solemn feeling comes over me—the feeling that comes on one of those clear, crisp autumn days—you know the kind I mean, when a placid sun shines in a clear sky and the air is heady and transparent, lending sharpness to distant outlines—bracing, but not cold; sunny, but not hot.

T a t y a n a : Dreams! Dreams! Perhaps you and Nil and Shishkin and others of your sort can live on dreams, but I can't.

T s v e t a y e v a : But look, they're not just dreams—

T a t y a n a : Nothing has ever seemed real to me. Nothing. Except perhaps this me and those walls. When I say "yes" or "no" it isn't because of conviction. It's just because I have to say something. And sometimes when I've said "no" I stop and wonder whether I was right. Shouldn't I have said "yes"?

T s v e t a y e v a : You enjoy being like that. Be honest: aren't you the least bit enamoured of that "dual personality"? Or perhaps you're afraid to put faith in anything. After all, faith carries obligations.

T a t y a n a : I don't know—I just don't know. Convert me to your faith. You convert others. (*Laughs softly.*) I feel sorry for the people who believe you. After all, it's only an illusion. Life always has been and always will be just as it is now—murky and stifling.

T s v e t a y e v a (*smiling*): Will it? Perhaps it won't.

P o l y a (*as if to herself*): It certainly won't.

T a t y a n a : What did you say?

P o l y a : I said it won't.

T s v e t a y e v a : Good for you, linnet!

T a t y a n a : Another one of your unfortunate believers! But ask her why it won't? What is going to change it? Ask her that!

P o l y a (*going over to them softly*): It's got to change because ... because ... at present life isn't for everybody. Very few people really live. Most of them have no time to. All they have time to do is work—earn their bread. But when they too—

S h i s h k i n (*entering briskly*): Hullo, everybody! (*To Poly a.*) Good evening, fair daughter of King Duncan!

P o l y a : Of King who?

S h i s h k i n : Caught! So you haven't read the Heine I left you two weeks ago? Good evening, Tatyana Vasilyevna.

T a t y a n a (*holding out her hand*): She has no time for books now. She's going to get married.

S h i s h k i n : She is? Who to?

T s v e t a y e v a : Nil.

S h i s h k i n : In that case I congratulate you, but in general I don't see much point in getting married, raising families, and all that sort of thing. Marriage, in modern conditions—

T a t y a n a : Oh, don't! Spare us! We've already heard your views on the subject.

S h i s h k i n : Very well, I'll spare you. I have no time, anyway. (*To Tsvetayeva.*) Are you coming with me? Good. Where's Pyotr?

P o l y a : He's upstairs.

S h i s h k i n : Hm ... no, I won't go for him. You just tell him, Tatyana Vasilyevna, or perhaps you, Poly a, that I ... er ... that my lessons with Prokhorov ... that is, that I'm without anyone to tutor again.

T s v e t a y e v a : You certainly have no luck.

T a t y a n a : Have you quarrelled with him?

S h i s h k i n : Not particularly. I tried to be civil.

T s v e t a y e v a : But how did it happen? I thought you were pleased with Prokhorov.

S h i s h k i n : I was, damn it all. And when you get down to it, I suppose he's better than most. He's not stupid, but he's a braggart, and a windbag, and—(*suddenly exploding*) a beast!

T a t y a n a : I'm afraid Pyotr won't get you any more tutoring to do after this.

S h i s h k i n : He'll probably be angry with me.

T s v e t a y e v a : What came between you and Prokhorov?

S h i s h k i n : Can you believe it? It turns out he's a Jew-hater.

T a t y a n a : What do you care?

Shishkin: But that's indecent! A person who pretends to be cultivated can't harbour feelings like that. He's just a foul bourgeois, that's what he is! Take this, for instance: his parlourmaid began to attend school on Sundays. Excellent! He himself gave me a long and tiresome harangue on the value of these schools—God knows I didn't ask him to. He even boasted of being one of the initiators of the movement. Well, one Sunday he came home, and—oh horrors!—instead of having the door opened to him by the parlourmaid, it was opened by the nursemaid! Where's the parlourmaid? says he. At school, says she. What a row there was! And that was the end of the parlourmaid's schooling. How do you like that?

(*Tatyana shrugs her shoulders and says nothing.*)

Tsvetayeva: And all the talking he does!

Shishkin: Pyotr's always finding cads like him for me to tutor.

Tatyana (*dryly*): If I'm not mistaken, you were pleased with the treasurer you gave lessons to.

Shishkin: I was. He's quite a decent old fellow, but a numismatist. He was forever poking coppers under my nose and raving about Caesars and the Diadochi and Pharaohs in their chariots. I stood it as long as I could, and one day I said to him, "Listen, Vikenty Vasilyevich, you're wasting your time on nonsense. Why, any old cobble-stone out in the street is more antique than your coins." That was a shock to the old boy. "Do you mean to say I've been devoting fifteen years of my life to nonsense?" he says. There was no denying it, and so. . . . When he paid me off he held back half a ruble. Kept it for his collection, I guess. But that was nothing. This affair with Prokhorov. . . hm. . . . (*Glumly.*) It's deucedly hard to be like me. (*Briskly.*) Marya Nikitishna, it's time for us to be going!

Tsvetayeva: I'm ready. Good-bye, Tatyana. Tomorrow's Sunday, I'll come and see you in the morning.

Tatyana: Thanks. Sometimes I feel as if I were a sort of weed that people trip over—nothing pretty or useful about me—I just grow underfoot for people to catch their toes in.

Shishkin: Ugh, what a horrid idea!

Tsvetayeva: It hurts to hear you say such things, Tatyana.

Tatyana: But wait. I think—or rather I know—yes, at last

I know one bitter truth: he who is without faith is not fit to live; he must die.

Tsvetayeva (*smiling*): Must he really? Perhaps he mustn't?

Tatyana: You're making fun of me. Have you nothing better to do?

Tsvetayeva: But I'm not, darling, really I'm not. It's your illness makes you say such things—you're tired and ill. Well, good-bye for the present. And don't think we're really so cruel and hard-hearted.

Tatyana: Run along. Good-bye.

Shishkin (*to Polya*): Well, when are you going to read Heine? Oh, I forgot, you're getting married. I could say a thing or two against that, but . . . ahem! Good-bye.

(*Goes out behind Tsvetayeva. Pause.*)

Polya: Mass will be over soon, I guess. Shall I have the samovar heated?

Tatyana: I don't think mother and father will want tea. But do as you like. (*Pause.*) Silence used to get on my nerves, but now I crave it.

Polya: Isn't it time for you to take your medicine?

Tatyana: Not yet. There's been so much noise and confusion. Shishkin's a noisy creature.

Polya (*going over to her*): He's very nice.

Tatyana: Kind-hearted, but not very bright.

Polya: He's decent, and he's got courage. He's always ready to stand up for what he thinks is right. See how he stood up for that parlourmaid? Most people don't give a straw how parlourmaids and other servants of the rich live. Even if they did, they wouldn't take the trouble to put in a good word for them.

Tatyana (*without looking at Polya*): Aren't you afraid to marry Nil, Polya?

Polya (*surprised*): Why should I be? Of course not.

Tatyana: Well, I would be, in your place. I say this to you because I'm fond of you. You aren't like him. You're a simple girl, but he has read a lot. He's educated. He may get tired of you. Have you ever thought of that, Polya?

Polya: No. I know he loves me.

Tatyana (*tetchily*): As if one could ever know that!

(*Teterev comes in with the samovar.*)

Polya: Thanks. I'll go for the milk. (*Goes out.*)

Teterev (*his face is puffy with a hang-over*): As I was coming through the kitchen, Stepanida spied me and asked me to bring in the samovar. "Be so kind," says she. "I'll give you a pickle for it—a nice juicy pickle." I couldn't resist, glutton that I am.

Tatyana: Have you been to mass already?

Teterev: No, I didn't go today. I've got a headache. How are you, feeling better?

Tatyana: Yes, thank you. I get asked that twenty times a day. I'd feel better still if this house weren't so noisy. All this hurly-burly upsets me—everybody shouting and rushing about. Father is always scolding Nil, mother is always sighing, and I just lie here watching them, unable to see any point to what they—all of them—call living.

Teterev: Why not? It's a curious business, living is. I'm an outsider, I take no part in the affairs of this earth—just go on living out of curiosity—and yet I find that life is not without interest.

Tatyana: You make no demands on it, I know. But what do you find so interesting about it?

Teterev: People are just tuning up. I like to hear musicians tune their horns and fiddles before the curtain goes up. You catch certain true notes—sometimes a lovely phrase. It makes you anxious to know what's coming—what they're going to play, who the soloists will be, what the opera will be about. The same thing is happening here—people are just tuning up.

Tatyana: That may be true of the theatre. The conductor comes in, waves his baton, and the musicians give a poor, soulless rendition of some outworn piece. But here? What are these musicians capable of rendering? Nothing, it seems to me.

Teterev: Something *fortissimo*.

Tatyana: Time will tell. (*Pause. Teterev lights his pipe.*) Why do you smoke a pipe instead of cigarettes?

Teterev: More convenient. I'm a tramp, you know. I spend most of the year on the road. I'll be off again soon—as soon as winter sets in for good.

Tatyana: Where?

Teterev: I don't know. It doesn't matter.

Tatyana: You'll freeze to death in some ditch when you're drunk.

Teterev: I never drink when I'm on the road. And what

if I do freeze to death? Better to freeze on the go than rot sitting still.

T a t y a n a : Is it me you have in mind?

T e t e r e v (*jumping up in alarm*): Good Lord, no! How could you think such a thing! I'm not that cruel!

T a t y a n a (*smiling*): Don't let it upset you. I don't mind. I've become immune to pain. (*Bitterly.*) Everyone seems to know that. Nil, Polya, Yelena, Masha—they all behave like rich people who eat their dainties without a thought for the feelings of the beggar who watches them.

T e t e r e v (*making a face and speaking through clenched teeth*): Why do you humiliate yourself so? You ought to have more self-respect.

T a t y a n a : Let's change the subject. (*Pause.*) Tell me something about yourself. You never talk about yourself. Why don't you?

T e t e r e v : It's a very big, but very uninteresting subject.

T a t y a n a : Tell me this: why have you chosen such a strange way of life? You strike me as being clever and gifted. What made you what you are?

T e t e r e v (*grinning*): The story would be too long and tiresome if I told it in my own words.

I went in search of happiness,
And came back naked, barefoot,
Bereft of my habiliments,
Of all my hopes and dreams. . . .

A simple explanation, but too pretty for me. I must add that in Russia a tramp or a drunk enjoys more ease of mind than a sober, honest fellow. (*Enter Pyotr and Nil.*) Only people as hard and sharp as swords can make their way in this world. Ah, Nil! Where have you been?

N i l : At the station. I just won a very good fight. That thick-skulled chief of ours—

P y o t r : You'll get the sack one of these days, I can see that.

N i l : I'll find myself another job.

T a t y a n a : Pyotr, Shishkin has quarrelled with Prokhorov and was ashamed to tell you himself.

P y o t r (*vexed*): Damn it all, that's the limit! How can I face Prokhorov now? And what's worse, I can't help any of the other fellows. Prokhorov will turn down anyone I suggest.

Nil: Don't be in such a hurry. You don't know who's in the right yet.

Pyotr: Oh, yes I do!

Tatyana: Shishkin was shocked to discover Prokhorov was down on the Jews.

Nil (*laughing*): God bless him!

Pyotr: You *would* find that noble in him! You, too, have no respect for other people's point of view.

Nil: Do you respect Jew-haters?

Pyotr: I wouldn't lay hands on anybody for his ideas, no matter what they were.

Nil: Well, I would.

Teterev (*after calmly surveying both parties to the quarrel*): Go ahead and do it.

Pyotr: Who gives you the right?

Nil: Nobody. Rights aren't given, they're taken. A person's got to win rights for himself if he doesn't want to be crushed under a weight of obligations.

Pyotr: Oh, I say!

Tatyana (*petulantly*): Do stop quarrelling! These endless quarrels! Don't you ever get sick of them?

Pyotr (*restraining himself*): Forgive me, I won't do it again. But it's true, Shishkin has placed me in a confoundedly—

Tatyana: I know. He's stupid.

Nil: He's a decent chap. He won't let anyone step on his toes, but he's not afraid to step on theirs if necessary. It's a fine thing to know your own worth.

Tatyana: To be childish, you mean?

Nil: I don't. But it's a good thing, whatever you call it—childishness or anything else.

Pyotr: Absurd.

Nil: You think so? When a fellow throws away his last crust of bread because the hand that gave it to him is not to his liking?

Pyotr: He can't be very hungry if he does. Oh, of course you'll deny it. You're no better than he is—just as childish. You make a point of showing father how much you despise him. Why should you?

Nil: Why shouldn't I?

Teterev: Decency demands the telling of white lies, my boy.

Pyotr: What's the good of it? Tell me that.

Nil: We'll never understand each other, you and I. Why should I explain to you? Everything your father says and does is repulsive to me.

Pyotr: Maybe it is to me, too, but I try not to show it, while you make a point of it. And he takes it out on us—on my sister and me.

Tatyana: Oh, stop it.

(Nil glances at her and walks over to the table.)

Pyotr: Does it upset you so much?

Tatyana: It bores me. The same thing over and over.

(Polya, who enters with a jug of milk, is struck by the dreamy smile on Nil's face.)

Polya: Doesn't he look like a saint?

Teteriev: Why the blissful smile?

Nil: I was just recalling the tongue lashing I gave the chief. Very amusing, this life of ours.

Teteriev *(in a deep bass voice)*: Are they born blind, these optimists, or what?

Nil: I don't know whether you'd call me an optimist or not, but I certainly do enjoy life. *(Gets up and paces the floor.)* It's a grand thing to be alive!

Teteriev: It is.

Pyotr: Two comedians—if you're not just making believe.

Nil: As for you—I don't understand you. Everybody knows you're in love, and that she loves you too. Isn't that enough to make you want to turn somersaults? To give you at least a little joy in life?

(Polya looks proudly out from behind the samovar. Tatyana twists on the couch trying to catch a glimpse of Nil's face.)

Teteriev smiles as he knocks the ashes out of his pipe.)

Pyotr: You forget that, first of all, students aren't allowed to get married; secondly, I've got a big battle with my parents ahead; and thirdly—

Nil: Good Lord! Was ever anything more absurd? There's only one thing left for you, Pyotr: run off into the desert!

(Polya smiles.)

T a t y a n a : Don't try to be funny, Nil!

Nil : You're on the wrong track, Pyotr. Life's a great thing even if you're not in love. Even if you're driving a rattletrap locomotive on an autumn night, in the rain and the wind—or in winter, with the blizzard roaring, snow blotting out the world and closing you in. It's exhausting to sit in the cab on a night like that—exhausting and dangerous. And even so it has its charms. The only thing that has no charms is that honest people have to take orders from pigs—from thieves and imbeciles. But life wasn't made for them. They'll pass. They'll disappear like a sore on a healthy body. There's no such thing as an order of the day that's not subject to change.

Pyotr : We've heard these speeches of yours often enough. Wait and see what answer life has in store for you.

Nil : I'll make it give the answer I want. You can't frighten me. I know better than you that life is hard, that sometimes it's sickeningly cruel, that a fierce, unbridled force is pressing people down. I know all that and don't like it. It gets my dander up. I don't want to accept things as they are. Life is a serious business, and it's out of shape. It will take all the strength and ability I have to help put it into shape. I also know I'm no hero—I'm just a strong honest fellow. And even so I say: just you wait—we'll win out in the end! And all my powers will go to satisfying my longing to change life—to throw myself into its very vortex—push it this way and that, mould it, help one thing, hinder another. That's what you call living! That's the joy of life!

T e t e r e v (*with a little laugh*): Therein lies the secret of learning; therein philosophy's lesson. And all other philosophy is claptrap!

Y e l e n a (*from the doorway*): What's all this shouting and waving of arms about?

Nil (*rushing towards her*): Here's one who will understand me! I've just been singing a hymn to life. You tell them what a pleasure it is to be alive.

P o l y a (*softly*): Oh it is, it is!

Y e l e n a : Does anyone doubt it?

Nil (*to Poly*): My blessed little mouse!

Y e l e n a : Come, now, no love-making in my presence.

P y o t r : God knows what's got into him. He must be drunk.

(*Tatyana throws her head back on the cushion and covers her face with her hands.*)

Yelena: Oh, you're about to have tea? And I came to ask you to have it with me. Well, then, I'll have it with you. It's lively here for a change. (*To Teterev.*) You're the only one, you wise old owl, who seems to be in the dumps. How's that?

Teterev: I'm as gay as anybody else, only I like to be quiet when I'm gay and noisy when I'm sad.

Nil: Like all big, clever, sulky dogs.

Yelena: I've never seen you either gay or sad—only philosophical. What do you think, everybody?—what do you think, Tanya?—he's teaching me philosophy! Last night he read me a long lecture on the law of . . . of proximate cause. How does it go? Oh, dear, I've forgotten. Come, tell me again.

Teterev (*smiling*): All life phenomena spring from—

Yelena: Hear that? Just see what clever things I'm learning! I don't suppose any of you ever heard that that law represents ("represents" is a philosophical term, mind you)—represents something like a . . . like a tooth, because it's got four roots. Am I right?

Teterev: Who am I to call you wrong?

Yelena: Exactly. You just try it! The first root (or maybe it's not the first)—is primary cause. Existence—that's matter in form. Take me, for instance: I'm matter which has taken (not without cause) the form of a woman, but (and this time without any cause whatsoever) is deprived of being. Being is eternal, but matter in form appears on this earth and then—it's gone. Am I right?

Teterev: We'll let it go at that.

Yelena: And besides this I know there are such things as causal relationships, *a priori* and *a posteriori*, but what they are I can't for the life of me remember. I'll probably get bald from all this wisdom. But the most profound problem posed by all this philosophy is: why in the world did you decide to teach me philosophy, Terenty Khrisanfovich?

Teterev: Firstly, because I take pleasure in looking at you.

Yelena: Thank you for that. Don't bother about the "secondly"—it can't be interesting.

Teterev: Secondly, because a person can't lie when he philosophizes, for philosophy is merely a figment of the imagination.

Yelena: Which means nothing to me. Oh, yes, Tanya! How do you feel? (*Without waiting for an answer.*) Pyotr ... er ... Pyotr Vasilyevich, what are you so displeased with?

Pyotr: Myself.

Nil: And everybody else?

Yelena: I feel a sudden urge to sing. What a pity today's Saturday and mass isn't over yet! (*Enter Bessemenov and Akulina Ivanovna.*) Ah, here come the pious folk! Good evening.

Bessemenov (*dryly*): Good evening.

Akulina Ivanovna (*in the same tone*): Good evening, young lady. But we've exchanged greetings once today.

Yelena: So we have. I had forgotten. Er ... how was church? Was it hot?

Bessemenov: We don't go to church to take the temperature.

Yelena (*embarrassed*): I see. But I—that wasn't what I meant. I meant to ask if there were many people there.

Akulina Ivanovna: We didn't count them, young lady.

Polya (*to Bessemenov*): Will you have tea?

Bessemenov: First we'll have supper. Go and get something ready, mother. (*Akulina Ivanovna goes out with a sniff. Silence. Tatyana gets up and Yelena helps her over to the table. Nil takes Tatyana's place on the couch. Pyotr walks up and down. Teterev, who is sitting at the piano, watches them all with a smile on his face. Polya is at the samovar. Bessemenov sits on the trunk in the corner.*) Surprising how thievish folk have become! A while back, when mother and I were going to church, I laid a board down at the gate—over the mud, that is. When we come back, the board's gone. Some thief stole it. Corruption has got into the people. (*Pause.*) There was less petty thieving back in the old days—more highway robbery, on account the people were on a bigger scale. They wouldn't put a smudge on their souls for anything as petty as a board. (*The sound of singing and the playing of an accordion comes from out in the street.*) Hear that? Singing. The eve of the Sabbath, and they're singing. (*The singing draws nearer. It is part-singing.*) Must be workmen. Went to the pub soon's they knocked off, drank up all their pay, and now they're stretching their gullets. (*The singers have reached the house. Nil leans on the window-sill and looks out.*) They'll go on living that way another year—two at the most, and all's over. Tramps they'll be, or petty thieves.

Nil: Perchikhin, it seems—

Akulina Ivanovna (*at the door*): Supper's ready, father.

Bessemenov (*getting up*): Perchikhin. Another one of those good-for-nothings. (*Goes out.*)

Yelena (*following him with her eye*): Wouldn't it be better to have tea at my place?

Nil: Very amusing, your talk with the old folk.

Yelena: I—he makes me feel uncomfortable. He doesn't like me, and that's very unpleasant—even hurtful. Why shouldn't he like me?

Pyotr: He's good enough at heart, but he's too proud.

Nil: And the least bit greedy and cantankerous.

Polya: Sh. You shouldn't say such things about a man behind his back. That's not nice.

Nil: It's not nice to be greedy.

Tatyana (*dryly*): Let's drop the subject. Father may come in any minute. He hasn't scolded anyone for the last three days. He's been trying to be pleasant.

Pyotr: It hasn't been easy, you can be sure.

Tatyana: We ought to appreciate it. He's old. It isn't his fault if he was born years before we were and doesn't see things as we do. (*With irritation.*) How cruel people are! How rude and heartless we are to each other! We're taught to love one another, to be meek and kind—

Nil: (*copying her tone*): So that others can climb up on our backs and ride to town on us.

(*Yelena laughs. Polya and Teterev smile. Pyotr goes over to Nil as if to say something to him. Tatyana shakes her head reproachfully.*)

Bessemenov (*casting a hostile glance at Yelena as he comes in*): Polya, your father's in the kitchen. Go and tell him to ... er ... come back another time, when he's ... er ... sober. Tell him to go home.

(*Polya goes out, Nil follows her.*)

Bessemenov (*to Nil*): You go too. Have a look at your future ... er ... (*Cuts himself short and sits down at the table.*) Why the silence? I notice soon's I come into the room, everybody goes mum.

Tatyana: We don't talk much when you're not here either.

Bessemenov (*scowling at Yelena*): What were you laughing at?

Yelena: Nothing in particular. Nil—

Bessemenov: Nil! He's at the bottom of everything. I could tell that without your saying so.

Tatyana: Shall I pour you out some tea?

Bessemenov: Go ahead.

Yelena: Here, Tanya, I'll do it.

Bessemenov: Don't trouble yourself. My daughter will do it, thank you.

Pyotr: I don't see what difference it makes who does it. Tatyana's not feeling well.

Bessemenov: I'm not asking you your opinion on this matter. If strangers mean more to you than your own folk—

Pyotr: Father! Aren't you ashamed?

Tatyana: There you go! Pyotr, can't you hold your tongue?

Yelena (*forcing a smile*): Is it worth—?

(The door is flung wide open and in comes Perchikhin, slightly tipsy.)

Perchikhin: Vasily Vasilyevich! Here I am! Don't think you can get rid of me by walking out of the kitchen!

Bessemenov (*without looking at him*): Well, sit down, once you're here. Have some tea.

Perchikhin: It's not tea I want. Drink it yourself. I've come to have a talk with you.

Bessemenov: Talk? Nonsense!

Perchikhin: Nonsense, eh? (*Laughs.*) You're a funny one! (*Nil comes in and stands leaning against the sideboard glaring at Bessemenov.*) Four days I been making up my mind to come and have a talk with you, and—well, here I am!

Bessemenov: Oh, drop it!

Perchikhin: No, I won't! You're a clever man, Vasily Vasilyevich; you're a rich man, but it's—it's your conscience I've come to talk to.

Pyotr (*going over to Nil and speaking in an undertone*): What did you let him in here for?

Nil: Leave him alone. It's none of your business.

Pyotr: You're always stirring up trouble.

Perchikhin (*drowning out Pyotr*): You're an old man,

too, Vasily Vasilyevich. Just think of all the years I've known you!

Bessemenov (*angrily*): What do you want of me?

Perchikhin: Here's what: tell me this, what did you put me out of your house for? I've thought and thought and can't make no sense out of it. Tell me why, brother. I've come to you without any bad feelings—with love in my heart.

Bessemenov: And fog in your head!

Tatyana: Pyotr, help me up—no, call Polya. (*Pyotr goes out.*)

Perchikhin: Take Polya, now. That sweet little girl of mine, that pretty little bird. Is it on her account you put me out? Because she took Tatyana's beau away from her?

Tatyana: How preposterous! How degrading!

Bessemenov (*slowly getting up*): Watch out, Perchikhin! Say that again and I'll—

Yelena (*to Nil, under her breath*): Take him out. There'll be trouble.

Nil: I don't want to.

Perchikhin: You won't put me out a second time, Vasily Vasilyevich! There'll be no reason to. Polya, she's a good girl and I love her, but she hadn't ought to have done it—no, brother, she hadn't ought to. It's not right to take what belongs to somebody else.

Tatyana: Yelena, help me to my room (*Yelena takes her arm. As they pass Nil, Tatyana says softly*): You ought to be ashamed! Take him out!

Bessemenov (*restraining himself with an effort*): Hold your tongue, Perchikhin. Sit down and hold your tongue, and if you can't, get out! (*Enter Polya followed by Pyotr.*)

Pyotr (*to Polya*): Wait, don't let it upset you so.

Polya: Vasily Vasilyevich! Why did you put my father out the last time he was here?

(*Bessemenov looks at her with stern disapproval, then at everyone else in turn.*)

Perchikhin (*shaking his finger*): Sh-h, daughter! Not a word! You'd ought to understand. Tatyana took poison, didn't she? What for?... See? I don't spare nobody, Vasily Vasilyevich—judge them all equal, as they deserve. I don't make no difference—

Polya: Wait, father—

Pyotr: Polya, can't you—?

Nil: You keep out of it!

Bessemenov: As for you, Polya, you're a bold and insolent—

Perchikhin: Her? Oh, no, she's—

Bessemenov: Shut up! I seem to have lost my bearings. Whose house is this anyway? Who's the master here? Who's to say what's right and what's wrong?

Perchikhin: I am. And I'll tell each of you in turn. First of all, it's wrong to take what belongs to somebody else. Secondly, once you've taken it, give it back.

Pyotr (*to Perchikhin*): Stop chirping and come into my room a minute.

Perchikhin: I don't like you, Pyotr! You're a hollow fellow. And too proud. And you don't know nothing, neither. What's sewerage, eh? There you are! I had to find out from somebody else. (*Pyotr pulls him by the sleeve.*) Hands off! Don't touch me!

Nil (*to Pyotr*): Don't touch him.

Bessemenov (*to Nil*): What are you here for? To sick the dog on?

Nil: I want to know what it's all about. What did Perchikhin do? Why did you turn him out? And what has Polya got to do with it?

Bessemenov: Are you cross-examining me?

Nil: What if I am? You're only a human being like myself.

Bessemenov (*furious*): Like you? You're not a human being, you're . . . you're poison! You're a cur!

Perchikhin: Sh-h! Let's talk quiet-like, friendly-like—

Bessemenov (*to Polya*): And you, you sly hussy—

Nil (*through his teeth*): Less noise, you!

Bessemenov: What's that? Get out, you ingrate! Turning on me who's fed you all these years by the sweat of my brow—

Tatyana (*from inside her room*): Papa! Don't!

Pyotr (*to Nil*): Have you got what you wanted? You ought to be ashamed of yourself!

Polya (*quietly*): Don't you dare shout at me. I'm no slave of yours. Not everybody will take your insults. Tell me what you turned my father out of the house for.

Nil (*calmly*): Tell me, too. This is no insane asylum. People here are expected to answer for what they do.

Bessemenov (*more quietly, taking himself in hand*): Get

out, Nil. Get out before something happens. Don't forget—I'm the one as fed you. I'm the one as brought you up.

Nil: Will you ever stop throwing that in my teeth? I'll pay you for all I've eaten.

Bessemenov: It's my soul you've eaten, you ingrate!

Polya (*taking Nil's hand*): Let's get out of here.

Bessemenov: That's it, crawl away like the snake you are. You're the one that's to blame. It's all on account of you. You stung my daughter. And now him. It's because of you my daughter....

Perchikhin: Vasily Vasilyevich! Soft there! Soft!

Tatyana (*calling out*): That's not true, father! Pyotr, can't you do something? (*Appears in the doorway and staggers into the centre of the room with outstretched arms.*) This is horrible! Good God! Terenty Khrisanfovich! Tell them ... tell them ... Nil! Polya! For God's sake, go away! Go away! Why do you allow it?

(The room is full of confused movement. Teterev, grinning, gets up slowly. Bessemenov retreats before his daughter. Pyotr seizes her by the arm and looks about him distractedly.)

Polya: Come along.

Nil: Very well. (*To Bessemenov.*) We're going. I'm sorry it had to end like this.

Bessemenov: Get out! And take her with you!

Nil: I won't come back, you know.

Polya (*loudly, in a trembling voice*): To accuse me of such a thing! To blame me for Tatyana! As if it were my fault! How shameful!

Bessemenov (*infuriated*): Well, go if you're going!

Nil: Not so loud, if you please.

Perchikhin: Don't be angry, children. We must be meek.

Polya: Good-bye. Come, father.

Nil: (*to Perchikhin*): Come along.

Perchikhin: I'm not going with you. I want to stand on my own two feet. Alone. Terenty, I stand alone! I've done nobody no harm.

Teterev: Come into my room.

Polya: Come along before they put you out again.

Perchikhin: No, I'm not coming. Terenty, I don't belong with them. I understand—

Pyotr (*to Nil*): For God's sake, go!

Nil (*to Pyotr*): A fine one you turned out to be!

Polya (*to Nil*): Come along, come along! (*They go out.*)

Bessemenov (*shouting after them*): You'll come back—
come crawling back!

Pyotr: Drop it, father.

Tatyana: Poor father! Don't shout, father.

Bessemenov: Just wait! We'll see!

Perchikhin: Well, now they've gone, thank goodness. Let
them.

Bessemenov: I'd like to tell them what I think of them,
the blood-suckers! Fed them, clothed them. . . . (*To Perchikhin.*)
And you, you old fool! Had to come and have your say, didn't
you? What are you after? What is it, I say?

Pyotr: Don't start all over again, father.

Perchikhin: Vasily Vasilyevich! Don't shout at me. Why,
I think the world of you, you funny man! I'm foolish, it's true,
but I understand a thing or two.

Bessemenov (*sinking down on the sofa*): That's more than
I do. I don't understand a thing. What happened? One of them
left—as sudden as a fire springs up in the dead of night. Says
he'll never come back. Just like that. But I don't believe him.

Teterrev (*to Perchikhin*): What are you here for?

Perchikhin: To get things plain. It's a simple way I have
of looking at things: two and two makes four and that's that.
She's my daughter, isn't she? Good. That means she's obliged. . . .
(*He suddenly falls silent.*) It's a bad father I've been to her, so
she's not obliged. Let her live her life as she sees fit. But I feel
sorry for Tatyana. I feel sorry for you, Tatyana. I feel sorry for
all of you. (*Sighs.*) Truth to tell, you're a set of fools.

Bessemenov: Hold your tongue!

Pyotr: Tatyana, has Yelena Nikolayevna gone?

Yelena (*from Tatyana's room*): No, I'm here. I'm mixing
medicines.

Bessemenov: My head's in a whirl. Can't make anything
out of it. Can Nil really have gone? For good?

Akulina Ivanovna (*enters in agitation*): What's hap-
pened? Nil and Polya are out in the kitchen . . . I was in the
shed. . . .

Bessemenov: Have they gone?

Akulina Ivanovna: No, they're waiting for Perchikhin.
Polya says . . . tell father, she says, and her lips are trembling. . . .
Nil's growling like an angry dog. What's happened?

Bessemenov (*getting up*): Now I'll go and tell them!

Pyotr: Don't, father. Stay here.

Tatyana: Father, please don't!

Bessemenov: Don't what?

Akulina Ivanovna: What is it? What's happened?

Bessemenov: Nil's leaving. For good.

Pyotr: What of it? Good riddance. What do you need him for? He's getting married. He wants to have his own family.

Bessemenov: His own? What am I, a stranger to him?

Akulina Ivanovna: Don't be so upset, father. Forget him, let him go. We've got our own children to think of. You still here, Perchikhin? They're waiting for you.

Perchikhin: Their way's not my way.

Bessemenov: It's not his going I mind. Let him go if he wants to. It's the way he went. Did you see the look he gave me?

(*Yelena comes out of Tatyana's room.*)

Teterrev (*taking Perchikhin by the arm and leading him to the door*): We'll have a glass of something, you and me.

Perchikhin: That's talking sense now!

(*They go out.*)

Bessemenov: I knew he'd leave us some day, but not like this. And her! The way she shouted! That beggar girl! Oh, no, I've got to give them a piece of my—

Akulina Ivanovna: Let them be, father! They're not our sort! Why should you bother with them? If they want to go, let them.

Yelena (*softly to Pyotr*): Come with me.

Tatyana (*to Yelena*): Me too. Take me with you.

Yelena: Of course. Come along.

Bessemenov (*hearing her invitation*): Where to?

Yelena: Upstairs.

Bessemenov: Who are you inviting? Pyotr?

Yelena: And Tatyana.

Bessemenov: Tatyana don't count, and Pyotr's not to go.

Pyotr: But, father, I'm not a child. I'll go or not, as I—

Bessemenov: You're not to go.

Akulina Ivanovna: Give in to your father, Pyotr. Give in, that's a good boy.

Yelena (*indignant*): I beg your pardon, Vasily Vasilyevich, but—

Bessemenov: No, it's me as begs yours—even if you do happen to be educated young folk, even if you do happen to have lost all sense of decency, all respect for your elders—

Tat'yana (*hysterically*): Father! Stop it!

Bessemenov: Hold your tongue! If you can't manage your own affairs, be so good as to hold your tongue at least. Wait, where are you going?

(*Yelena makes for the door.*)

Pyotr (*rushes after her and seizes her hand*): Just a minute. We ought to have it out—now—once and for all!

Bessemenov: You ought to hear me out. Be good enough to listen to me for once. Give me a chance to see what's what. (*Perchikhin comes in beaming, followed by Teterev, who is also smiling. They halt in the doorway and exchange glances. Perchikhin winks in Bessemenov's direction and gives a disparaging wave of his hand.*) Everybody running off like this without so much as a by-your-leave! Very hurtful and wanton! There's no place for you to go, Pyotr. Who do you think you are? What can you do? How can you make a living? (*Akulina Ivanovna whimpers softly. Pyotr, Yelena and Tat'yana form a solid little group facing Bessemenov, but on his words: "There's no place for you to go," Tat'yana leaves them and goes over to the table where her mother is standing. Perchikhin makes signs to Teterev—shakes his head and flaps his arms as if scaring up a flock of birds.*) I have a right to ask. You're still young and foolish. For fifty-eight years I've been working myself to the bone for the sake of my children—

Pyotr: I've heard all that before, father. A hundred times.

Bessemenov: Hold your tongue!

Akulina Ivanovna: Ah, Pyotr, Pyotr!

Tat'yana: Hush, mother, you don't understand.

(*Akulina Ivanovna shakes her head.*)

Bessemenov: Not a word! What can you tell us? What can you teach us? Not one thing!

Pyotr: I can't stand much more of this, father. What do you want of me?

Akulina Ivanovna (*suddenly speaking in a loud voice*): Wait! I, too, have feelings; I, too, have a right to speak! Think what you're doing, son! Have you asked us?

Tat'yana: This is ghastly. Like a blunt saw. (*To her mother.*) You're hacking me to pieces—body and soul.

Akulina Ivanovna: Your mother—a blunt saw! Your mother!

Bessemenov: Wait, old woman. Let him speak.

Yelena (*to Pyotr*): I've had enough. I'm going.

Pyotr: Just a minute, for God's sake! Everything will be clear in a minute!

Yelena: It's a mad-house, a—

Teterrev: Go away, Yelena Nikolayevna! To hell with them—the whole lot of them!

Bessemenov: As for you, my fine gentleman—as for you—

Tat'yana: Will it never end? Go away, Pyotr!

Pyotr (*almost shrieking*): Father! Mother! Look! This is the woman I'm going to marry!

(Silence. All eyes are on Pyotr. Akulina Ivanovna puts her hand over her mouth and looks in horror at her husband. Bessemenov falls backward as if pushed and drops his head on his chest. Tat'yana gives a deep sigh and walks slowly towards the piano, her hands hanging limply at her sides.)

Teterrev (*under his breath*): He chose the right moment.

Perchikhin (*stepping forward*): So there you are! All the birdies flying off! Good for you, young folk. Fly out of your cages like the birds on Lady Day!

Yelena (*snatching her hand out of Pyotr's*): Let me go! I can't bear it!

Pyotr (*murmuring*): Everything's clear now—once and for all!

Bessemenov (*bowing to his son*): Thank you, son, for such good tidings.

Akulina Ivanovna (*tearfully*): You're ruined, Pyotr! As if she was your equal!

Perchikhin: Her? Pyotr's? Come, come, old woman! What's he worth?

Bessemenov (*slowly to Yelena*): Thank you, young lady. So now he's done for. He was to go on studying, and now? Very slick of you. But I saw it coming. (*Viciously.*) Congratulations on your catch! But you'll not have my blessing, Pyotr! So you caught him, did you? Crept up on him and seized him, you damned she-cat!

Yelena: How dare you!

Pyotr: Father! Have you gone mad?

Yelena: You're right! I took him away from you! Yes, I did! I was the one to propose, hear that, you old screechowl? I'm the one snatched him away from you! Out of pity for him. You'd have tortured him to death! You're not human beings, you're a sort of rust that eats people up! Your love would have been his ruin. You think—oh, I know what you think!—you think I did this for my own sake. Well, think what you like. How I hate you!

Tatyana: Yelena! What are you saying?

Pyotr: Yelena! Let's go!

Yelena: Maybe I'll never marry him—you'd be glad, wouldn't you? It's very likely I won't. Don't lose hope. I'll just live with him—without any wedding-ring. But I won't give him to you, you can be sure of that! I'll never let you torture him again. He'll never come back to you—never! never!

Teterev: Vivat, young lady! Vivat!

Akulina Ivanovna: Merciful heavens! What's happening, father? What is it?

Pyotr (*pushing Yelena towards the door*): Go. Do go. Hurry.

(Yelena goes out and draws Pyotr after her.)

Besemenov (*glancing about helplessly*): How's that? (*In a sudden burst of fury.*) Call the police! (*Stamping his feet.*) I'll put her out! This very day! The slut!

Tatyana: Father! Take yourself in hand!

Perchikhin (*astounded, uncomprehending*): Vasily Vasilyevich! What's the matter? What're you shouting for? You'd ought to be glad.

Tatyana (*going over to her father*): Listen—

Besemenov: You? You still here? Why don't you go too? Go ahead! Nowhere to go? Nobody to go with? Missed your chance, eh?

(Tatyana staggers back, then turns and goes quickly over to the piano. Akulina Ivanovna—piteous, distracted—rushes over to her.)

Perchikhin: Vasily Vasilyevich, think what you're saying! Pyotr won't go on studying now—why should he? (*Besemenov gazes dully at Perchikhin and shakes his head.*) He's got enough

money to live on—you've saved it up. His wife's a very daisy, and here you are shouting and carrying on! What's the sense of it, you funny old fellow?

(Teterev bursts out laughing.)

Akulina Ivanovna (*wailing*): They've all gone and left us! All gone away!

Bessemenov (*glancing round*): Hush, mother. They'll come back. They haven't the guts to go away. Where'll they go? (*To Teterev.*) What are you grinning at, you pestilence? I'll put you out too! So's there's not a smell of you left on the premises this time tomorrow! You and the likes of you!

Perchikhin: Vasily Vasilyevich!

Bessemenov: You get out too, you miserable tramp!

Akulina Ivanovna: Tanya! Tanechka! My blessed daughter! My poor unfortunate! What are we coming to?

Bessemenov: You knew what was happening, daughter! You knew it all the time and never said a word! A conspiracy against your father, eh? (*Suddenly a look of fright comes over his face.*) What if he never leaves her—that skirt! A whore to wife! My son! Oh, there's a curse on the lot of you, wretched, immoral creatures that you are!

Tatyana: Stop it, father! Don't make me hate you!

Akulina Ivanovna: My poor darling! My poor unfortunate! They've wore you out. They've wore us all out, the Lord only knows why!

Bessemenov: Who has? It's all that rascal of a Nil. He's the one spoiled our son! He's the one hurt our daughter! (*Catching sight of Teterev standing at the sideboard.*) What're you doing here, you sot? Get out, I say!

Perchikhin: Vasily Vasilyevich! What's *he* done? Good Lord, the old man's gone clean off his chump!

Teterev (*serenely*): Save your wind, old man! You've got no power to stop the storm that's breaking over you. But have no fear, your son will come back.

Bessemenov (*quickly*): How do you know?

Teterev: He won't leave you for long. He raised himself ever so slightly for the time being. He got pulled up. But he'll sink back again. As soon as you're dead he'll make over this sty of yours, move the furniture about and go on living as you've been living—calm, cosy and respectable.

Perchikhin (to Bessemenov): See? You flew off the handle for no good reason, foolish man! He wishes you well, Terenty does, wants to comfort you, and you shout at him! He's a wise fellow, Terenty is.

Teterev: He'll just rearrange the furniture and go on living in the same old way, convinced he's done his duty before God and man. He was made in your image and likeness.

Perchikhin: As like as two peas!

Teterev: Exactly alike—as big a coward, as big a fool.

Perchikhin (to Teterev): Wait, what's that you're saying?

Bessemenov: No insults, if you please. How dare you?

Teterev: And in due time he'll be just as greedy, just as hard-hearted, and just as self-complacent. (*Perchikhin stares wonderingly at Teterev, trying to understand whether he's comforting or upbraiding the old man. Bessemenov, too, is non-plussed, but he takes an interest in what Teterev is saying.*) And he'll be just an miserable in the end as you are now. Life is moving ahead, old man, and whoever is unable to keep up with it will find himself left behind—alone.

Perchikhin: Hear that? In other words, everything is as it ought to be, and here you are, bellowing and snorting!

Bessemenov: Can't you keep out of it?

Teterev: And in just the same way there'll be no pity shown him, that miserable son of yours. He'll be asked straight to his face, as I'm asking you now: "What have you lived for? What good have you ever done?" And, like you, he'll be unable to answer.

Bessemenov: Very pretty it sounds when you say it—you always could put things pretty. But search your own soul and see what's there! I'll never put any faith in what you say! And ... well ... I'm giving you notice. Clear out of here. I've taken enough from you. A lot of this has been your doing. You've brought enough harm on my house.

Teterev: If only it had been me! Unfortunately it wasn't. (*Goes out.*)

Bessemenov (*tossing back his head*): I'll go on standing it. I'll bide my time. I've been standing it all these years—I guess I can stand it a little longer. (*Goes into his room.*)

Akulina Ivanovna (*running after her husband*): Father! My poor old man! Why have our children done this to us? What have we done to deserve it? (*They go into their room. Perchikhin*

stands in the middle of the room blinking his eyes. Tatyana, who is sitting on the piano stool, gazes wildly about her. The sound of muffled voices comes from Bessemenov's room.)

Perchikhin: Tanya! Tanechka! (*Tatyana does not so much as look at him.*) Tanya! What's the reason for it—the running away, the crying—what's the reason, eh? (*Looks at Tatyana and sighs.*) Queer birds! (*Glances at the door of Bessemenov's room, then goes out into the hall shaking his head.*) Guess I'll go and sit with Terenty a spell. Queer birds!

(Slowly Tatyana collapses, dropping her arms on the keyboard, her head on her arms. There is the discordant sound of many keys striking at once. Gradually it dies out.)

CURTAIN