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IN HOLY RUSSIA

Drawn from:

Seven Modern Comedies

By

Lord Dunsany

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London & New York

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

MARYA NICOLAEVNA.

ANNA PETROVNA.

IVAN MICHAILOVITCH.

ALEXEY.

ZERSTCHIN.

ALCOHOL.

A POLICEMAN OF NIBOLESKAYA.

IN HOLY RUSSIA

SCENE: Outside a Russian cottage. A table and chairs stand before the little cottage. The housewife (Marya Nicolaevna) is tidying it.

Time: Russia about 1912.

Enter another peasant-woman, the neighbour.

MARYA. Why, Anna Petrovna, an angel has sent you.

ANNA. Well, Marya Nicolaevna, I came to talk.

MARYA. Surely an angel sent you, for I needed a talk so much.

ANNA. Ah, often I feel like that. And then I must talk. I must. And if the men are away I just talk to myself.

MARYA. Oh, one should not do that.

ANNA. No?

MARYA. No. For an evil spirit might hear, and think that you spoke to him.

ANNA. I should not like that.

MARYA. No. He would answer then.

ANNA. That would be dreadful. But we have each other to talk to now.

MARYA. Yes. Let us talk of all things. But fast, for my nephew Ivan will be here soon to speak with his friend Alexey from Tobolsk, and young Zerstchin. You know of what they speak?

ANNA. No.

MARYA. It is of politics.

ANNA. Of politics!

MARYA. Yes, they say wonderful things. Their talk is all strange like a dream, and it makes my heart beat faster.

ANNA. What do they say?

MARYA. Oh, I know not. Strange words, strange sayings, and many things not true. I know not what they mean, but I know it's politics. It's very strange to hear them: it is like something quite different.

ANNA. Do they speak of change?

MARYA. Yes. Of things quite different.

ANNA. God does not wish that.

MARYA. No, nor the Czar. Yet their talk thrills me. There are new words in their mouths. And though I know not their meaning, it sets me thinking of strange new things. You shall hear them Anna.

ANNA. Not here! Not politics in the open daylight and just by the road that runs through Niboleskaya.

MARYA. Ah. But they are so cunning. None knows what they talk of.

ANNA. If they see three men talking together, they may suspect.

MARYA. No. For they are cunning. Alexey has lived in Tobolsk and seen the wide world, and knows things that they would not dream of in Niboleskaya. It is his plan. They have a box of images that I keep for them. And they set them all up on the table, and play with them for all the world like children. And if the police come by they think they are playing.

ANNA. Playing? But, Marya, the police will never think big men like your nephew are children.

MARYA. Ah. That is the strange thing. Yet so it is. Alexey has learned it in Tobolsk. Grown men, it seems, work their brains over those images, aye, and will beat their foreheads with their fists, and will sit and gaze at them all day. It is strange, but so it is, and the world is full of strange customs.

ANNA. Strange indeed. And will the police in Niboleskaya know this custom?

MARYA. They know of it; though they know not how to play with the images. Alexey says that, for that, they are all the readier to smile on the images and to appear to comprehend the ways of them.

ANNA. I like not playing with images.

MARYA. Why not?

ANNA. It may bring bad luck.

MARYA. Bad luck? Will it come to us?

ANNA. Not this year, I think, for it is a lucky year, and we will have a beautiful harvest.

MARYA. God be praised. How do you know?

ANNA. The beans are in double rows in the pods this year. I have seen twenty such.

MARYA. Are they indeed?

ANNA. Yes. It is a portent.

MARYA. Look. Here they come. I must get the queer box.

[Exit into cottage.]

Enter Ivan, followed by Alexey and Zerstchin.

IVAN. Well, neighbour. How do you prosper?

ANNA. Well, thank you, Ivan Michailovitch, for we are to have a great harvest this year. There are double rows in the bean-pods.

IVAN. Ah, yes. You would know by that.

ANNA. Certainly, Ivan Michailovitch. God put them there for that purpose.

IVAN. Ah, to be sure He does.

*Enter Marya with a chess-board and box of large chessmen.
She puts board and box on the table.*

MARYA. Well, Ivan, I've brought you your images.

IVAN. Thank you, Aunt Marya.

MARYA. You wouldn't like me to help you with them?

IVAN. No, no. (*He turns to his silent, serious, preoccupied companions and they set up handfuls of chessmen haphazard upon the board. Ivan and Alexey (from Tobolsk) sit down at opposite ends of the board.*) Now we can talk.

ALEXEY. No, not yet. Sit you down, Zerstchin, there. Now; there are two men playing chess and one watching. What more natural? We may talk.

IVAN. Tell him, then, of the future of Russia. He has not heard.

ALEXEY (*to Zerstchin*). You are ready to work for Russia?

ZERSTCHIN. I yearn to see Holy Russia free.

ALEXEY. Learn first, then, to speak of "Holy Russia" no more. It was that in the past, and all the past is bad. We shall only be free by escaping from it utterly. The past will try to bind you with old customs, will reach out hands to clutch you, will bring chains to fasten you down; and old customs and chains and hands must all be broken. What the past made holy must be unholy now, and only what none dared speak of hitherto shall be holy, things of which none dared think. It is only by this that we shall be free.

ZERSTCHIN (*eagerly*). Tell me how we shall free Russia.

ALEXEY. Each man shall teach ten men every week. And of those ten he shall choose one, also to be a teacher. Thus, wherever there was one teacher on Monday, at the end of that week there shall be two, and every teacher teaching ten more.

IVAN. No, no, that will be too long. Let them find a new teacher every day.

ZERSTCHIN. Yes. Then we shall soon be free.

ALEXEY. No. If we have but fifty teachers now, and double them every week, we shall have six or seven million in four months.

ZERSTCHIN. Six or seven million!

ALEXEY. Aye, and nearer ten million.

ZERSTCHIN. It is wonderful.

ALEXEY. We shall do it.

ZERSTCHIN. And then. In four months' time?

ALEXEY. Then we shall wait a little longer.

ZERSTCHIN. And then?

ALEXEY. Then we shall have taught that the sceptre that men go in fear of is only a bar of gold, and that there is nothing more in that than there is in lead. That the sanctity of the Czar and his sceptre are but dreams from which men may waken as they waken from others. We shall waken them with a whisper. We shall waken them in the golden future and the dream will be all gone, and Russia will be happy again as free birds are happy at dawn.

IVAN. Will all awaken?

ZERSTCHIN. Yes, surely.

ALEXEY. No. There will be those that will not hear our voices. Heavy minds that would sleep on though all the birds were singing. Against these we shall teach the holiness of assassination. For things shall be holy that were not holy before, and things unholy that were holy of old. It will be for the sake of Russia. When these are gone all shall be free.

ZERSTCHIN (*ecstatically*). Russia free!

ALEXEY. Yes, for all that live will be those with freedom in their hearts. How should these oppress any? And all the old oppressions will be gone. They will have all been sacrificed to Freedom.

ZERSTCHIN. And we shall all be free?

ALEXEY. Free as the birds that sing. And then we shall live in a State planned by sensible, reasoning men, not made by the chance absurdities and violences of uncivilized ages. We shall.... Your move, Ivan.

[They bend over the chessboard. The village Policeman walks across.]

POLICEMAN. Chess, Ivan Michailovitch?

[But Ivan, deep over the game, does not answer.]

ALEXEY. Yes.

POLICEMAN. A clever game. A very excellent game.

[Exit.]

ALEXEY. We shall have none of those folk.

IVAN. A few, perhaps, to enforce our free laws!

ALEXEY. No! Why do Russians break the law? Because it is not *their* law. It is not the law of a free people, but the law of a tyranny that they detest. When the tyranny is gone, and the laws are the people's own, made by themselves and for each other, what Russian will ever break them?

IVAN. See, Zerstchin; you are learning. You shall hear the constitution of the new Russia.

ZERSTCHIN. Yes, it is wonderful.

ALEXEY. And then none will have any desire to break the new laws, even if free Russians could be found to do it, for all will be so rich that they'll be content.

ZERSTCHIN. We'll all be rich, Alexey?

IVAN. Yes, listen, and you shall hear.

ALEXEY. Yes, there is enough of gold and jewellery in the imperial palaces alone to feed all the people of Russia for a year, even if they did no work for the whole of that time. But they *will* work, and for themselves: there will be no rent to any landlord, and no interest to be paid on any borrowed money, for we shall abolish capitalism. The wealth of Russia will be for the people of Russia. It is boundless; it is enormous. We have worked it all out, and we have found that every peasant will be as wealthy, all his life, as any lawyer or priest or doctor in a large provincial town. And furthermore there will be no taxes, or very few.

IVAN. That is because there will be no army or navy to maintain. Is it not, Alexey?

ALEXEY. Only at first, until other nations have learned from us not to desire to make war.

ZERSTCHIN. But if any do break the laws of free Russia, what then, Alexey?

ALEXEY. If any do? Why, if any do, we shall put them in pleasant schools. Not in Siberian prisons like the imperialists. And in those schools we shall teach them until they can know their error. Then we shall free them and they will go back better citizens than the rest, for we shall have trained them in all civic things.

ZERSTCHIN. It will be a glorious time.

ALEXEY. Ah, you say that when I tell you how rich we shall all be.

ZERSTCHIN (*ecstatically*). No. I say it because Russia will be free.

IVAN. Come. We will drink to that day. Marya Nicolaevna! Marya Nicolaevna!

MARYA. I come, Ivan.

IVAN. Will you give us some vodka, Aunt?

MARYA. Vodka, so early?

IVAN. We wish to drink to a very glorious day.

MARYA. Oh, your politics.

IVAN. Our politics will free Russia.

MARYA. They make my heart beat faster.

[*Exit into house.*]

ZERSTCHIN. Russia will be free.

IVAN. Yes, we will drink to that day.

ZERSTCHIN. I will not drink.

IVAN. Why not?

ZERSTCHIN. I want to think of those glorious days. I want to think with clear brains of the freedom of Russia; the rule of reason, and freedom for all. The glory of it warms me so that I want no drink.

ALEXEY. Nonsense. We will drink to the day that is coming. It will make it seem nearer.

ZERSTCHIN. I do not need it. The glory of those days is enough for me.

IVAN. Here comes Marya Nicolaevna with the vodka. We will all drink. We shall be able to work the better for it.

ZERSTCHIN. No.

IVAN. One drink.

ZERSTCHIN. Well, one then, and no more.

ALEXEY. Yes, that is all we need. We must keep our brains clear for they have to free Russia.

MARYA (*to Anna*). The strange things they are saying.

ANNA. Yes. Yes. God send no ill come of them.

MARYA. Ill? I trust not.

[*Exeunt Marya and Anna.*]

ZERSTCHIN. This is good stuff.

IVAN. Have another.

ZERSTCHIN. Well, one more, but only one more. Then I will leave you, or I shall drink too much. I want to think of free Russia and all the golden days. (*Ivan pours.*) Too much. Too much. You've poured out too much.

IVAN. You needn't drink it all.

ZERSTCHIN. I'll sit over there and think. If I stay with you here, soon I shan't be able to. (*He goes away with his glass and sits on a tree-stump (Stage R.) by footlights.*) The golden days!

[*He sips the vodka. The lights lower slightly. He sips it again: a thin gauze descends between him and the others. Again he sips, and again a thin gauze. Once more: and again a gauze, until all is misty white between him and the rest of the stage. Then a brilliant harlequin in his jazz-bright tights leaps up beside him in sunlight.*

ZERSTCHIN. Who are you?

THE FIGURE. Alcohol.

ZERSTCHIN. Alco-what?

ALCOHOL. Alcohol. An old, old family. You know our motto: *In vino veritas.*

ZERSTCHIN. *In vino...?*

ALCOHOL. Look!

[*He waves with his harlequin's sword and the gauzes disappear, all but one thin film. All is bright sunlight. Alexey is gone, but Ivan is sitting at the same table, but his head and arms are fallen upon it, a bit of a gnawed twig lies by his hand. Marya and Anna, lying upon the ground, are trying to gnaw the bark of twigs, or eat pieces of grass. The Policeman leans hopeless against a tree. The misery of all shows they are starving. The thatch of the house, etc., have become unkempt.*

ZERSTCHIN. Starving!

ALCOHOL (*cheerfully*). Yes.

ZERSTCHIN. What! In Russia?

ALCOHOL. Yes. Here in Russia.

ZERSTCHIN. Oh! (*Alcohol, leaning against tree by Zerstchin, toys with his harlequin's sword and watches the starving people.*) No, but this shall not be. Folk must not starve in Russia. I'll give them money to buy bread. I've a hundred-rouble note. And I can get more. They shall not starve in Russia. Here, good folk. (*He steps towards them with his rouble note outstretched.*) Here. (*But he comes against the gauze, and both hands grope at it, though he does not actually touch it, and he can get no further. None of them see him.*)

ALCOHOL. You cannot. It is too far.

ZERSTCHIN. Too far?

ALCOHOL. Yes, this is Russia of 1920.

ZERSTCHIN. The future! What can I do?

ALCOHOL. You have done all you can do.

ZERSTCHIN. I?

ALCOHOL. Look!

ZERSTCHIN (*with his hundred-rouble note still held out childishly towards them. Plaintively.*) I want to give them my money.

ALCOHOL. Look!

MARYA (*to Ivan, pulling at his shoulder*). Ivan, Ivan. Arouse yourself.

IVAN (*turning his head without raising it*). Why?

MARYA. We must find food at once.

IVAN (*contemptuously*). Food? Where?

MARYA. Listen and I will tell you. Listen, Ivan.

IVAN. Let me sleep.

MARYA. Listen, Ivan. Only listen. There is food in Niboleskaya.

IVAN (*incredulously*). In Niboleskaya?

MARYA. Not so loud. Listen, Ivan.

IVAN. Well.

MARYA (*with the air of a secret*). Yesterday Skoboleff opened a tin of sprats. It is known. It came from England. He ate two or three, not more; but they smelt bad and he stopped eating them. There must be nine sprats in that tin now: there were twelve. Take your money, and go and buy them.

IVAN. I have no money, but these (*showing four notes*).

MARYA. How much?

IVAN. Four thousand roubles. You can't buy all those sprats for four thousand roubles.

MARYA. They smelt very bad, little Ivan. Perhaps Skoboleff will sell.

[Zerstchin, dropping his rouble note, hides his face in sudden despair. The scene darkens till nothing is visible but Zerstchin sobbing. Alcohol has lain down to rest. And then above the sound of Zerstchin sobbing comes a yawn of the most intense boredom. It is Alcohol awaking. He is now dressed all in grey. Alcohol rises slowly, yawning. He is scarcely able to lift his weight. He walks away, leaning heavily on trees; not of course drunkenly, but wearily. Exit. The earlier scene comes back again. It is once more Russia of about 1912, with Ivan and Alexey seated at the table. Marya and Anna enter gossiping to each other.]

ZERSTCHIN (*drying his tears as the light brightens*). Ah! I will save them yet. (*He rises and goes over to Alexey and Ivan.*) Friends. Friends. A moment before you decide. Alexey, a moment.

ALEXEY. Well?

ZERSTCHIN. If in the changes you make you affect our commerce. Suppose you injure its delicate organization. And our finance. What if the sudden change harms that?

ALEXEY. I told you. I shall make the people rich.

ZERSTCHIN. Yes, Alexey, yes. Yes, certainly. But what if the sudden change injure our credit? What if the rouble should lose its value, when, when we want to buy food.

MARYA. Still at their politics.

ANNA. Ah, well. Let the men talk as well as us.

[*Marya laughs.*]

ALEXEY. I will deal with that point.

IVAN. Alexey has studied all that.

ZERSTCHIN. Yes, I know, Ivan. I know. And yet....

ALEXEY. I will deal with that point. If any unfavourable influence should affect the purchasing value of the rouble, which is not to be anticipated, but in case it should, the People's Central Revolutionary Banks will in that case so regulate the deflation of currency, that....

CURTAIN

TRANSCRIBER'S NOTE

Hyphenation is inconsistent, with both chessboard and chess-board present in the original.

[The end of *In Holy Russia* by Lord Dunsany]