

THE BOOR

by: Anton Chekhov

This English translation was published in Contemporary One-Act Plays. Ed. B. Roland Lewis. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1922.

PERSONS IN THE PLAY

HELENA IVANOVNA POPOV, *a young widow, mistress of a country estate*

GRIGORI STEPANOVITCH SMIRNOV, *proprietor of a country estate*

LUKA, *servant of MRS. POPOV*

A gardener. A Coachman. Several workmen.

TIME: *The present.*

SCENE: *A well-furnished reception-room in MRS. POPOV'S home. MRS. POPOV is discovered in deep mourning, sitting upon a sofa, gazing steadfastly at a photograph. LUKA is also present.*

LUKA: It isn't right, ma'am. You're wearing yourself out! The maid and the cook have gone looking for berries; everything that breathes is enjoying life; even the cat knows how to be happy--slips about the courtyard and catches birds--but you hide yourself here in the house as though you were in a cloister. Yes, truly, by actual reckoning you haven't left this house for a whole year.

MRS. POPOV: And I shall never leave it--why should I? My life is over. He lies in his grave, and I have buried myself within these four walls. We are both dead.

LUKA: There you are again! It's too awful to listen to, so it is! Nikolai Michailovitch is dead; it was the will of the Lord, and the Lord has given him

eternal peace. You have grieved over it and that ought to be enough. Now it's time to stop. One can't weep and wear mourning forever! My wife died a few years ago. I grieved for her. I wept a whole month--and then it was over. Must one be forever singing lamentations? That would be more than your husband was worth! [*He sighs.*] You have forgotten all your neighbors. You don't go out and you receive no one. We live--you'll pardon me--like the spiders, and the good light of day we never see. All the livery is eaten by mice--as though there weren't any more nice people in the world! But the whole neighborhood is full of gentlefolk. The regiment is stationed in Riblov--officers--simply beautiful! One can't see enough of them! Every Friday a ball, and military music every day. Oh, my dear, dear ma'am, young and pretty as you are, if you'd only let your spirits live--! Beauty can't last forever. When ten short years are over, you'll be glad enough to go out a bit and meet the officers--and then it'll be too late.

MRS. POPOV: [*Resolutely.*] Please don't speak of these things again. You know very well that since the death of Nikolai Michailovitch my life is absolutely nothing to me. You think I live, but it only seems so. Do you understand? Oh, that his departed soul may see how I love him! I know, it's no secret to you; he was often unjust to me, cruel, and--he wasn't faithful, but I shall be faithful to the grave and prove to him how *I* can love. There, in the Beyond, he'll find me the same as I was until his death.

LUKA: What is the use of all these words, when you'd so much rather go walking in the garden or order Toby or Welikan harnessed to the trap, and visit the neighbors?

MRS. POPOV: [*Weeping.*] Oh!

LUKA: Madam, dear madam, what is it? In Heaven's name!

MRS. POPOV: He loved Toby so! He always drove him to the Kortschagins or the Vlassovs. What a wonderful horseman he was! How fine he looked when he pulled at the reins with all his might! Toby, Toby--give him an extra measure of oats to-day!

LUKA: Yes, ma'am.

[*A bell rings loudly.*]

MRS. POPOV: [*Shudders.*] What's that? I am at home to no one.

LUKA: Yes, ma'am.

[He goes out, centre.]

MRS. POPOV: *[Gazing at the photograph.]* You shall see, Nikolai, how I can love and forgive! My love will die only with me--when my poor heart stops beating. *[She smiles through her tears.]* And aren't you ashamed? I have been a good, true wife; I have imprisoned myself and I shall remain true until death, and you--you--you're not ashamed of yourself, my dear monster! You quarrelled with me, left me alone for weeks--

[LUKA enters in great excitement.]

LUKA: Oh, ma'am, someone is asking for you, insists on seeing you--

MRS. POPOV: You told him that since my husband's death I receive no one?

LUKA: I said so, but he won't listen; he says it is a pressing matter.

MRS. POPOV: I receive no one!

LUKA: I told him that, but he's a wild man; he swore and pushed himself into the room; he's in the dining-room now.

MRS. POPOV: *[Excitedly.]* Good. Show him in. The impudent--!

[LUKA goes out, centre.]

MRS. POPOV: What a bore people are! What can they want with me? Why do they disturb my peace? *[She sighs.]* Yes, it is clear I must enter a convent. *[Meditatively.]* Yes, a convent.

[SMIRNOV enters, followed by LUKA.]

SMIRNOV: *[To LUKA.]* Fool, you make too much noise! You're an ass! *[Discovering MRS. POPOV--politely.]* Madam, I have the honor to introduce myself: Lieutenant in the Artillery, retired, country gentleman, Grigori Stapanovitch Smirnov! I'm compelled to bother you about an exceedingly important matter.

MRS. POPOV: *[Without offering her hand.]* What is it you wish?

SMIRNOV: Your deceased husband, with whom I had the honor to be acquainted, left me two notes amounting to about twelve hundred roubles. Inasmuch as I have to pay the interest to-morrow on a loan from the Agrarian Bank, I should like to request, madam, that you pay me the money to-day.

MRS. POPOV: Twelve-hundred--and for what was my husband indebted to you?

SMIRNOV: He bought oats from me.

MRS. POPOV: [*With a sigh, to LUKA.*] Don't forget to give Toby an extra measure of oats.

[*LUKA goes out.*]

MRS. POPOV: [*To SMIRNOV.*] If Nikolai Michailovitch is indebted to you, I shall, of course, pay you, but I am sorry, I haven't the money to-day. To-morrow my manager will return from the city and I shall notify him to pay you what is due you, but until then I cannot satisfy your request. Furthermore, today is just seven months since the death of my husband, and I am not in the mood to discuss money matters.

SMIRNOV: And I am in the mood to fly up the chimney with my feet in the air if I can't lay hands on that interest to-morrow. They'll seize my estate!

MRS. POPOV: Day after to-morrow you will receive the money.

SMIRNOV: I don't need the money day after to-morrow; I need it to-day.

MRS. POPOV: I'm sorry I can't pay you today.

SMIRNOV: And I can't wait until day after to-morrow.

MRS. POPOV: But what can I do if I haven't it?

SMIRNOV: So you can't pay?

MRS. POPOV: I cannot.

SMIRNOV: Hm! Is that your last word?

MRS. POPOV: My last.

SMIRNOV: Absolutely?

MRS. POPOV: Absolutely.

SMIRNOV: Thank you. [*He shrugs his shoulders.*] And they expect me to stand for all that. The toll-gatherer just now met me in the road and asked why I was always worrying. Why, in Heaven's name, shouldn't I worry? I need money, I feel the knife at my throat. Yesterday morning I left my house in the early dawn and called on all my debtors. If even one of them had paid his debt! I worked the skin off my fingers! The devil knows in what sort of Jew-inn I slept; in a room with a barrel of brandy! And now at last I come here, seventy versts from home, hope for a little money, and all you give me is moods! Why shouldn't I worry?

MRS. POPOV: I thought I made it plain to you that my manager will return from town, and then you will get your money.

SMIRNOV: I did not come to see the manager; I came to see you. What the devil--pardon the language--do I care for your manager?

MRS. POPOV: Really, sir, I am not used to such language or such manners. I shan't listen to you any further.

[*She goes out, left.*]

SMIRNOV: What can one say to that? Moods! Seven months since her husband died! Do I have to pay the interest or not? I repeat the question, have I to pay the interest or not? The husband is dead and all that; the manager is--the devil with him!--travelling somewhere. Now, tell me, what am I to do? Shall I run away from my creditors in a balloon? Or knock my head against a stone wall? If I call on Grusdev he chooses to be "not at home," Iroschevitch has simply hidden himself, I have quarrelled with Kurzin and came near throwing him out of the window, Masutov is ill and this woman has--moods! Not one of them will pay up! And all because I've spoiled them, because I'm an old whiner, dish-rag! I'm too tender-hearted with them. But wait! I allow nobody to play tricks with me, the devil with 'em all! I'll stay here and not budge until she pays! Brr! How angry I am, how terribly angry I am! Every tendon is trembling with anger, and I can hardly breathe! I'm even growing ill! [*He calls out.*] Servant!

[*LUKA enters.*]

LUKA: What is it you wish?

SMIRNOV: Bring me Kvas or water! [*LUKA goes out.*] Well, what can we do? She hasn't it on hand? What sort of logic is that? A fellow stands with the knife at his throat, he needs money, he is on the point of hanging himself, and she won't pay because she isn't in the mood to discuss money matters. Women's logic! That's why I never liked to talk to women, and why I dislike doing it now. I would rather sit on a powder barrel than talk with a woman. Brr!--I'm getting cold as ice; this affair has made me so angry. I need only to see such a romantic creature from a distance to get so angry that I have cramps in my calves! It's enough to make one yell for help!

[*Enter LUKA.*]

LUKA: [*Hands him water.*] Madam is ill and is not receiving.

SMIRNOV: March! [*LUKA goes out.*] Ill and isn't receiving! All right, it isn't necessary. I won't receive, either! I'll sit here and stay until you bring that money. If you're ill a week, I'll sit here a week. If you're ill a year, I'll sit here a year. As Heaven is my witness, I'll get the money. You don't disturb me with your mourning--or with your dimples. We know these dimples! [*He calls out the window.*] Simon, unharness! We aren't going to leave right away. I am going to stay here. Tell them in the stable to give the horses some oats. The left horse has twisted the bridle again. [*Imitating him.*] Stop! I'll show you how. Stop! [*Leaves window.*] It's awful. Unbearable heat, no money, didn't sleep last night and now--mourning--dresses with moods. My head aches; perhaps I ought to have a drink. Ye-s, I must have a drink. [*Calling.*] Servant!

LUKA: What do you wish?

SMIRNOV: Something to drink! [*LUKA goes out. SMIRNOV sits down and looks at his clothes.*] Ugh, a fine figure! No use denying that. Dust, dirty boots, unwashed, uncombed, straw on my vest--the lady probably took me for a highwayman. [*He yawns.*] It was a little impolite to come into a reception-room with such clothes. Oh, well, no harm done. I'm not here as a guest. I'm a creditor. And there is no special costume for creditors.

LUKA: [*Entering with glass.*] You take great liberty, sir.

SMIRNOV: [*Angrily.*] What?

LUKA: I--I--I just----

SMIRNOV: Whom are you talking to? Keep quiet.

LUKA: *[Angrily.]* Nice mess! This fellow won't leave!

[He goes out.]

SMIRNOV: Lord, how angry I am! Angry enough to throw mud at the whole world! I even feel ill! Servant!

[MRS. POPOV comes in with downcast eyes.]

MRS. POPOV: Sir, in my solitude I have become unaccustomed to the human voice and I cannot stand the sound of loud talking. I beg you, please to cease disturbing my rest.

SMIRNOV: Pay me my money and I'll leave.

MRS. POPOV: I told you once, plainly, in your native tongue, that I haven't the money at hand; wait until day after to-morrow.

SMIRNOV: And I also had the honor of informing you in your native tongue that I need the money, not day after to-morrow, but to-day. If you don't pay me to-day I shall have to hang myself to-morrow.

MRS. POPOV: But what can I do if I haven't the money?

SMIRNOV: So you are not going to pay immediately? You're not?

MRS. POPOV: I cannot.

SMIRNOV: Then I'll sit here until I get the money. *[He sits down.]* You will pay day after to-morrow? Excellent! Here I stay until day after to-morrow. *[Jumps up.]* I ask you, do I have to pay that interest to-morrow or not? Or do you think I'm joking?

MRS. POPOV: Sir, I beg of you, don't scream! This is not a stable.

SMIRNOV: I'm not talking about stables, I'm asking you whether I have to pay that interest to-morrow or not?

MRS. POPOV: You have no idea how to treat a lady.

SMIRNOV: Oh, yes, I have.

MRS. POPOV: No, you have not. You are an ill-bred, vulgar person! Respectable people don't speak so to ladies.

SMIRNOV: How remarkable! How do you want one to speak to you? In French, perhaps! Madame, je vous prie! Pardon me for having disturbed you. What beautiful weather we are having to-day! And how this mourning becomes you!

[He makes a low bow with mock ceremony.]

MRS. POPOV: Not at all funny! I think it vulgar!

SMIRNOV: *[Imitating her.]* Not at all funny--vulgar! I don't understand how to behave in the company of ladies. Madam, in the course of my life I have seen more women than you have sparrows. Three times have I fought duels for women, twelve I jilted and nine jilted me. There was a time when I played the fool, used honeyed language, bowed and scraped. I loved, suffered, sighed to the moon, melted in love's torments. I loved passionately, I loved to madness, loved in every key, chattered like a magpie on emancipation, sacrificed half my fortune in the tender passion, until now the devil knows I've had enough of it. Your obedient servant will let you lead him around by the nose no more. Enough! Black eyes, passionate eyes, coral lips, dimples in cheeks, moonlight whispers, soft, modest sights--for all that, madam, I wouldn't pay a kopeck! I am not speaking of present company, but of women in general; from the tiniest to the greatest, they are conceited, hypocritical, chattering, odious, deceitful from top to toe; vain, petty, cruel with a maddening logic and *[he strikes his forehead]* in this respect, please excuse my frankness, but one sparrow is worth ten of the aforementioned petticoat-philosophers. When one sees one of the romantic creatures before him he imagines he is looking at some holy being, so wonderful that its one breath could dissolve him in a sea of a thousand charms and delights; but if one looks into the soul--it's nothing but a common crocodile. *[He siezes the arm-chair and breaks it in two.]* But the worst of all is that this crocodile imagines it is a masterpiece of creation, and that it has a monopoly on all the tender passions. May the devil hang me upside down if there is anything to love about a woman! When she is in love, all she knows is how to complain and shed tears. If the man suffers and makes sacrifices she swings her train about and tries to lead him by the nose. You have the misfortune to be a woman, and naturally you know woman's nature; tell me on your honor, have you ever in your life seen a woman who was really true and

faithful? Never! Only the old and the deformed are true and faithful. It's easier to find a cat with horns or a white woodcock, than a faithful woman.

MRS. POPOV: But allow me to ask, who is true and faithful in love? The man, perhaps?

SMIRNOV: Yes, indeed! The man!

MRS. POPOV: The man! *[She laughs sarcastically.]* The man true and faithful in love! Well, that is something *new!* *[Bitterly.]* How can you make such a statement? Men true and faithful! So long as we have gone thus far, I may as well say that of all the men I have known, my husband was the best; I loved him passionately with all my soul, as only a young, sensible woman may love; I gave him my youth, my happiness, my fortune, my life. I worshipped him like a heathen. And what happened? This best of men betrayed me in every possible way. After his death I found his desk filled with love-letters. While he was alive he left me alone for months--it is horrible even to think about it--he made love to other women in my very presence, he wasted my money and made fun of my feelings--and in spite of everything I trusted him and was true to him. And more than that: he is dead and I am still true to him. I have buried myself within these four walls and I shall wear this mourning to my grave.

SMIRNOV: *[Laughing disrespectfully.]* Mourning! What on earth do you take me for? As if I didn't know why you wore this black domino and why you buried yourself within these four walls. Such a secret! So romantic! Some knight will pass the castle, gaze up at the windows, and think to himself: "Here dwells the mysterious Tamara who, for love of her husband, has buried herself within four walls." Oh, I understand the art!

MRS. POPOV: *[Springing up.]* What? What do you mean by saying such things to me?

SMIRNOV: You have buried yourself alive, but meanwhile you have not forgotten to powder your nose!

MRS. POPOV: How dare you speak so?

SMIRNOV: Don't scream at me, please; I'm not the manager. Allow me to call things by their right names. I am not a woman, and I am accustomed to speak out what I think. So please don't scream.

MRS. POPOV: I'm not screaming. It is you who are screaming. Please leave me, I beg you.

SMIRNOV: Pay me my money, and I'll leave.

MRS. POPOV: I won't give you the money.

SMIRNOV: You won't? You won't give me my money?

MRS. POPOV: I don't care what you do. You won't get a kopeck! Leave me!

SMIRNOV: As I haven't had the pleasure of being either your husband or your fiancé, please don't make a scene. [*He sits down.*] I can't stand it.

MRS. POPOV: [*Breathing hard.*] You are going to sit down?

SMIRNOV: I already have.

MRS. POPOV: Kindly leave the house!

SMIRNOV: Give me the money.

MRS. POPOV: I don't care to speak with impudent men. Leave! [*Pause.*] You aren't going?

SMIRNOV: No.

MRS. POPOV: No?

SMIRNOV: No.

MRS. POPOV: Very well.

[*She rings the bell. Enter LUKA.*]

MRS. POPOV: Luka, show the gentleman out.

LUKA: [*Going to SMIRNOV.*] Sir, why don't you leave when you are ordered? What do you want?

SMIRNOV: [*Jumping up.*] Whom do you think you are talking to? I'll grind you to powder.

LUKA: *[Puts his hand to his heart.]* Good Lord! *[He drops into a chair.]* Oh, I'm ill; I can't breathe!

MRS. POPOV: Where is Dascha? *[Calling.]* Dascha! Pelageja! Dascha!

[She rings.]

LUKA: They're all gone! I'm ill! Water!

MRS. POPOV: *[To SMIRNOV.]* Leave! Get out!

SMIRNOV: Kindly be a little more polite!

MRS. POPOV: *[Striking her fists and stamping her feet.]* You are vulgar! You're a boor! A monster!

SMIRNOV: What did you say?

MRS. POPOV: I said you were a boor, a monster!

SMIRNOV: *[Steps toward her quickly.]* Permit me to ask what right you have to insult me?

MRS. POPOV: What of it? Do you think I am afraid of you?

SMIRNOV: And you think that because you are a romantic creature you can insult me without being punished? I challenge you!

LUKA: Merciful Heaven! Water!

SMIRNOV: We'll have a duel!

MRS. POPOV: Do you think because you have big fists and a steer's neck I am afraid of you?

SMIRNOV: I allow no one to insult me, and I make no exception because you are a woman, one of the "weaker sex!"

MRS. POPOV: *[Trying to cry him down.]* Boor, boor, boor!

SMIRNOV: It is high time to do away with the old superstition that it is only the man who is forced to give satisfaction. If there is equity at all let there be equity in all things. There's a limit!

MRS. POPOV: You wish to fight a duel? Very well.

SMIRNOV: Immediately.

MRS. POPOV: Immediately. My husband had pistols. I'll bring them. *[She hurries away, then turns.]* Oh, what a pleasure it will be to put a bullet in your impudent head. The devil take you!

[She goes out.]

SMIRNOV: I'll shoot her down! I'm no fledgling, no sentimental young puppy. For me there is no weaker sex!

LUKA: Oh, sir. *[Falls to his knees.]* Have mercy on me, an old man, and go away. You have frightened me to death already, and now you want to fight a duel.

SMIRNOV: *[Paying no attention.]* A duel. That's equity, emancipation. That way the sexes are made equal. I'll shoot her down as a matter of principle. What can a person say to such a woman? *[Imitating her.]* "The devil take you. I'll put a bullet in your impudent head." What can one say to that? She was angry, her eyes blazed, she accepted the challenge. On my honor, it's the first time in my life that I ever saw such a woman.

LUKA: Oh, sir. Go away. Go away!

SMIRNOV: That *is* a woman. I can understand her. A real woman. No shilly-shallying, but fire, powder, and noise! It would be a pity to shoot a woman like that.

LUKA: *[Weeping.]* Oh, sir, go away.

[Enter MRS. POPOV.]

MRS. POPOV: Here are the pistols. But before we have our duel, please show me how to shoot. I have never had a pistol in my hand before!

LUKA: God be merciful and have pity upon us! I'll go and get the gardener and the coachman. Why has this horror come to us?

[He goes out.]

SMIRNOV: *[Looking at the pistols.]* You see, there are different kinds. There are special duelling pistols, with cap and ball. But these are revolvers, Smith & Wesson, with ejectors; fine pistols! A pair like that cost at least ninety roubles. This is the way to hold a revolver. *[Aside.]* Those eyes, those eyes! A real woman!

MRS. POPOV: Like this?

SMIRNOV: Yes, that way. Then you pull the hammer back--so--then you aim--put your head back a little. Just stretch your arm out, please. So--then press your finger on the thing like that, and that is all. The chief thing is this: don't get excited, don't hurry your aim, and take care that your hand doesn't tremble.

MRS. POPOV: It isn't well to shoot inside; let's go into the garden.

SMIRNOV: Yes. I'll tell you now, I am going to shoot into the air.

MRS. POPOV: That is too much! Why?

SMIRNOV: Because---because. That's my business.

MRS. POPOV: You are afraid. Yes. A-h-h-h. No, no, my dear sir, no flinching! Please follow me. I won't rest until I've made a hole in that head I hate so much. Are you afraid?

SMIRNOV: Yes, I'm afraid.

MRS. POPOV: You are lying. Why won't you fight?

SMIRNOV: Because--because--I--like you.

MRS. POPOV: *[With an angry laugh.]* You like me! He dares to say he likes me! *[She points to the door.]* Go.

SMIRNOV: *[Laying the revolver silently on the table, takes his hat and starts. At the door he stops a moment, gazing at her silently, then he approaches her, hesitating.]* Listen! Are you still angry? I was mad as the devil, but please understand me--how can I express myself? The thing is like this--such things are--

[He raises his voice.] Now, is it my fault that you owe me money? *[Grasps the back of the chair, which breaks.]* The devil know what breakable furniture you have! I like you! Do you understand? I--I'm almost in love!

MRS. POPOV: Leave! I hate you.

SMIRNOV: Lord! What a woman! I never in my life met one like her. I'm lost, ruined! I've been caught like a mouse in a trap.

MRS. POPOV: Go, or I'll shoot.

SMIRNOV: Shoot! You have no idea what happiness it would be to die in sight of those beautiful eyes, to die from the revolver in this little velvet hand! I'm mad! Consider it and decide immediately, for if I go now, we shall never see each other again. Decide--speak--I am a noble, a respectable man, have an income of ten thousand, can shoot a coin thrown into the air. I own some fine horses. Will you be my wife?

MRS. POPOV: *[Swings the revolver angrily.]* I'll shoot!

SMIRNOV: My mind is not clear--I can't understand. Servant--water! I have fallen in love like any young man. *[He takes her hand and she cries with pain.]* I love you! *[He kneels.]* I love you as I have never loved before. Twelve women I jilted, nine jilted me, but not one of them all have I loved as I love you. I am conquered, lost; I lie at your feet like a fool and beg for your hand. Shame and disgrace! For five years I haven't been in love; I thanked the Lord for it, and now I am caught, like a carriage tongue in another carriage. I beg for your hand! Yes or no? Will you?--Good!

[He gets up and goes quickly to the door.]

MRS. POPOV: Wait a minute!

SMIRNOV: *[Stopping.]* Well?

MRS. POPOV: Nothing. You may go. But--wait a moment. No, go on, go on. I hate you. Or--no; don't go. Oh, if you knew how angry I was, how angry! *[She throws the revolver on to the chair.]* My finger is swollen from this thing. *[She angrily tears her handkerchief.]* What are you standing there for? Get out!

SMIRNOV: Farewell!

MRS. POPOV: Yes, go. *[Cries out.]* Why are you going? Wait--no, go!! Oh, how angry I am! Don't come too near, don't come too near--er--come--no nearer.

SMIRNOV: *[Approaching her.]* How angry I am with myself! Fall in love like a schoolboy, throw myself on my knees. I've got a chill! *[Strongly.]* I love you. This is fine--all I needed was to fall in love. To-morrow I have to pay my interest, the hay harvest has begun, and then you appear! *[He takes her in his arms.]* I can never forgive myself.

MRS. POPOV: Go away! Take your hands off me! I hate you--you--this is--

[A long kiss. Enter LUKA with an axe, the gardener with a rake, the coachman with a pitchfork, and workmen with poles.]

LUKA: *[Staring at the pair.]* Merciful heavens!

[A long pause.]

MRS. POPOV: *[Dropping her eyes.]* Tell them in the stable that Toby isn't to have any oats.

CURTAIN

THE PROPOSAL
a play in one-act

by Anton Chekhov

The following one-act play is reprinted from *Plays by Anton Tchekoff*. Trans. Julius West. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1916. It is now in the public domain and may be performed without royalties.

CHARACTERS

STEPAN STEPANOVITCH CHUBUKOV, a landowner

NATALYA STEPANOVNA, his daughter, twenty-five years old

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

SETTING

CHUBUKOV's country-house

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHUBUKOV: *[Joyfully]* By Jove! Ivan Vassilevitch! Say it again--I didn't hear it all!

LOMOV: I have the honour to ask ...

CHUBUKOV: *[Interrupting]* My dear fellow ... I'm so glad, and so on. ... Yes, indeed, and all that sort of thing. *[Embraces and kisses LOMOV]* I've been hoping for it for a long time. It's been my continual desire. *[Sheds a tear]* And I've always loved you, my angel, as if you were my own son. May God give you both His help and His love and so on, and I did so much hope ... What am I behaving in this idiotic way for? I'm off my balance with joy, absolutely off my balance! Oh, with all my soul ... I'll go and call Natasha, and all that.

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

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

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

[NATALYA STEPANOVNA comes in.]

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

LOMOV: How do you do, honoured Natalya Stepanovna?

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

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

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

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

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

LOMOV: I shall try to be brief. You must know, honoured Natalya Stepanovna, that I have long, since my childhood, in fact, had the privilege of knowing your family. My late aunt and her husband, from whom, as you know, I inherited my land, always had the greatest respect for your father and your late mother. The Lomovs and the Chubukovs have always had the most friendly, and I might almost say the most affectionate, regard for each other. And, as you know, my land is a near neighbour of yours. You will remember that my Oxen Meadows touch your birchwoods.

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

LOMOV: Yes, mine.

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

LOMOV: No, mine, honoured Natalya Stepanovna.

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

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

NATALYA STEPANOVNA: Yes, yes. ... They're ours.

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

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

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

NATALYA STEPANOVNA: Really, you won't get me to believe that!

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

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

LOMOV: I'll show you the documents, Natalya Stepanovna!

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

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

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

LOMOV: Mine

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

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

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

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

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

LOMOV: Mine!

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

LOMOV: What?

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

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

NATALYA STEPANOVNA: You dare!

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

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

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

NATALYA STEPANOVNA: Ours!

LOMOV: Mine!

NATALYA STEPANOVNA: Ours!

LOMOV: Mine!

[Enter CHUBUKOV.]

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

LOMOV: I shall!

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHUBUKOV: What did you say, sir?

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

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

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

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

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

NATALYA STEPANOVNA: All, all, all!

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

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

CHUBUKOV: Your father was a guzzling gambler!

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

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

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

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

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

[Goes to the door.]

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

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

[LOMOV staggers out.]

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

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

CHUBUKOV: The villain! The scarecrow!

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

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

NATALYA STEPANOVNA: What proposal?

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

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

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

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

CHUBUKOV: Bring whom here?

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

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

NATALYA STEPANOVNA: I'm dying! Fetch him!

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

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

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

[CHUBUKOV runs in.]

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

NATALYA STEPANOVNA: *[Wails]* Fetch him!

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

NATALYA STEPANOVNA: No, it was you!

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

[LOMOV enters, exhausted.]

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

NATALYA STEPANOVNA: What a pity! Why?

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

NATALYA STEPANOVNA: It was too much, Ivan Vassilevitch.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

NATALYA STEPANOVNA: Have you measured?

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

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

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

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

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

NATALYA STEPANOVNA: It's not true.

LOMOV: He is!

NATALYA STEPANOVNA: It's not true!

LOMOV: Why shout, madam?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

NATALYA STEPANOVNA: I shan't shut up.

[Enter CHUBUKOV.]

CHUBUKOV: What's the matter now?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

LOMOV: I remember too!

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

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

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

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

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

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

LOMOV: Intriguer!

CHUBUKOV: Boy! Pup!

LOMOV: Old rat! Jesuit!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Give me a knife! Give me a pistol! [*LOMOV moves*] He seems to be coming round. ... Drink some water! That's right. ...

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

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

LOMOV: [*Getting up*] Eh? What? To whom?

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

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

CHUBUKOV: Kiss each other!

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

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

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

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

LOMOV: Better!

NATALYA STEPANOVNA: Worse!

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

LOMOV: He's better!

NATALYA STEPANOVNA: Worse! worse! worse!

CHUBUKOV: [*Trying to shout her down*] Champagne! Champagne!

CURTAIN

THE STEPMOTHER
a farce in one-act

by Arnold Bennett

The following one-act play is reprinted from *Polite Farces for the Drawing-Room*. Arnold Bennett. New York: George H. Doran Company, 1900. It is now in the public domain and may therefore be performed without royalties.

CHARACTERS

CORA PROUT, a Popular Novelist and a Widow,
30

ADRIAN PROUT, her Stepson, 20

THOMAS GARDNER, a Doctor, 35

CHRISTINE FEVERSHAM, Mrs. Prout's
Secretary, 20

[Mrs. Prout's study: luxuriously furnished; large table in centre, upon which are a new novel, press-cuttings, and the usual apparatus of literary composition. Christine is seated at the large table, ready for work, and awaiting the advent of Mrs. Prout. To pass the time she picks up the novel, the leaves of which are not cut, and glances at a page here and there. Enter Mrs. Prout, hurried and preoccupied; the famous novelist is attired in a plain morning gown, which in the perfection of its cut displays the beauty of her figure. She nods absently to Christine, and sits down in an armchair away from the table.]

CHRISTINE: Good morning, Mrs. Prout. I'm afraid you are still sleeping badly?

MRS. PROUT: Do I look it, girl?

CHRISTINE: You don't specially look it, Mrs. Prout. But I observe. You are my third novelist, and they have all taught me to observe. Before I took up novelists I was with a Member of Parliament, and he never observed anything except five-line whips.

MRS. PROUT: Really! Five-line whips! Oblige my by putting that down in Notebook No. 2. There will be an M.P. in that wretched thirty-thousand word thing I've promised for the Christmas number of the *New York Surpriser* and it might be useful. I might even make an epigram out of it.

CHRISTINE: Yes, Mrs. Prout. [*Writes.*]

MRS. PROUT: And what are your observations about me?

CHRISTINE: [*while writing*] Well, this is twice in three weeks that you've been here five minutes late in the morning.

MRS. PROUT: Is that all? You don't think my stuff's falling off?

CHRISTINE: Oh, *no*, Mrs. Prout! I *know* it's not falling off. I was just going to tell you. The butler's been in, and wished me to inform you that he begged to give notice. [looking up] It seems that last night you ordered him to cut the leaves of our new novel [patting book maternally]. He said he just looked into it, and he thinks it's disgraceful to ask a respectable butler to cut the leaves of such a book. So he begs to give warning. Oh, no, Mrs. Prout, your stuff isn't falling off.

MRS. PROUT: [*grimly*] What did you say to him, girl?

CHRISTINE: First I looked at him, and then I said, "Brown, you will probably be able to get a place on the reviewing staff of *The Methodist Recorder*."

MRS. PROUT: Christine, one day, I really believe, you will come to employ a secretary of your own.

CHRISTINE: I hope so, Mrs. Prout. But I intend to keep off the morbid introspection line. You do that so awfully well. I think I shall go in for smart dialogue, with marquises and country houses, and a touch of old-fashioned human nature at the bottom. It appears to me that's what's coming along very shortly.... Shall we begin, Mrs. Prout?

MRS. PROUT: [*disinclined*] Yes, I suppose so. [*Clearing her throat.*] By the way, anything special in the press-cuttings?

CHRISTINE: [*fingering the pile of press-cuttings*] Nothing very special. The *Morning Call* says, "genius in every line."

MRS. PROUT: [*blasé*] Hum!

CHRISTINE: The *Daily Reporter*: "Cora Prout may be talented--we should hesitate to deny it--but she is one of several of our leading novelists who should send themselves to a Board School in order to learn grammar."

MRS. PROUT: Grammar again! They must keep a grammar in the office! Personally I think it's frightfully bad form to talk about grammar to a lady. But they never had any taste at the *Reporter*. Don't read me any more. Let us commence work.

CHRISTINE: Which will you do, Mrs. Prout? [*consulting a diary of engagements*] There's the short story for the *Illustrated Monthly*, six thousand, promised for next Saturday. There's the article on "Women's Diversions" for the *British Review*--they wrote for that Yesterday. There's the serial that begins in the *Sunday Daily Sentinel* in September--you've only done half the first instalment of that. And of course there's *Heart Ache*.

MRS. PROUT: I think I'll go with *Heart Ache*. I feel it coming. I'll do the short story for the *Illustrated* tomorrow. Where had I got to?

CHRISTINE: [*choosing the correct notebook, reads*] "The inanimate form of the patient lay like marble on the marble slab of the operating-table. 'The sponge, Nurse,' said the doctor, 'where is it?'" That's where you got to.

MRS. PROUT: Yes, I remember. New line. "Isabel gazed at him imperturbably." New line. Quote-marks. "I fear, Doctor," she remarked, 'that in a moment of forgetfulness you have sewn it up in our poor patient.'" New line. Quote-marks. "'Damn!' said the doctor, 'so I have.'" Rather good, that, Christine, eh? [*Christine writes in shorthand.*]

CHRISTINE: Oh, Mrs. Prout, I think it's beautiful. So staccato and crisp. By the way, I forgot to tell you that there's a leader in the *Daily Snail* on that frightful anonymous attack in the *Forum* against your medical accuracy. [*looking at Mrs. Prout, who is silent, but shows signs of agitation*] You remember-- "Medicine in Fiction." The *Snail* backs up the *Forum* for all it's worth.... Mrs. Prout, you *are* ill. I was sure you were. What can I get for you?

MRS. PROUT: [*weakly wiping her eyes*] Nonsense, Christine. I am a little unstrung, that is all. I want nothing.

CHRISTINE: Your imagination is too much for you.

MRS. PROUT: [*meekly*] Perhaps so.

CHRISTINE: [*firmly*] But it isn't all due to an abnormal imagination. You've never been quite cheerful since you turned Mr. Adrian out.

MRS. PROUT: You forget yourself, Christine.

CHRISTINE: I forget nothing, Mrs. Prout, myself least of all. Mr. Adrian is your dead husband's son, and you turned him out of your house, and now you're sorry.

MRS. PROUT: Christine, you know perfectly well that I--er--requested him to go because he would insist on making love to you, which interfered with our work. Besides, it was not quite nice for a man to make love to the secretary of his stepmother. I wonder you are indelicate enough to refer to the matter. You should never have permitted his advances.

CHRISTINE: I didn't permit them. I wasn't asked to. I tolerated them. I hadn't been secretary to a lady novelist with a stepson before, and I wasn't quite sure what was included in the duties. I always like to give satisfaction.

MRS. PROUT: You do give satisfaction. Let that end the discussion.

CHRISTINE: [*pouting; turning to her notebook; reads*] "'Damn!' said the doctor, 'so I have'" [*Pause.*] "'Damn!' said the doctor, 'so I have'" [*Pause.*]

MRS. PROUT: Christine, did you find out who was the author of that article on "Medicine in Fiction?"

CHRISTINE: Is *that* what's bothering you, Mrs. Prout? Of course it was a nasty attack, but it is very unlike you to trouble about critics.

MRS. PROUT: It has hurt me more than I can say. That was why I asked you to make a few discreet inquiries.

CHRISTINE: I did ask at my club.

MRS. PROUT: And what did they think there?

CHRISTINE: They laughed at me, and said everyone knew you had written it yourself just to keep the silly season alive, July being a sickly month for reputations.

MRS. PROUT: What did you say to that?

CHRISTINE: I should prefer not to repeat it.

MRS. PROUT: Christine, I insist. Your modesty is becoming a disease.

CHRISTINE: I said they were fools--

MRS. PROUT: A little abrupt, perhaps, but effective.

CHRISTINE: --not to see that the grammar was different from ours.

MRS. PROUT: Oh! That was what you said, was it?

CHRISTINE: It was, and it settled them.

MRS. PROUT: *[assuming a confidential air]* Christine, I believe I know who wrote that article.

CHRISTINE: Who?

MRS. PROUT: Dr. Gardner. *[Bursts into tears.]*

CHRISTINE: *[soothing her]* But he lives on the floor below, in the very flat underneath this.

MRS. PROUT: *[choking back her sobs]* Yes. It is too dreadful.

CHRISTINE: But he comes here nearly every evening.

MRS. PROUT: *[sharply]* Who told you that?

CHRISTINE: Now, Mrs. Prout, let me implore you to be calm. The butler told me. I didn't ask him, and as I cannot be expected to foretell what my employer's butler will say before he opens his mouth, I am not to blame. *[Compresses her lips.]* Shall we continue?

MRS. PROUT: Christine, do you think it was Dr. Gardner? I would give worlds to know.

CHRISTINE: [*Coldly analytic*] Do you mean that you would give worlds to know that it was Dr. Gardner, or that it wasn't Dr. Gardner? Or would give worlds merely to know the author's name--no matter who he might be?

MRS. PROUT: [*sighing*] You are dreadfully unsympathetic this morning.

CHRISTINE: I am placid, nothing else. Please recollect that when you engaged me you asked if you might rely on me to be placid, as your previous secretary, when you dictated the pathetic chapters, had wept so freely into her notebook that she couldn't transcribe her stuff, besides permanently injuring her eyesight. Since you ask my opinion as to Dr. Gardner being the author of this attack on you, I say that he isn't. Apart from the facts that he lives on the floor below, and that he is, so the butler says, a constant visitor in the evenings, there is the additional fact--a fact which I have several times observed for myself without the assistance of the butler--that he likes you.

MRS. PROUT: You have noticed that. It is true. But the question is: Does he like me sufficiently not to attack my work in the public press? That is the point. The writer of that cruel article begins by saying that he has no personal animus, and that he is actuated solely by an enthusiasm for the cause of medicine and the medical profession.

CHRISTINE: Can you mean to infer, Mrs. Prout, that the author of the article might, as a man, like you, while as a doctor he despised you?

MRS. PROUT: [*whimpering again*] That is my suspicion.

CHRISTINE: But Dr. Gardner does more than like you. He adores you.

MRS. PROUT: He adores my talent, my genius, my fame, my wealth; but does he adore *me*? I am not an ordinary woman, and it is no use pretending that I am. I must think of these things.

CHRISTINE: Neither is Dr. Gardner an ordinary doctor. His researches into toxicology--

MRS. PROUT: His researches are nothing to me. I wish he wasn't a doctor at all.

CHRISTINE: Even doctors have their place in the world, Mrs. Prout.

MRS. PROUT: They should not meddle with fiction, poking their noses--

CHRISTINE: But if fiction meddles with *them*?... You know fiction is very meddlesome. It pokes its nose with great industry.

MRS. PROUT: [*pulling herself together*] Christine, you have never understood me. Let us continue.

CHRISTINE: [*with an offended air, turning once more to her notebook*] "Damn!" said the doctor, 'so I have.'"

MRS. PROUT: [*coughing*] New line. "A smile flashed across the lips of Isabel as she took up a glittering knife----" [*Gives a great sob.*] Oh, Christine! I'm sure Dr. Gardner wrote it.

CHRISTINE: Very well, madam. He wrote it. We have at last settled something. [*Mrs. Prout buries her face in her hands. Christine looks up, and after an instant's pause springs toward her.*] You poor dear! You are perfectly hysterical this morning. You must go and lie down for a little. A horizontal posture is what you need.

MRS. PROUT: Perhaps you are right. I will leave you for an hour. [*Totters to her feet.*] Take down this note for Dr. Gardner. He may call this morning. In fact, I rather think he will. "The answer to the question is 'No'"--capital *N*.

CHRISTINE: Shall I sign it?

MRS. PROUT: Yes; sign it "C.P." And if he comes, give it him yourself, and say that I can see no one. And, Christine, would you mind [*crying gently again*] seeing the b-b-butler, and try to reason him into a sensible attitude towards my n-n-novels. In my present state of health I couldn't stand any change. And he is so admirable at table.

CHRISTINE: Shall I offer some compromise in our next novel? I might require what is the irreducible minimum of his demands.

MRS. PROUT: [*faintly*] Anything, anything, if he will stay.

CHRISTINE: *[following Mrs. Prout to the door, and touching her shoulder caressingly]* Try to sleep.

[Exit Mrs. Prout. Christine whistles in a low tone as she returns meditatively to her seat.]

CHRISTINE: *[looking at notebook]* "Isabel took up a glittering knife," did she? "The answer to the question is 'No,'" with a capital N. "C.P." sounds like Carter Peterson. Now, as I have nothing to do, I think I will devote the morning to an article on "Hysteria in Lady Novelists." Um! Ah! "The answer to the question is 'No'"--capital N. What question? Can it be that the lily-white hand of the author of *Heart Ache* has ... *[Knock.]* Come in. *[Enter Dr. Gardner.]*

GARDNER: Oh, good morning, Miss Feversham.

CHRISTINE: Good morning, Dr. Gardner. You seem surprised to see me here. Yet I am to be found in this chair daily at this hour.

GARDNER: Not at all, not at all. I assure you I fully expected to find both you and the chair. I also expected to find Mrs. Prout.

CHRISTINE: Are you capable of interrupting our literary labours? We do not receive callers so early, Dr. Gardner. Which reminds that I have several times remarked that this study ought not to have a door opening into the corridor.

GARDNER: As for that, may I venture to offer the excuse that I had an appointment with Mrs. Prout?

CHRISTINE: At what hour? She never makes appointments before noon.

GARDNER: I believe she did say twelve o'clock.

CHRISTINE: *[looking at her watch]* And it is now twenty-five minutes to ten. Punctuality is a virtue. You may be said to have raised it to the dignity of a fine art.

GARDNER: I will wait *[sits down]*. I trust I do not interrupt?

CHRISTINE: Yes, Doctor, I regret to say that you do. I was about to commence the composition of an article.

GARDNER: Upon what?

CHRISTINE: Upon "Hysteria in Lady Novelists." It is my specialty.

GARDNER: Surely lady novelists are not hysterical.

CHRISTINE: The increase of hysteria among that class of persons is one of the saddest features of the age.

GARDNER: Dear me! [*enthusiastically*] But I can tell you the name of one lady novelist who isn't hysterical--and that, perhaps, the greatest name of all--Mrs. Prout.

CHRISTINE: *Of course* not, of course not, Doctor. Nevertheless, Mrs. Prout is somewhat indisposed this morning.

GARDNER: Cora--ill! What is it? Nothing serious?

CHRISTINE: Rest assured. The merest slight indisposition. Just sufficient to delay us an hour or two with out work. Nothing more. Nerves, you know. The imagination of a great artist, Dr. Gardner, is often too active, too stressful, for the frail physical organism.

GARDNER: Ah! You regard Mrs. Prout as a great artist?

CHRISTINE: Doctor--even to ask such a question...! Do not you?

GARDNER: I? To me she is unique. I say, Miss Feversham, were you ever in love?

CHRISTINE: In love? I have had preferences.

GARDNER: Among men?

CHRISTINE: No; among boys. Recollect I am only twenty, though singularly precocious in shrewdness and calm judgment.

GARDNER: Twenty? You amaze me, Miss Feversham. I have often been struck by your common sense and knowledge of the world. They would do credit to a woman of fifty.

CHRISTINE: I am glad to notice that you do not stoop to offer me vulgar compliments about my face.

GARDNER: I am incapable of such conduct. I esteem your mental qualities too highly. And so you have had your preferences among boys?

CHRISTINE: Yes, I like to catch them from eighteen to twenty. They are so sweet and fresh then, like new milk. The *employé* of the Express Dairy Company who leaves me my half-pint at my lodgings each morning is a perfectly lovely dear. I adore him.

GARDNER: He is one of your preferences, then?

CHRISTINE: A preference among milkmen, of whom, as I change my lodgings frequently, I have known many. Then there is the postman--not a day more than eighteen, I am sure, though that is contrary to the regulations of St. Martin's-le-Grand. Dr. Gardner, you *should* see my postman. When *he* brings them I can receive even rejected articles with equanimity.

GARDNER: I should be charmed to see him. But tell me, Miss Feversham, have you had no serious preferences?

CHRISTINE: You seem interested in this question of preferences.

GARDNER: I am.

CHRISTINE: Doctor, I will open my heart to you. It is conceivable you may be of use to me. You are on friendly terms with Adrian, and doubtless you know the history of his exit from this house. [*Gardner nods, with a smile.*] Doctor, he and I are passionately attached to each other. Our ages are precisely alike. It is a beautiful idyll, or rather it would be, if dear Mrs. Prout did not try to transform it into a tragedy. She has not only turned the darling boy out, but she has absolutely forbidden him the house.

GARDNER: Doubtless she had her reasons.

CHRISTINE: Oh, I'm *sure* she had. Only, you see, her reasons aren't ours. Of course we could marry at once if we chose. I could easily keep Adrian. I do not, however, wish to inconvenience dear Mrs. Prout. It is a mistake to quarrel with the rich relations of one's future husband. But I was thinking that perhaps you, Doctor,

might persuade dear Mrs. Prout that my marriage to Adrian need not necessarily interfere with the performance of my duties as her secretary.

GARDNER: Anything that I can do, Miss Feversham, you may rely on me doing.

CHRISTINE: You are a dear.

GARDNER: But why should you imagine that I have any influence with Mrs. Prout?

CHRISTINE: I do not imagine; I know. It is my unerring insight over again, my faultless observation. Doctor, you did not begin to question me about love because you were interested in *my* love affairs, but because you were interested in your own, and couldn't keep off the subject. I read you like a book. You love Mrs. Prout, my dear Doctor. Therefore you have influence over her. No woman is uninfluenced by the man who loves her.

GARDNER: [*laughing between self-satisfaction and self-consciousness*] You have noticed that I admire Mrs. Prout? It appears that nothing escapes you.

CHRISTINE: That is a trifle. The butler has noticed it.

GARDNER: The butler!

CHRISTINE: The butler.

GARDNER: [*with abandon*] Let him. Let the whole world notice. Miss Feversham, be it known that I love Mrs. Prout with passionate adoration. Before the day is out I shall either be her affianced bridegroom--or I shall be a dead man.

CHRISTINE: [*leaning forward; in a low, tense voice*] You proposed to her last night?

GARDNER: I did.

CHRISTINE: And you were to come for the answer this morning?

GARDNER: Yes. Can you guess that I am eager--excited? Can you not pardon me for thinking it is noon at twenty-five minutes to ten? Ah, Miss Feversham, if Adrian adores you with one-tenth of the fire with which I adore Mrs. Prout--

CHRISTINE: Stop, Doctor. I do not wish to be a burnt sacrifice. Now let me ask you a question. You have seen that attack on Mrs. Prout, entitled "Medicine in Fiction," in this month's *Forum*. Do you know the author of it?

GARDNER: I don't. Has it disturbed Mrs. Prout?

CHRISTINE: It has. Did she not mention it to you?

GARDNER: Not a word. If I did know the author of it, if I ever do know the author of it, I will tear him [*fiercely*] limb from limb.

CHRISTINE: I trust you will chloroform him first. It will be horrid of you if you don't.

GARDNER: I absolutely decline to chloroform him first.

CHRISTINE: You must.

GARDNER: I won't.

CHRISTINE: Never mind. Perhaps you will be dead. Remember that you have promised to kill yourself today on a certain contingency. Should you really do it? Should you really put an end to your life if Mrs. Prout gave you a refusal?

GARDNER: I swear it. Existence would be valueless to me.

CHRISTINE: By the way, Mrs. Prout told me that if you called I was to say that she could see no one.

GARDNER: See no one! But she promised ...

CHRISTINE: However, she left a note.

GARDNER: [*starting up*] Give it me instantly. Why didn't you give it me before?

CHRISTINE: I had no opportunity. Besides, I haven't transcribed it yet. It was dictated.

GARDNER: *Dictated?* Are you sure?

CHRISTINE: [*seriously*] Oh, yes, she dictates *everything*.

GARDNER: Well, well, read it to me, read it to me. Quick, I say.

CHRISTINE: *[turning over leaves rapidly]* Here it is. Are you listening?

GARDNER: Great Heaven!

CHRISTINE: *[reads from her shorthand note]* "The answer to your question is----
"

GARDNER: Go on.

CHRISTINE: *[drawing her breath first]* "Yes.--C.P." There! I've saved your life for you.

GARDNER: You have indeed, my dear girl. But I must see her. I must see my beloved Cora.

CHRISTINE: *[taking his hand]* Accept my advice, Doctor--the advice of a simple, artless girl. Do not attempt to see her today. There are seasons of emotion when a woman [stops] ... Go downstairs and write to her, and then give the letter to me. *[Pats him on the back.]*

GARDNER: I will, by Jove. Miss Feversham, you're a good sort. And as you've told me something, I'll tell you something. Adrian is going to storm the castle today.

CHRISTINE: Adrian! *[A knock. Enter Adrian.]*

ADRIAN: Since you command it, I enter.

GARDNER: Let me pass, bold youth.

[Exit Dr. Gardner hurriedly.]

ADRIAN: *[overcome with Gardner's haste]* Why this avalanche? Has something happened suddenly?

CHRISTINE: Several things have happened suddenly, Adrian, and several more will probably happen when your mamma discovers that you are defying her orders in this audacious manner. Why are you here? *[Kisses him.]* You perfect duck!

ADRIAN: [*gravely*] I am not here, Miss Feversham--

CHRISTINE: "Miss Feversham" -- and my kiss still warm on his lips!

ADRIAN: I repeat, Miss Feversham, that I am not here. This [*pointing to himself*] is not I. It is merely a rather smart member of the staff of the *Daily Snail*, come to interview Cora Prout, the celebrated novelist.

CHRISTINE: And I have kissed a *Snail* reporter. Ugh!

ADRIAN: Impetuosity has ruined many women.

CHRISTINE: It is a morning of calamities [*Assuming the secretarial pose.*] Your card, please.

ADRIAN: [*handing card*] With pleasure.

CHRISTINE: [*taking card by the extreme corner, perusing it with disdain, and then dropping it on the floor*] We never see interviewers in the morning.

ADRIAN: Then I will call this afternoon.

CHRISTINE: You must write for an appointment.

ADRIAN: Oh! I'll take my chances, thanks.

CHRISTINE: We never give them: it is our rule. We have to be very particular. The fact is, we hate being interviewed, and we only submit to the process out of a respectful regard for the great and enlightened public. Any sort of notoriety, any suggestion of self-advertisement, is distasteful to us. What do you wish to interview us about? If it's the new novel, we are absolutely mum. Accept that from me.

ADRIAN: It isn't the new novel. The *Snail* wishes to know whether Mrs. Prout feels inclined to make any statement in reply to that article, "Medicine in Fiction," in the *Forum*.

CHRISTINE: Oh, Adrian, do you know anything about that article?

ADRIAN: Rather! I know *all* about it.

CHRISTINE: You treasure! You invaluable darling! I will marry you tomorrow morning by special licence--

ADRIAN: Recollect, it is a *Snail* reporter whom you are addressing. Suppose I were to print that!

CHRISTINE: Just so. You are prudence itself, while I, for the moment, happen to be a little--a little abnormal. I saved a man's life this morning, and it is apt to upset one's nerves. It is a dreadful thing to do--to save a man's life. And the consequences will be simply frightful for me. [*Buries her face in her hands.*]

ADRIAN: Christine [*taking her hands*], what are you raving about? You are not yourself.

CHRISTINE: I wish I wasn't. [*Looking up with forced calm.*] Adrian, there is a possibility of your being able to save me from the results of my horrible act, if only you will tell me the name of the author of that article in the *Forum*.

ADRIAN: [*tenderly*] Christine, you little know what you ask. But for you I will do anything.... Kiss me, my white lily. [*She kisses him.*]

CHRISTINE: [*whispers*] Tell me.

[*He folds her up in his arms. Enter Mrs. Prout excitedly.*]

MRS. PROUT: [*as she enters*] Christine, that appalling butler has actually left the house... [*Observing group.*] Heavens!

CHRISTINE: [*quietly disengaging herself*] You seem a little better, Mrs. Prout. A person to interview you from the *Daily Snail*. [*Pointing to Adrian.*]

MRS. PROUT: Adrian!

ADRIAN: Yes, Mamma.

MRS. PROUT: [*opening her lips to speak and then closing them*] Sit down.

ADRIAN: Certainly, Mamma. [*Sits.*]

MRS. PROUT: How dare you come here?

ADRIAN: I don't know how, Mamma. [*Picks up his card from the floor and hands it to her; then resumes his seat.*]

MRS. PROUT: [*glancing at card*] Pah!

CHRISTINE: That's just what I told the person, Mrs. Prout. [*Mrs. Prout burns her up with a glance.*]

MRS. PROUT: You have, then, abandoned your medical studies, for which I had paid all the fees?

ADRIAN: Yes, Mamma. You see, I was obliged to earn something at once. So I took to journalism. I am getting on quite nicely. The editor of the *Snail* says that I may review your next book.

MRS. PROUT: Unnatural stepson, to review in cold blood the novel of your own stepmother! But this morning I am getting used to misfortunes.

ADRIAN: It cuts me to the heart to hear you refer to any action of mine as a misfortune for you. Perhaps you would prefer that I should at once relieve you of my presence.

MRS. PROUT: Decidedly, yes--that is, if Christine thinks she can do without the fifth act of that caress which I interrupted.

CHRISTINE: The curtain was already falling, madam.

MRS. PROUT: Very well. [*To Adrian.*] Good day.

ADRIAN: As a stepson I retire. As the "special" of the *Daily Snail* I must insist on remaining. A "special" of the *Daily Snail* is incapable of being snubbed. He knows what he wants, and he gets it, or he ceases to be a "special" of the *Daily Snail*.

MRS. PROUT: I esteem the press, and though I should prefer an existence of absolute privacy, I never refuse its demands. I sacrifice myself to my public, freely acknowledging that a great artist has no exclusive right to the details of his own daily life. A great artist belongs to the world. What is it you want, Mr. Snail?

ADRIAN: I want to know whether you care to say anything in reply to that article on "Medicine in Fiction" in the *Forum*.

MRS. PROUT: [*sinking back in despair*] That article again! [*Sitting up.*] Tell me--do you know the author?

ADRIAN: I do.

MRS. PROUT: His name!

ADRIAN: He is a friend of mine.

MRS. PROUT: His name!

ADRIAN: I am informed that in writing it he was actuated by the highest motives. His desire was not only to make a little money, but to revenge himself against a person who had deeply injured him. He didn't know much about medicine, being only a student, and probably the larger part of his arguments could not be sustained, but he knew enough to make a show, and he made it.

MRS. PROUT: His name! I insist.

ADRIAN: Adrian Spout or Prout--I have a poor memory....

MRS. PROUT: Is it possible?

CHRISTINE: Monster!

ADRIAN: Need I defend myself, Mamma? Consider what you had done to me. You had devastated my young heart, which was just unfolding to its first passion. You had blighted the springtime of the exquisite creature [*looking at Christine, who is moved by the feeling in his tones*]--the exquisite creature who was dearer to me than all the world. In place of the luxury of my late father's house you offered me--the street....

CHRISTINE: Yes ... and Gower Street.

ADRIAN: You, who should have gently fostered and encouraged the frail buds of my energy and intelligence--you cast me forth ...

CHRISTINE: Cast *them* forth.

ADRIAN: Cast *them* forth, untimely plucked, to wither, and perhaps die, in the deserts of a great city. And for what? For what?

CHRISTINE: Merely lest she should be deprived of *my* poor services. Ah! Mrs. Prout, can you wonder that Mr. Adrian should actively resent such conduct--you with your marvellous knowledge of human nature?

MRS. PROUT: Adrian, did you really write it?

ADRIAN: Why, of course. You seem rather pleased than otherwise, Mamma.

MRS. PROUT: [*after cogitating*] Ah! You didn't write it, really. You are just boasting. It is a plot, a plot!

ADRIAN: I can prove that I wrote it, since you impugn my veracity.

MRS. PROUT: How can you prove it?

ADRIAN: By producing the cheque which I received from the *Forum* this very morning.

MRS. PROUT: Produce it, and I will forgive all.

ADRIAN: [*with a sign to Christine that he entirely fails to comprehend the situation*] I fly. It is in my humble attic, round the corner. Back in two minutes. [*Exit Adrian.*]

MRS. PROUT: Christine, *did* he really write it?

CHRISTINE: Can you doubt his word? Was it for lying that you ejected the poor youth from this residence?

MRS. PROUT: Ah! If he did! [*Smiles.*] Of course Dr. Gardner has not called?

CHRISTINE: Yes, he was in about twenty minutes ago.

MRS. PROUT: [*agonised*] Did you give him my note?

CHRISTINE: No.

MRS. PROUT: Thank Heaven!

CHRISTINE: I had not copied it out, so I read it to him.

MRS. PROUT: You read it to him?

CHRISTINE: Yes; that seemed the obvious thing to do.

MRS. PROUT: *[in black despair]* All is over. *[Sinks back.]*

[Enter Dr. Gardner hastily.]

CHRISTINE: Again?

GARDNER: *[excited]* I was looking out of the window of my flat when I saw Adrian tear along the street. I said to myself, "A man, even a reporter, only runs like that when a doctor is required, and urgently required. Someone is ill, perhaps my darling Cora." So I flew upstairs.

MRS. PROUT: *[with a shriek]* Dr. Gardner!

GARDNER: You are indeed ill, my beloved. *[Approaching her.]* What is the matter?

MRS. PROUT: *[waving him off]* It is nothing, Doctor. Could you get me some salts? I have mislaid mine. *[Sighs.]*

GARDNER: Salts! In an instant. *[Exit Dr. Gardner.]*

MRS. PROUT: Christine, you said you read my note to Dr. Gardner.

CHRISTINE: Yes, Mrs. Prout.

MRS. PROUT: His behaviour is singularly in the extreme. He seems positively overjoyed, while the freedom of his endearing epithets---- What were the precise terms I used? Read me the note.

CHRISTINE: Yes, Mrs. Prout. *[reads demurely]* "The answer to your question is 'Yes,'" --with a capital *N*.

MRS. PROUT: "Yes" with a capital *N*?

CHRISTINE: *[calmly]* I mean with a capital *Y*.

[Christine and Mrs. Prout look steadily at each other. Then they both smile. Enter Dr. Gardner.]

GARDNER: *[handing the salts]* You are sure you are not ill?

MRS. PROUT: *[smiling at him radiantly]* I am convinced of it. Christine, will you kindly reach me down the dictionary from that shelf?

[While Christine's back is turned Dr. Gardner gives, and Mrs. Prout returns, a passionate kiss.]

CHRISTINE: *[handing dictionary]* Here it is, Mrs. Prout.

MRS. PROUT: *[after consulting it]* I thought I could not be mistaken. Christine, you have rendered me a service *[regarding her affectionately]* -- a service for which I shall not forget to express my gratitude; but I am obliged to dismiss you instantly from my service.

CHRISTINE: Dismiss me, madam?

GARDNER: Cora, can you be so cruel?

MRS. PROUT: Alas, yes! She has sinned the secretarial sin which is beyond forgiveness. She has misspelt.

GARDNER: Impossible!

MRS. PROUT: It is too true.

GARDNER: Tell me the sad details.

MRS. PROUT: She has been guilty of spelling "No" with a "Y."

GARDNER: Dear me! And a word of one syllable, too! Miss Feversham, I should not have thought it of you. *[Enter Adrian.]*

ADRIAN: *[as he hands a cheque for Mrs. Prout's inspection]* Here again, Doctor?

GARDNER: Yes, and to stay.

MRS. PROUT: Adrian, the Doctor and I are engaged to be married. And talking of marriage, you observe that girl there in the corner. Take her and marry her at the earliest convenient moment. She is no longer my secretary.

ADRIAN: What! You consent?

MRS. PROUT: I consent.

ADRIAN: And you pardon my article?

MRS. PROUT: No, my dear Adrian, I ignore it. Here, take your ill-gotten gains. *[Returning cheque.]* They will bring you no good. And since they will bring you no good, I have decided to allow you the sum of five hundred pounds a year. You must have something.

ADRIAN: Stepmother!

CHRISTINE: *[advancing to take Mrs. Prout's hand]* Stepmother-in-law!

GARDNER: Cora, you are an angel.

MRS. PROUT: Merely an artist, my dear Tom, merely an artist. I have the dramatic sense--that is all.

ADRIAN: Your sense is more than dramatic, it is common; it is even horse. What about the *Snail* "special," mummy?

MRS. PROUT: My attitude is one of strict silence.

ADRIAN: But I must go away with something.

MRS. PROUT: Strict silence. The attack is beneath my notice.

ADRIAN: But what can I *say*.

CHRISTINE: Say that Mrs. Prout's late secretary, Miss Feversham, having retired from her post, has already entered upon a career of original literary composition. That will be a nice newsy item, won't it?

ADRIAN: *[taking out notebook]* Rather! What is she at work on?

CHRISTINE: Oh, well, I scarcely--

GARDNER: I know--"Hysteria in Lady Novelists."

MRS. PROUT: *What?*

GARDNER: *[to Christine]* Didn't you tell me so?

CHRISTINE: Of course I didn't, Doctor. What a shocking memory you have! It is worse than my spelling.

GARDNER: Then what did you say?

CHRISTINE: I said, "Generosity in Lady Novelists."

CURTAIN