

An excerpt from

THE NEWS FROM ST. PETERSBURG (from **HA!**)

a comedy in one act

by Rich Orloff

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- Place:* The living room of a large estate, a few hour's horseback ride from St. Petersburg, Russia.
- Time:* Late in the afternoon of Sunday, January 9, 1905. (Old Russian calendar).
- Characters:* FYODOR, a landowner
ANYA, his wife
SASHA, their manservant
NIKOLAI, their good friend, the doctor
A COW OF NOBLE BIRTH (off-stage)

The living room is decorated in a plush but unimpressive style, as befits an aristocratic couple with mediocre taste. As the play begins, FYODOR, a philosophical man of about fifty, sits in his easy chair, puffing a pipe, staring into the distance. His wife, ANYA, about the same age, is embroidering – something she is not very good at.

ANYA
(gives a long, deep,
world-weary sigh. Then:)
The sky turns black so early in January.

FYODOR
The sky turns dark blue.

ANYA
Pardon me?

FYODOR
I always like to think the sky turns dark blue.

ANYA
What's the difference?

FYODOR
Black is gloomy. I like dark blue.

ANYA

Either way, the sky turns dark.

FYODOR

Yes, but it turns darker for you than it does for me. Life is all a matter of perception. I prefer to look at it through rose-colored glasses.

ANYA

I would think then the sky would turn purple.

FYODOR

(ignoring her remark)

Do you know what Vladimir Nikolayich Trishnikov told me in church this morning?

ANYA

No, what?

FYODOR

He told me that Yevgeny Alekseyevich Trofimov-Pishchik was discovered embezzling from his own bank.

ANYA

How awful!

FYODOR

I never trusted the man.

ANYA

Why would anyone embezzle from their own bank? It is not a rational thing to do.

FYODOR

Perhaps Yevgeny Alekseyevich Trofimov-Pishchik is not a rational man.

We hear a cow MOO in the distance.

FYODOR

Ah, Bessimka Bessinovna sounds in good spirits today.

ANYA

Guess what I heard in town yesterday. You won't believe it.

FYODOR

If I won't believe it, then why bother telling me?

ANYA

Just listen. I heard this on good authority from Charlotta, the servant girl of Boris Alekseyevich Kulibin and his wife Nina Leonardovna. Apparently, Nina Leonardovna has been having an affair for five years with Semon Penteleyevich Rogov, ever since they danced together at the New Century's Eve party given by Mikhail Romanovich Ryabushinsky.

FYODOR

You don't say.

ANYA

There's more. Boris Alekseyevich knew about his wife's affair, but he said nothing... for business reasons. But last Tuesday, when Nina Leonardovna usually has her rendezvous with Semon Penteleyevich, who should Boris Alekseyevich see at the market but – Semon Penteleyevich! They were both so shocked they rushed back to the home of Boris Alekseyevich, where they found Nina Leonardovna with Dmitri Dobrolyubov, the bastard son of Elena Nikolayena Kazakova and either Maxim Lvovich Chichikov or Ivan Konstantinovich Begushkin!

FYODOR

I hear that in America, there are people named Bob. Some people go their entire life being called Bob Smith.

ANYA

America. Isn't that where they believe in life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness?

FYODOR

I believe so.

ANYA

Amazing such a place has lasted.

Fyodor checks his pocket watch.

FYODOR
(calling to the kitchen:)
Oh, Sasha! Sasha!

SASHA (o.s.)
I'll be there in a minute, sir.

FYODOR
It is time for tea.

SASHA (o.s.)
I am bringing it now.

SASHA, their servant, enters and serves tea.

FYODOR
You're three minutes late.

SASHA
I am sorry, sir.

FYODOR
Remember, punctuality is next to godliness.

SASHA
Last week, you told me cleanliness
was next to godliness.

FYODOR
Punctuality is on one side of godliness;
cleanliness is on the other.

ANYA
Let that be a lesson to you, Sasha.

SASHA
I will, madame. And thank you for
your interest in my education.

ANYA
You're welcome.

Sasha turns to leave, but then remembers something.

SASHA
Oh, sir, madame, excuse me.

FYODOR
Yes, Sasha?

SASHA

Sofya wishes to know what you would like for the evening meal.

ANYA

How should we know? It is not yet time to eat.

SASHA

Could you make a little guess?

FYODOR

Who can predict the future?
There are too many imponderables.

SASHA

Please, sir, we need to know.

ANYA

Sasha, go. I am too worn. There is something so tiring about Sundays in January. Already the sky has turned black and blue.

SASHA

Yes, madame.

Sasha exits.

ANYA

I don't think the servants take as much pride in their work as they once did.

FYODOR

Yes, you're right. I miss feudalism so much.

There's a KNOCK on the front door. A pause. Fyodor rises.

FYODOR (cont'd)

(calling to the kitchen:)

I'll get it, Sasha!

ANYA

You'll get it?!

FYODOR

I need the exercise.

ANYA

It's Sasha's job to open the door.

FYODOR

It's not that important.

ANYA

Mark my words. Today we answer the door;
tomorrow they will expect us to dress ourselves.

Fyodor opens the door. NIKOLAI GREGORIEVICH SHUBIN enters.
He looks like he's just heard bad news. He's quite agitated.

FYODOR

Nikolai Gregorievich!

NIKOLAI

Good evening Fyodor Ivanovich,
Anna Bogdonovna.*

(*NOTE: He would say the formal "Anna" here, not "Anya".)

ANYA

What a pleasant surprise this visit is.

NIKOLAI

I'm not sure it is.

FYODOR

You don't look well. Are you all right?

NIKOLAI

I have been better.

FYODOR

Would the good doctor like something
to drink? A little schnapps, perhaps?

NIKOLAI

No, thank you.

FYODOR

A little vodka then?

NIKOLAI

I'm not thirsty.

FYODOR

Some beet borscht with a little sherry in it?

NIKOLAI

No! Have you heard the news?

FYODOR

What news?

NIKOLAI

The news from St. Petersburg.

ANYA

Has something happened?

NIKOLAI

Yes!

ANYA

Oh, good. So few things actually happen.

NIKOLAI

It is not good.

FYODOR

Why? What happened?

NIKOLAI

You know about all the strikes in the capital,
of course.

FYODOR

No.

NIKOLAI

Don't you read the newspaper?

FYODOR

Oh, no. I don't like the way the print
rubs off on my fingers.