

# A TRAGEDIAN IN SPITE OF HIMSELF

Anton Chekhov

1889

Translated by Julius West

## CHARACTERS

*IVAN IVANOVITCH TOLKACHOV, the father of a family*

*ALEXEY ALEXEYEVITCH MURASHKIN, his friend*

The scene is laid in St. Petersburg, in MURASHKIN'S flat

[MURASHKIN'S study. Comfortable furniture. MURASHKIN is seated at his desk. Enter TOLKACHOV holding in his hands a glass globe for a lamp, a toy bicycle, three hat-boxes, a large parcel containing a dress, a bin-case of beer, and several little parcels. He looks round stupidly and lets himself down on the sofa in exhaustion.]

MURASHKIN. How do you do, Ivan Ivanovitch? Delighted to see you! What brings you here?

TOLKACHOV. [Breathing heavily] My dear good fellow... I want to ask you something.... I implore you lend me a revolver till to-morrow. Be a friend!

MURASHKIN. What do you want a revolver for?

TOLKACHOV. I must have it.... Oh, little fathers!... give me some water... water quickly!... I must have it... I've got to go through a dark wood to-night, so in case of accidents... do, please, lend it to me.

MURASHKIN. Oh, you liar, Ivan Ivanovitch! What the devil have you got to do in a dark wood? I expect you are up to something. I can see by your face that you are up to something. What's the matter with you? Are you ill?

TOLKACHOV. Wait a moment, let me breathe.... Oh little mothers! I am dog-tired. I've got a feeling all over me, and in my head as well, as if I've been roasted on a spit. I can't stand it any longer. Be a friend, and don't ask me any questions or insist on details; just give me the revolver! I beseech you!

MURASHKIN. Well, really! Ivan Ivanovitch, what cowardice is this? The father of a family and a Civil Servant holding a responsible post! For shame!

TOLKACHOV. What sort of a father of a family am I! I am a martyr. I am a beast of burden, a nigger, a slave, a rascal who keeps on waiting here for something to happen instead of starting off for the next world. I am a rag, a fool, an idiot. Why am I alive? What's the use? [Jumps up] Well now, tell me why am I alive? What's the purpose of this uninterrupted series of mental and physical sufferings? I understand being a martyr to an idea, yes! But to be a martyr to the devil knows what, skirts and lamp-globes, no! I humbly decline! No, no, no! I've had enough! Enough!

MURASHKIN. Don't shout, the neighbours will hear you!

TOLKACHOV. Let your neighbours hear; it's all the same to me! If you don't give me a revolver somebody else will, and there will be an end of me anyway! I've made up my mind!

MURASHKIN. Hold on, you've pulled off a button. Speak calmly. I still don't understand what's wrong with your life.

TOLKACHOV. What's wrong? You ask me what's wrong? Very well, I'll tell you! Very well! I'll tell you everything, and then perhaps my soul will be lighter. Let's sit down. Now listen... Oh, little mothers, I am out of breath!... Just let's take to-day as an instance. Let's take to-day. As you know, I've got to work at the Treasury from ten to four. It's hot, it's stuffy, there are flies, and, my dear fellow, the very dickens of a chaos. The Secretary is on leave, Khrapov has gone to get married, and the smaller fry is mostly in the country, making love or occupied with amateur theatricals. Everybody is so sleepy, tired, and done up that you can't get any sense out of them. The Secretary's duties are in the hands of an individual who is deaf in the left ear and in love; the public has lost its memory; everybody is running about angry and raging, and there is such a hullabaloo that you can't hear yourself speak. Confusion and smoke everywhere. And my work is deathly: always the same, always the same—first a correction, then a reference back, another correction, another reference back; it's all as monotonous as the waves of the sea. One's eyes, you understand, simply crawl out of one's head. Give me some water.... You come out a broken, exhausted man. You would like to dine and fall asleep, but you don't!—You remember that you live in the country—that is, you are a slave, a rag, a bit of string, a bit of limp flesh, and you've got to run round and do errands. Where we live a pleasant custom has grown up: when a man goes to town every wretched female inhabitant, not to mention one's own wife, has the power and the right to give him a crowd of commissions. The wife orders you to run into the modiste's and curse her for making a bodice too wide across the chest and too narrow across the shoulders; little Sonya wants a new pair of shoes; your sister-in-law wants some scarlet silk like the pattern at twenty copecks and three arshins long.... Just wait; I'll read you. [Takes a note out of his pocket and reads] A globe for the lamp; one pound of pork sausages; five copecks' worth of cloves and cinnamon; castor-oil for Misha; ten pounds of granulated sugar. To bring with you from home: a copper jar for the sugar; carbolic acid; insect powder, ten copecks' worth; twenty bottles of beer; vinegar; and corsets for Mlle. Shanceau at No. 82.... Ouf! And to bring home Misha's winter coat and goloshes. That is the order of my wife and family. Then there are the commissions of our dear friends and neighbours—devil take them! To-morrow is the name-day of Volodia Vlasin; I have to buy a bicycle for him. The wife of Lieutenant-Colonel Virkhin is in an interesting condition, and I am therefore bound to call in at the midwife's every day and invite her to come. And so on, and so on. There are five notes in my pocket and my handkerchief

is all knots. And so, my dear fellow, you spend the time between your office and your train, running about the town like a dog with your tongue hanging out, running and running and cursing life. From the clothier's to the chemist's, from the chemist's to the modiste's, from the modiste's to the pork butcher's, and then back again to the chemist's. In one place you stumble, in a second you lose your money, in a third you forget to pay and they raise a hue and cry after you, in a fourth you tread on the train of a lady's dress.... Tfoo! You get so shaken up from all this that your bones ache all night and you dream of crocodiles. Well, you've made all your purchases, but how are you to pack all these things? For instance, how are you to put a heavy copper jar together with the lamp-globe or the carbolic acid with the tea? How are you to make a combination of beer-bottles and this bicycle? It's the labours of Hercules, a puzzle, a rebus! Whatever tricks you think of, in the long run you're bound to smash or scatter something, and at the station and in the train you have to stand with your arms apart, holding up some parcel or other under your chin, with parcels, cardboard boxes, and such-like rubbish all over you. The train starts, the passengers begin to throw your luggage about on all sides: you've got your things on somebody else's seat. They yell, they call for the conductor, they threaten to have you put out, but what can I do? I just stand and blink my eyes like a whacked donkey. Now listen to this. I get home. You think I'd like to have a nice little drink after my righteous labours and a good square meal— isn't that so?—but there is no chance of that. My spouse has been on the look-out for me for some time. You've hardly started on your soup when she has her claws into you, wretched slave that you are—and wouldn't you like to go to some amateur theatricals or to a dance? You can't protest. You are a husband, and the word husband when translated into the language of summer residents in the country means a dumb beast which you can load to any extent without fear of the interference of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. So you go and blink at "A Family Scandal" or something, you applaud when your wife tells you to, and you feel worse and worse and worse until you expect an apoplectic fit to happen any moment. If you go to a dance you have to find partners for your wife, and if there is a shortage of them then you dance the quadrilles yourself. You get back from the theatre or the dance after midnight, when you are no longer a man but a useless, limp rag. Well, at last you've got what you want; you unrobe and get into bed. It's excellent—you can close your eyes and sleep.... Everything is so nice, poetic, and warm, you understand; there are no children squealing behind the wall, and you've got rid of your wife, and your conscience is clear—what more can you want? You fall asleep—and suddenly... you hear a buzz!... Gnats! [Jumps up] Gnats! Be they triply accursed Gnats! [Shakes his fist] Gnats! It's one of the plagues of Egypt,

one of the tortures of the Inquisition! Buzz! It sounds so pitiful, so pathetic, as if it's begging your pardon, but the villain stings so that you have to scratch yourself for an hour after. You smoke, and go for them, and cover yourself from head to foot, but it is no good! At last you have to sacrifice yourself and let the cursed things devour you. You've no sooner got used to the gnats when another plague begins: downstairs your wife begins practising sentimental songs with her two friends. They sleep by day and rehearse for amateur concerts by night. Oh, my God! Those tenors are a torture with which no gnats on earth can compare. [He sings] "Oh, tell me not my youth has ruined you." "Before thee do I stand enchanted." Oh, the beastly things! They've about killed me! So as to deafen myself a little I do this: I drum on my ears. This goes on till four o'clock. Oh, give me some more water, brother!... I can't... Well, not having slept, you get up at six o'clock in the morning and off you go to the station. You run so as not to be late, and it's muddy, foggy, cold—brr! Then you get to town and start all over again. So there, brother. It's a horrible life; I wouldn't wish one like it for my enemy. You understand—I'm ill! Got asthma, heartburn—I'm always afraid of something. I've got indigestion, everything is thick before me... I've become a regular psychopath.... [Looking round] Only, between ourselves, I want to go down to see Chechotte or Merzheyevsky. There's some devil in me, brother. In moments of despair and suffering, when the gnats are stinging or the tenors sing, everything suddenly grows dim; you jump up and race round the whole house like a lunatic and shout, "I want blood! Blood!" And really all the time you do want to let a knife into somebody or hit him over the head with a chair. That's what life in a summer villa leads to! And nobody has any sympathy for me, and everybody seems to think it's all as it should be. People even laugh. But understand, I am a living being and I want to live! This isn't farce, it's tragedy! I say, if you don't give me your revolver, you might at any rate sympathize.

MURASHKIN. I do sympathize.

TOLKACHOV. I see how much you sympathize.... Good-bye. I've got to buy some anchovies and some sausage... and some tooth-powder, and then to the station.

MURASHKIN. Where are you living?

TOLKACHOV. At Carrion River.

MURASHKIN. [Delighted] Really? Then you'll know Olga Pavlovna Finberg, who lives there?

TOLKACHOV. I know her. We are even acquainted.

MURASHKIN. How perfectly splendid! That's so convenient, and it would be so good of you...

TOLKACHOV. What's that?

MURASHKIN. My dear fellow, wouldn't you do one little thing for me? Be a friend! Promise me now.

TOLKACHOV. What's that?

MURASHKIN. It would be such a friendly action! I implore you, my dear man. In the first place, give Olga Pavlovna my very kind regards. In the second place, there's a little thing I'd like you to take down to her. She asked me to get a sewing-machine but I haven't anybody to send it down to her by.... You take it, my dear! And you might at the same time take down this canary in its cage... only be careful, or you'll break the door.... What are you looking at me like that for?

TOLKACHOV. A sewing-machine... a canary in a cage... siskins, chaffinches...

MURASHKIN. Ivan Ivanovitch, what's the matter with you? Why are you turning purple?

TOLKACHOV. [Stamping] Give me the sewing-machine! Where's the bird-cage? Now get on top yourself! Eat me! Tear me to pieces! Kill me! [Clenching his fists] I want blood! Blood! Blood!

MURASHKIN. You've gone mad!

TOLKACHOV. [Treading on his feet] I want blood! Blood!

MURASHKIN. [In horror] He's gone mad! [Shouts] Peter! Maria! Where are you? Help!

TOLKACHOV. [Chasing him round the room] I want blood! Blood!

Curtain.

This eBook is for the use of anyone anywhere in the United States and most other parts of the world at no cost and with almost no restrictions whatsoever. You may copy it, give it away or re-use it under the terms of the Project Gutenberg License included with this eBook or online at [www.gutenberg.org](http://www.gutenberg.org). If you are not located in the United States, you will have to check the

laws of the country where you are located before using this eBook. The original Plain Vanilla ASCII version can be located at <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/7986>.

This eBook was converted to Portable Document Format (PDF) by Theatre Links at <https://theatrelinks.com>.