

Acting Copy

Full
Annotations

.....love, Chekhov

Letters exchanged between
Anton Chekhov and Olga Knipper
adapted by Dominick Jones © 1999

A play in one act

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Vishnievski My name is Alexander Leonidovich Vishnievski. Chekhov and I spent our childhood together in Taganrog. It was an important seaport in Peter the Great's time, but in my day, it was just a provincial backwater. We were both crazy about the theatre, but it was off limits. It was thought to be immoral. So we used to sneak in, all disguised in our fathers' cloaks and dark glasses. Then we went our separate ways. Chekhov became a doctor. I was a good provincial actor, and eventually I transferred to the Arts Theatre in Moscow. Then, who do you think turns up? Chekhov. With a play under his arm. He was very sick, even then. He had tuberculosis. We knew he couldn't stand the Moscow winters. So, he went to live in Yalta. It's a long way south of here. On the Black Sea. Anyway, it meant my friend Chekhov had to write lots of letters, and that's why we know about Olga. Dear Olga. I loved her too, but he prevailed.

From time to time, you'll find me doubling as a telegraphist - a bit of literary licence, but there it is. Producers like to save money.

Even his close friends found Chekhov somewhat impenetrable, but he was a great letter writer, and he did have an older friend to whom he wrote a great deal. That was Suvorin for many years his publisher. Now Suvorin was very ambitious for Chekhov, and had been urging him to marry for the sake of his writing. This is Chekhov's somewhat exasperated reply.

Chekhov All right, I'll get married if you like. But these are my conditions. Everything must remain as before: she must live in Moscow, I'll live in the country, and I'll go to visit her. I promise to be a splendid husband, but give me a wife like the moon, who won't appear in my sky every day. But, it doesn't follow that I'll write any better for being married. I don't care for mistresses anymore. I'm gradually growing impotent with them. In fact, all thinkers are impotent at forty, while ninety-year-old savages keep ninety wives apiece.

Vishnievski Then he met Olga and they struck up a correspondence, and

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engaged in some family visits.

Knipper We've just got back from your sister, Masha. She tells me you're going to marry the priest's daughter. Congratulations, dear writer. So, you couldn't resist? God grant you love and happiness. But, don't you forget that you and I came to an agreement - remember the Kokkoz Valley?

Yesterday I heard from your sister that you're going abroad for the whole summer. You can't, you hear. Tell me instantly that we shall spend the summer together. Won't we, won't we, won't we? I still talk like that, remember the way I talk?

Your Olga Knipper, little actress

Chekhov Dear actress, I thank you for your good wishes on my marriage. When I told my fiancée, just to tease her, that you intended coming to Yalta, she replied that when that wicked woman came, she would keep tight hold of me. I answered that such prolonged proximity was not very hygienic in hot weather. She got angry and went very quiet. A little later, she said the theatre was wicked. Then she asked me to kiss her. At present, with my new title of academician, it wasn't seemly to kiss too often, I told her. She burst into tears and I left.

A Chekhov

Vishnievski When Olga got back to Moscow after one of these family visits - this was a year ago - we heard about their wonderful drive through the beautiful Kokkoz Valley. An agreement? Was there any agreement? She might have thought so, but I'm sure he didn't.

Anyway, she's just got back from visiting him again in Yalta. It seems that this year they spent time together in his beach house at Gurzuf, just along the coast from his family house. Our whole company at the Moscow Arts Theatre knows something's afoot, I can tell you.

Knipper Oh The railroad carriage is swaying badly. I've just got up, washed, drunk some very bad coffee and sat down to try to write

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to you.

Vishnievski That was written in August 1900 on the train, less than half way back to Moscow. She couldn't wait to write, you see.

Knipper To my great chagrin, two travelling companions have appeared on the scene: the elderly lady is going as far as Kharkov but, there is a Polish woman with a flat face. She is still sleeping in the upper berth but I don't like the look of her. I don't know where she is going.

Yesterday, after I left you, I stared into the darkness for a long time, my heart was heavy. I had a cry, of course. It's just that life was so full during my short stay with you! I can't write clearly, because my thoughts are so disjointed. It was awful to be alone, leaving everything behind yesterday, suddenly I was overcome. I thought about you all the time - he's on a bus, he's visiting Kist's inn, he has finished his business and has gone for a stroll round the town.

I'm thinking back to Gurzuf and regretting a great deal.

Knipper Write to me. Damn, the carriage is swaying so much I can't write. What did you do in Sevastopol? We'll be in Kharkov at three and I'll post this letter.

Your Olga

Vishnievskiwhich she did, half way to Moscow, and then she wrote again next day.

Knipper Here I am in Moscow, my dearest darling!

It's late, I'm terribly tired, my brains are addled, but I want to write just a few lines to you.

Did you get home today, as well? Did you wander round Sevastopol?

In Kursk, a young girl got into the train, full of life. In five minutes she'd told me all about herself and her family.

She's seen *THE SEAGULL* four times and didn't suspect she was

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talking to Arkadina. I didn't enlighten her.

The disagreeable Polish woman got off at Kursk, I would have been afraid to sleep in the compartment with her - she was very strange.

Nemirovich asked when you were sending the play, everyone kept asking me about it, thinking I was bringing real news. But can I really get any sense out of Anton Chekhov? Judge for yourself.

For God's sake, write the play. Don't keep everyone in suspense. I know you have those three sisters almost complete in your mind.

Vishnievski You can see what a state she was in from this letter to Chekhov's sister, Masha

Knipper Greetings, tender Masha. Here I am in Moscow. My nerves are in a state, I can't stop that idiotic nervous laughing. It's like living in a station waiting-room. Yesterday evening at rehearsal I had a fight with Nemirovich about my part. Then, I felt ashamed and apologised.

Anton and I had a wonderful journey, our farewell was very tender and affectionate. He was deeply moved, so was I. When the train pulled out, I burst into tears, peering into the dark night. It was frightening to be left alone after all I'd experienced in the past month. And the future is so terrifying and unknown. Mashechka, Mashechka, how terrifying life is! I feel I want to bury my head in your shoulder this very moment and start crying. There, I've gone and begun howling already.

Vishnievski Masha was in quite a state also. On the same day, she wrote to Olga: "The uncertainty is making me terribly anxious. Write and tell me as soon as possible, my dear, how you're feeling and what has been decided. Today Anton received the letter you wrote from the train, but I can't very well go and ask him about it. He's been coughing very badly all morning. Stanislavsky was here yesterday, stayed for hours and had loads to eat.

Dearest, do be frank with me as you have been up till now and

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write soon.”

Knipper No letter from you, Anton. Perhaps you've stopped thinking about me? Do write. I kiss you with all my heart, my dear Anton - and what will you call me? Thou, as I have?

Chekhov Greetings my darling Olya, my joy! I received your letter today, the first since you left. I read it, reread it and am writing to you, my actress. After taking you to the station I went to Kist's inn and spent the night there. The day after, because I was bored and at a loose end, I went to Balaklava. I spent my time avoiding fashionable ladies who recognized me and wanted to organize a reception in my honour. I spent the night and in the morning took the steamship Tavel for Yalta. The sea was devilishly rough. Now I'm in Yalta. Stanislavski came to see me. He ate a great deal. I promised to finish my new play by September at the latest.

Your Antonio

Vishnievski That letter took five days to reach her, five days when she just kept on writing.

Knipper I come to the most important question near the end: when are you coming? You must come. It would be too cruel to be apart the whole winter.

You know, I just can't show myself in Moscow. A lot of people are convinced we're already married.

Savitskaya stated it as a fact in Kastropol. Elka heard it in a bath house in Alupka.

I expect a letter from you tomorrow - will I get one? I shall be terribly hurt if I don't.

Chekhov I've been in Gurzuf for three days; now I'm back in Yalta, my prison. A fierce wind is blowing, there's not a drop of rain, everything has withered and faded. In a word, everything's been awful here since you left. Without you, I'll hang myself.

Big, big kisses, 400 of them.

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- Vishnievski There was still another day for her to wait for Chekhov's first letter, so she wrote to Masha again.
- Knipper Masha, dear. The most terrible thoughts keep coming into my head. If there's no letter tomorrow, I shan't know what to think. You ask me what decision your brother and I have come to. That's a strange question. Can one ever come to a decision with him? I don't know anything myself and I'm suffering deeply.
- Chekhov Dearest, I don't know when I'm coming to Moscow - I don't know because, can you imagine, I'm writing a play.
- Vishnievski At last, more than a week after her train ride to Moscow, Chekhov's first letter reached her.
- Knipper I've finally had a letter from you, my darling Anton! I was sick with waiting, I was in torment. Are you laughing? Then go ahead. I love it when you laugh and then, suddenly, go glum again.
- So, you're working? In Gurzuf?
- But where shall we see each other? You don't mention it anywhere.
- Knipper Remember how you took me to the stairs and the staircase creaked so treacherously? But, we talked so little and everything is so vague. Have you forgotten what I'm like? Do you love me? Do you believe me? Are you lonely without me? Do you eat well at dinner? Do you quarrel with your mother? Are you kind to Masha? Try and answer all my questions from now on.
- Chekhov Good day to my dear, good little actress. I'm writing a play but guests are an infernal nuisance. The headmistress of the girls school has arrived with two of her relations and settled themselves in my study to drink tea.
- There's a swell. But, no wind. Very ominous. I abandoned the study and I'm writing in a corner of my bedroom. If our visitors don't shatter my mood and I don't get angry, I'll finish the play between September 1st and the 5th, in less than three weeks time. I'll make a fair copy, too. Then I'll come to Moscow, in all probability.

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I haven't had a line from you for ages. That's very poor, my dear.

Knipper I heard Uncle Sasha's confession: his dissatisfaction, his sense his life's been stupid, his debauchery, his drinking bouts, his morbid soul-searching to see if he can find one speck of purity, humanity, remorse, his desire to make reparation, and all of it delivered in a dull monotone by the light of a single candle. On the table there were a sausage and a dish of green redcurrants which I ate as I listened. He is a pitiful sight, he is talking of shooting himself, but of course he won't. He kept asking if I had faith in him, if I believed he had improved after a life in a military camp. I'm sorry I wasn't kinder to him, but I really am disgusted by some of the things he has done this summer. I just listened in silence, and made no answer. He felt it. He dropped a hint that he'd like to tell you everything, that perhaps you would understand him better than I! I really do feel sorry for him.

Chekhov My darling, I shall answer all the questions in your letter. I'm working in Yalta, not Gurzuf. I'm being abominably frustrated at every turn. The play is in my head, it's already shaped and running smoothly, all it wants is to get written down but as soon as I pick up a piece of paper some ugly great mug or other peers round the door.

Shall we see each other? Yes, we shall. When? Early September, probably. I'm bored and angry. Money just disappears, I'm ruined, going broke. A bitter wind today, storms, the trees have withered.

Remember those long-legged birds, my cranes? One of them has flown away.

Don't be unfaithful to me, even in your thoughts.

Knipper Good day, dear Anton. It's late and I've just got back from the Hermitage garden where I went with Vishnievski - he's an agreeable companion. I tried listening to an operetta but found it utterly crude, trite and vulgar.

You write to me so seldom! However, knowing you, it can't be otherwise. I hope the expression "don't be unfaithful to me" is a joke. Aren't you ashamed? I've no time to fall for anyone else,

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even if I wanted to.

I'm terribly happy you've settled down to work. The play must be first class, you hear? I feel it will be riveting. Masha will be here tomorrow. When I meet you, my dove. I will clean you up, you will be well groomed, we'll clean your shoes, get rid of all the fluff and dust and examine our hearts. Don't call me German, you hear?

Chekhov What is all this, my darling?!! You write that you've only had one letter from me but I write every, or almost, every day. What does it mean? My letters never get lost.

Yesterday I went into the garden to rest when suddenly - horror of horrors! - a lady in grey approached me. She talked rubbish but gave me to understand she could only stay from one till three. Only!

Knipper I had letters from you yesterday and today, my dear, my darling Anton. I'm terribly happy. Happy that the play is coming right.

You Slav layabout. I think if you really intend working, you will guard against all these visitors.

So, are you coming, my dear? At the beginning of September?. Do you want to see me? Or are you doing fine without me?

Your letters aren't very affectionate.

Chekhov Good day, my darling. In your letter you are angry because I write to you so little. But I write to you often, you know!

Stanislavski was here yesterday. He stayed until 9. Then I took him to see the headmistress of the girls school. We stayed until 12.

Still no rain. They're building a shed in the courtyard. The remaining crane is bored. I love you.

Will you come to the station to meet me? And where am I to stay? In which hotel - is there a comfortable one near you that's not too expensive?

You go to the operetta with Vishnievski? Well now ...

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I will love you wildly like an Arab.

Knipper Anton mine. Are you mine? You've never called me by my real name, only in your first letter. Don't you like it? I've just got back from rehearsal with soaking feet because I had no galoshes and holes in my shoes. Vishnievski calls me the "dowerless bride" and laughs long and loud when he sees me with holes in my shoes and in an old frock.

No letter from you yesterday or today - I'm sad.

You asked me about hotels. But I thought you would be staying with Masha. You'll be better, more comfortable than in an hotel - aren't I right?

Love me wildly like an Arab.

We had tea with Vishnievski. Nemirovich was there, too. Vishnievski lives in grand style. Everything in his house is dazzlingly clean and impeccably tidy and I'm thinking of marrying him. What do you advise?

Chekhov I've not been writing to you because of the weather and because I'm writing the new play. It's turning out rather tedious. I'm writing slowly.

Oh, doggie, if only you knew the frustrations. I can't refuse to see people, it's something I can't do.

Knipper I haven't had a letter from you since August 23. Anton, my dear, that's unkind.

My mood is a mixture of this and that, very uneasy.

Chekhov You are hurt because I don't call you by your right name in some of my letters. Word of honour, it isn't intentional.

I kiss you seventy times.

I've been rather unwell, but it's all right now.

Knipper At last a letter from you, dear Anton! I'm so glad you're in good health and working.

You know Gorki has been coming to rehearsals. He has been

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moved to tears. He lunched with us the day before yesterday, told a lot of stories, talked about himself a lot. He read your story, *IN THE RAVINE*, to some peasants this summer. They looked at your photograph with such curiosity and affection, and listened so attentively, he said.

Chekhov I leave for Moscow on September 20 and will be there on October 1. I'll stay in the hotel all day and finish writing the play.

I'm afraid you'll be disappointed in me. My hair is falling out, it's awful, so bad I shall be bald as an old coot in a week.

Knipper I'll give you an excellent remedy for falling hair. Take half a bottle of alcohol, add 9 grams of naphthalene and rub it into your scalp - it will be a great help. Do you hear me? It wouldn't do at all for you to come to Moscow bald, people will think I've torn your hair out.

Knipper No, no, no. I misled you - you need one and a half grams of naphthalene, not 9, do you hear? do you hear? I gave you six times too much. A gram and a half in 1/2 bottle of alcohol. Be sure and do it. Rub your scalp 3 or 4 times a week. I'm losing my hair, too - you see, in sympathy.

Chekhov I'm terribly bored. Do you understand? Terribly. All I eat is soup. It's cold in the evenings and I stay home. There are no pretty ladies. Money is running out, my beard is going grey

Knipper The trip to the mountains was better than we could have anticipated. We gathered in the morning, on the spur of the moment. The weather was warm, balmy, it was easy to breathe, easy to walk, everything around was smiling, pensive, gentle.

We took the horse tram as far as the monastery, then walked a mile or two through the kitchen gardens which smelled of dill and cabbages, and crossed the river. There wasn't a soul about, an unusual silence, not a sound in the air, not a leaf stirring, and I wanted to be alone, quite alone, and sit with you in this autumnal heaven and feel nature all round. In the woods, the maples and beeches are golden, the aspens are turning red; the oaks are still green. The earth is damp, you can smell the mushrooms, there were my favourite late flowers and gossamer in the air. The sun was loving, in a kind of reverie, and the clouds in the sky had

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such soft shapes. We spent a long time admiring our golden-domed mother, Moscow, lost in a haze. I have loved this view since I was a child.

There were geese on the river banks and we saw two wild ducks land. We got back home very happy, refreshed and had a noisy meal.

I've just received your letter, my dear! I want to see you awfully. You'll stay with Masha, of course. We will love you and nurse you. Why do you want to come after the 20th and not now? It's warm, the sun is shining. And it would be better for you to write here than in your Crimean exile. Aren't I right? Don't think of going to an hotel - Masha's house is so comfortable.

Chekhov I've been at home for the last 6 or 7 days and haven't been out at all. I've been very ill - temperature, cough, catarrh. Today things seem a little better, I'm on the mend but still weak and useless, and sick at the thought that I've done nothing, written nothing for a whole week. The play stares balefully at me from my desk and I am baleful about it, too.

You don't advise me to come to Moscow? Mother is coming in early October. I shall have to send her as, obviously, I can't come to you. That means during the winter you'll forget who I am, I'll fall for someone else, just like you and everything will be as before.

Knipper My dear, you write such strange things. I don't want you to come to Moscow? I don't want. I decided you'd gone cold on me.

Chekhov As regards my play, it'll get finished sooner or later, in September or October, or November, maybe. I must be at rehearsals, I must! Four crucial female roles, four young, intelligent women, I can't entrust them to Stanislavski, however great my respect for his intelligence and understanding.

Write me another interesting letter. Go back to the Vorobevy Mountains and write. You're a clever woman, but write the essentials so there won't be two stamps on the envelope. You're damnably cold, but then that befits an actress.

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No rain, no water, the plants are dying. It's been warm again.

Knipper Do you know, I got your letter of Sept. 15 yesterday evening and the letter of the 14th today - isn't that strange? You've finally written me a human letter - but you only sent a short note as though it were a burden to you to write.

So, you've decided to forget me and fall in love with someone else? Do so! And I'll catch someone's fancy. What nonsense this all is.

Chekhov Will you send this, please?

Vishnievski ***MOTHER ARRIVES MOSCOW TOMORROW STOP PLAY NOT FINISHED STOP WILL COME LATER STOP I BOW I KISS YOUR HAND STOP ANTONIUS***

Chekhov Good day to my darling Olga, my dove. How are you? It's a long time since I wrote to you. My conscience pricks me a little but what would I write about? My life in the Crimea? By the way, Mother leaves for Moscow tomorrow.

I'm going to Paris, then - probably - to Nice, and from Nice to Africa - if they haven't got the plague. I have to get through, or drag myself through, this winter somehow.

.....and I may come soon to Moscow - although it's not at all clear why I should. Why should I? To see you and then leave again? How interesting.

Knipper Why don't you come, my dear Anton. I don't understand. I've not been writing because I've been waiting for you and want to see you again. What's stopping you? What's worrying you? I don't know what to think, I'm very worried.

Chekhov My dear Olga, my wonderful little actress, why this plaintive, bitter tone? I've not been able to come to Moscow because I've been ill, for no other reason, I assure you, I give you my word I will come later. Word of honour! Do you believe me?

Knipper Or maybe you don't feel the need to see me? I'm hurt that you

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haven't been open with me. I feel like crying every day. Everyone says you are going abroad. Can't you understand how painful it is to hear that and to have to answer hundreds of questions?

I know nothing. You write so vaguely - "I will come later". You have a loving, tender heart, why harden it?

Chekhov "You have a loving, tender heart, why harden it?" When did I harden it? When, come to think of it, have I displayed any hardness? My heart has always loved you, and I've been affectionate with you. I've never hidden anything from you, never, and you accuse me of being hardhearted just like that, with no rhyme or reason.

Knipper My dear, my beloved Anton, come to me. Don't you want to acknowledge me, or is the thought of linking your fate to mine irksome to you?

Chekhov Judging by your letter, you want a long talk with serious faces and serious consequences, but it's not my fault, or yours, that we aren't together. It's the devil's. He planted the tubercle bugs in me and the love of art in you.

Knipper I expect you almost daily. I'm not well, my heart is heavy and troubled. I eat little, sleep little.

Chekhov I shall stay in Yalta until October 10, working, then leave for Moscow, or go abroad, depending on my health.

You're not like me, you have a lot to write about, a lot to pass on, while I've nothing to offer - oh yes, one thing: I caught two mice today.

Still no rain in Yalta. A drought to end all droughts. Poor trees, especially on this side of the mountain, not a drop of water and now they have turned yellow, like people who never know a drop of happiness in their lives.

Chekhov Take this, will you?

Vishnievski ***HAD A VERY NICE LETTER YESTERDAY STOP WILL***

.....love, Chekhov

PROBABLY COME IN OCTOBER STOP ANTONINO

Knipper When your telegram arrived my heart skipped a beat, I thought you were wiring me to announce your arrival. But when I read it, I was so hurt I nearly cried.

“I'll probably come.” I don't want probably, I want positively.

I'm bombarded with questions about you and when you are coming.

Chekhov Oh, what a part you're going to have in *THREE SISTERS*! What a part! Give me ten rubles and I'll make sure you get it; otherwise, I'll give it to another actress.

Knipper Here.

Vishnievski ***COME QUICKLY STOP AM ALL IMPATIENCE***

Chekhov Dearest, if I come, it won't be before the 12th. I'll wire you, without fail. There's been a slight hitch with the play, I haven't written anything for ten days or more because I've been ill. Now I'm on the mend and can go out. Whatever happens, the play will be written but won't be done this season.

Knipper Yesterday we played *UNCLE VANYA*, dearest, with such pleasure, such delight!

Chekhov Think about an hotel or furnished room. Please do! A room where it won't be tiresome to go down the corridor and it doesn't smell. In Moscow I'll probably make a clean copy of the play. From Moscow, I'll go to Paris.

Vishnievski But, writing to his sister, Chekhov has a somewhat different tale to tell.

Chekhov Masha dear. The weather in Yalta is marvellous, just like summer. There are some planting jobs I want to do, so I've put off my departure for a few days.

Knipper ***WIRE THE DAY OF YOUR ARRIVAL STOP WAITING STOP SENDING NO LETTER.***

Chekhov ***DEFINITELY THE 21ST***

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Knipper In your letter you talk of arriving on the 12th and then on that day I get a telegram - definitely the 21st. I decided that was a mistake and the numbers had been reversed. Yesterday, by chance, I heard from Nemirovich that you were indeed coming on the 21st so I hasten to write to you, my dear. I usually have few regrets about the past, but the thought of the recent past and the present causes me pain and distress.

Chekhov Darling, I'll be coming to Moscow on October 23 at 5.30 p.m.

Knipper Don't be afraid, I don't want a conversation with serious faces and serious consequences, as you feared

Chekhov We have amazing weather in Yalta, the like of which you haven't seen. Everything is in full bloom, the trees are green, the sun shines and warms the air, but it isn't hot.

It rained for three days, including yesterday, violent rain but today the sun is out again. Don't ask about the play, it doesn't matter if it isn't done this year.

From Moscow I'll go abroad.

I'll be at the theatre on the 23rd, definitely

Knipper ***WIRE ME STOP I'M WORRIED***

Chekhov ***COMING MONDAY STOP DEFINITELY***

Knipper ***COME QUICKLY STOP I WANT TO SEE YOU***

Chekhov ***I'M SWIMMING***

Knipper Unfortunately, I have a rehearsal call for the crowd scene in Act I of *WHEN WE DEAD AWAKEN*. Farewell, darling, I'll come after rehearsal.

Vishnievski Stanislavski called the company together to read the new play. It was called *THE THREE SISTERS*. At first we were thrilled to be doing this. None of us had had a chance to look it over beforehand. We

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just read it cold.

When we had finished, there was a long silence. No one knew quite what to say. It was embarrassing. You see, it didn't really seem like a play at all, a sort of outline, just a sketch.

Chekhov just stalked out. Stanislavski later told me he found him sulking in his bedroom, vowing to withdraw the play entirely. However, Stanislavski persuaded him to re-write it, then and there. I suppose the strain must have had something to do with this letter he wrote to his old friend Suvorin, right in the middle of his Moscow visit.....

Chekhov Have you heard I'm getting married? It's not true. I'm off to Africa, to see the crocodiles.

Chekhov I've reached Brest. Everything is fine. Still no sun.

Knipper I've just got back from the theatre, after *SEAGULL*, and found your postcard from Brest - I was overjoyed.

Chekhov My dear, I turned into a complete idiot! Here I am in Vienna and all the shops are shut. It's German Christmas. So, here I am, sitting uselessly in my room, not knowing what to do, calling myself every kind of fool. Some restaurants are open and they are packed with dandies who would make me look like a scarecrow. So, what was I to do?

Tomorrow I leave for Nice and in the meantime I cast a lustful eye towards the two beds in my room. As soon as I get to Nice I'll go straight to the Post Office - perhaps your letter will have arrived.

Knipper It's so empty without you, so very empty. I can still see your face there, in front of me, so alive, I can hear your voice so clearly.

Chekhov Wonderful little actress mine, my angel, my little Jewess, good day. As soon as I got to Nice I had a meal and then the first thing I did was write to you ...

Vishnievski That's quite an improvement don't you think. Last time, when he seduced her, he waited four days before writing to her.

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Chekhov My head is spinning from travel fatigue, I've not been able to do any writing today. I will tomorrow but for today just let me kiss you 10,000 times, little girl.

You ordered me to stay at the Hotel Bristol. They're terribly snooty and won't let you read newspapers in the dining-room.

Knipper At home I found your letter from Vienna. Why get so upset? You could jostle your way through the festive crowds and look, and you can buy things that are just as good and cheaper in Nice. ? You're just a Slav sourpuss.

Chekhov You call me a Slav sourpuss? Yes, 15 years ago that might have been true, but this time I went to the only place possible, the theatre. It was sold out. Not exactly for want of trying, was it?

Knipper Do you remember that hotel? The Hotel Dresden? I do

Chekhov This is the third night I've spent in Nice and not a line from you. My dear Olya, don't be lazy, my angel, write to this old man very soon.

Because you don't write to me I don't feel like writing either. Enough is enough! This is my last letter.

Give Vishnievski my address if he wants it.

The residents at the *pension* here are Russian and dreadfully boring, dreadfully. And mostly ladies. They feed you enormously. After lunch you have to take a nap, which isn't good. I must change my way of living, eat less.

Knipper I'm in bed with bronchitis.

Why no letter from you? There wasn't one yesterday, or today. You could write a few lines. It's bad to cheat, you know, my dear.

I haven't had a line so far from Nice.

Nemirovich came and combed my hair.

Chekhov The play is finished. I've added a lot for you in Act IV. I often see you in my dreams, when I close my eyes I can see you

.....love, Chekhov

clearly. You are the woman I need.

Knipper You staggered me yesterday, dear writer! You hadn't received a single one of my letters by the 17th when you should have had at least two; in all I sent eight letters.

Have your picture taken and send it to me with something intimate written on it, I'll keep it hidden.

Chekhov I kiss you a thousand times. I'm rather afraid you have mild typhoid fever, not bronchitis, and it's catching. That means you won't be allowed inside the theatre and that means my plays won't be done and that means I shall have to play roulette.

Knipper Here. ***SENT TEN LETTERS STOP. WORRIED STOP WRITE***

Vishnievski No, no, that won't do. He's in France. You'll have to do it in French. They deliver telegrams by telephone.

Knipper ***INQUIÈTE. ENVOYÉ DIX LETTRES. RÉPONDEZ***

Chekhov ***SALUT MA BELLE***

Vishnievski There he goes again, avoiding her question.

Knipper Your telegram came from Monte Carlo. Are you playing roulette instead of writing?

Chekhov Imagine, doggie mine, the horror! A short while ago I was told a gentleman was asking for me. I went downstairs and there I saw an old man who introduced himself as Cherkov. He was holding some letters addressed to me but delivered to him. One of them was open.

Today I went to Monte Carlo and won 295 francs. I am yours. Take me and devour me-with vinegar and Provence butter.

Chekhov Today I did even better: I won 500 francs at roulette. May I play roulette, sweetheart?

.....love, Chekhov

Knipper Today at last I went past the Dresden for the first time and I remembered.....

Chekhov I'd like your love to last for a good long time, say fifteen years or so. What do you think? Can there be a love like that? For me, yes, but not for you. All the same, I embrace you.

Chekhov You've said nothing yet about *THE THREE SISTERS*, absolutely nothing, except that today we had a rehearsal, or today we didn't have a rehearsal. I'll surely give you a thrashing, dammit.

It's highly possible I shall go to Algiers on January 15. But write to the old address in Nice. The *pension* will forward letters to Algiers. I want to see the Sahara.

Knipper We ran the third act twice. Stanislavski created tremendous commotion on stage with everyone running about and getting excited. Nemirovich, on the other hand, suggested creating a lot of noise off-stage and a feeling of emptiness on stage.

Yesterday, Stanislavski talked to me for more than two hours: a thorough examination of me as an artist, lecturing me again on my inability to work, saying I had played far too many roles in the last three years and that I'm never ready at the first performance, only on the fifteenth, and so on and so forth.

Nemirovich said you were going to Africa?!!! That's news to me!

Have you thought when we'll meet? And where?

Nemirovich is discussing the next season with the actors. I would get an increase of 400 roubles. I'm not greedy, but really, given the work I do, it's not very much. What do you think?

Chekhov Why don't you write anything about *THREE SISTERS*? How is the play going? I saw Nemirovich here. I had the impression the play is an unmitigated flop and that I won't be writing for the Moscow Art Theatre again.

Knipper I haven't been able to write anything about the play up till now because we've been at the diaper stage, so what could I write? Besides, you never like to talk about anything while you're working on it.

.....love, Chekhov

Yesterday we had a dress run of Act 2. Stanislavski says I'm over-dramatizing my role as Masha.

Chekhov I'm in top form. We're intending to go to Algeria but the sea is rough. Today, for example, there's a storm. A lot of people come to see me, stop me working a lot and get on my nerves. I can't write, mainly because I feel such fury. After Algiers I want to go straight back to Yalta.

Knipper You ask about the play? What nonsense to think of failure! God help you! The play is terribly interesting to see.

Does it matter if I make a tiny cut in my last speech? If I find it difficult to deliver? Does it matter? I really like the shaping of Masha in the last act. The whole role is a marvel. If I ruin it, I'll give myself up as a bad job.

Write to me from Africa every day, without fail.

Knipper Oh, here: *TÉLÉGRAPHIE SANTÉ INQUIÈTE*

Knipper You told Masha you've not been well. Write me in detail what's the matter with you. I'm not a doll and that kind of attitude towards me will only make me angry. I sent you a telegram today in the heat of the moment.

Chekhov *SANTÉ MERVEILLEUSE ANTOINE*

Chekhov Judging by your letters you're all making utter and complete nonsense of *THREE SISTERS*. If you ruin Act III, the whole play goes for nothing and, in the twilight of my years, I shall be hissed off the stage. In his letters Stanislavski praises you highly, Vishnievski, too.

Knipper The opening of *SISTERS* is fixed for January 30. Why have you still not said anything about Tusenbach's body?

Chekhov If the play flops, then I'll go to Monte Carlo, gamble and drink myself silly.

I feel the urge to get out of Nice. But where am I to go? I can't go to Africa at the moment because the sea is rough and I don't want to go to Yalta. I shall have to be in Yalta in February and in Moscow in April. And then we'll leave Moscow for somewhere.

.....love, Chekhov

Knipper So you're coming in April? We'll get married very quietly and live together. Without any fuss. Agreed? I've the feeling you are cooling off me.

Chekhov I'm not going to Algiers because the sea's still rough and my companions refuse to leave. So, I wash my hands of the whole thing and am going home to Yalta.

Knipper Tomorrow there's a dress rehearsal of *SISTERS*. I'm very emotional in the 4th act, I cry my heart out.

Chekhov Today, my dearest, I shall in all probability go to Algiers. Still write to Nice and they will forward my letters or write one or two letters to: CHEKHOV ALGER POSTE RESTANTE. From Algiers, I'll move on to Yalta and then go somewhere with my doggie.

How did *THREE SISTERS GO*? Wire me CHEKHOV ALGER POSTE RESTANTE - don't spare me.

For the last few days I've dreamed of going to Spitsbergen for the summer, or Solovka.

Chekhov I'm still in Nice, sweetheart. From here I'll go to Florence, then Rome, then Naples, where I'll get your letters forwarded from Nice. My address for letters and telegrams is: CHEKHOV NAPLES POSTE RESTANTE

Has my play been done, or not? I know nothing.

By Lent I shall be at home in Yalta. I'll probably leave Italy by sea, via Corfu.

Chekhov So, *THREE SISTERS* won't be done in Moscow this season? You'll première it in Petersburg?

Only, remember, there's no hope of any success in Petersburg at all, polemics but not a whiff of success. I'm sorry.

Chekhov Dearest, I'm writing from Florence and will probably stay here for two days.

Has *THREE SISTERS* been done?

Knipper Send this to Algiers. The address is CHEKHOV ALGER POSTE RESTANTE. Here's the text: *HUGE SUCCESS*.... Oh, I forgot

.....love, Chekhov

you want it in French.....**GRAND SUCCÈS STOP EMBRASSE
MON BIEN AIMÉ**

Chekhov Dearest girl, I'm in Rome. I think my play has flopped. Not a whisper about it - obviously it misfired.

From here I go on to Naples, where I'll spend five days. That means I'll get your letter there if you sent one. Then to Brindisi and from Brindisi by sea to Yalta, via Corfu, but only if I hear there's no plague in Constantinople. You and I will go together to Sweden and Norway. Yes? A memory for our old age.

Knipper Moscow talks of nothing else but *THREE SISTERS*. A success for Chekhov and a success for our theatre.

I'm so sad you can't see me playing Masha. I would play for you with such joy!

Chekhov My darling, I shall be leaving for Russia, for the north, in two hours. I'm not going to Naples. So, write to me now in Yalta.

Not one letter from you about *THREE SISTERS*.

Knipper People tell me I wear myself out, go frantic like a squirrel in a cage and imagine I'm doing something practical. Laugh at me, Anton, if you like, but I couldn't live without all that.

SISTERS is all the rage. Yesterday there was an ovation after the fourth act. We're going to Petersburg on the 14th. Two bookings sold out. We open with *UNCLE VANYA*.

Today we played *SEAGULL*. After the 4th act there was an ovation, and tomorrow, after *THREE SISTERS*, farewell to the audience. Everyone's talking about *SISTERS*, talking, talking about Chekhov

...

Chekhov ***WIRE ODESSA, HOTEL LONDON, GOING TO YALTA
STOP GREETINGS***

Knipper Yesterday the season ended with *THREE SISTERS*. We've played it seven times! Full houses of course, even the house seats were sold. So, now to Petersburg.

I've sent many letters to Naples, so you should know by now that *SISTERS* had a huge success; both the play and our interpretation

.....love, Chekhov

produced a sensation.

Chekhov I only found out about *THREE SISTERS* here in Yalta; in Italy, all I got was ifs and buts. It was like failure because everyone who read the papers kept their mouths shut and I couldn't believe in Masha's fulsome praise. Well, never mind.

Knipper We've just played *UNCLE VANYA* for the second time. The audience was receptive but the papers roasted us shamelessly. And such a roasting! They absolutely tore me to pieces.

I've been terribly upset tonight. I confess it openly. You can't imagine how disgusting, how insulting the attitude towards our theatre is. I'm sick at heart. They attack our whole enterprise; they tore Elena to pieces, so now of course they'll savage *THREE SISTERS*. But I'll survive!

I haven't become a stranger to you, Anton? You haven't forgotten me? You haven't fallen out of love with me?

Chekhov Sweetheart, how is life in Petersburg? I think you will all soon be sick of that town and come to loathe its coldness and tittle-tattle.

Why don't you write? Why don't you wire me? Do you grudge the money for the telegram? Wire me for 25 roubles, I give you my word of honour, indeed I pledge myself to love you for 25 years.

Nothing new here.

Your father

Knipper ***WIRE ME STOP NO LETTER STOP STRANGE***

Chekhov ***SENT THREE LETTERS STOP HAPPILY AWAIT TELEGRAM MORE GENUINE AS TO MOOD***

Chekhov I'm waiting, waiting for you. Why don't you and Masha come down to Yalta in Holy Week and then we could go back to Moscow together?'

.....love, Chekhov

Your Father

Knipper But I won't be coming to Yalta at Easter; think about it and you'll understand why. It's impossible. You're such a kind soul and so you invite me! But don't you understand?

Don't dare sign yourself Father. I don't like it.

Chekhov I received an anonymous letter, telling me you fell head over heels in love in Petersburg. I've suspected for a long time that you are a real miser, a pinch-penny. It would appear you don't love me because I'm a spendthrift and wanted you to bankrupt yourself by sending one or two telegrams.

The Yaltese spend a lot of time in my house. Each time I lose heart and swear I will leave. Or get married, so my wife can throw them out - the guests I mean. Then I'll get a divorce and marry again. Allow me to propose to you.

I have bought some excellent perfumes. Come and collect them in Holy Week.

I kiss you eighty times and hug you.

Knipper I gather I'm going to be free in April and May - does that please you? Only, remember, dearest, that for the moment I can't go to Yalta. Having to make pretend again and see your mother suffer, playing games of hide-and-seek. You don't seem to understand, or don't want to. And it's difficult for me to talk about it. Surely you remember how agonising and intolerable things were last summer. How much longer are we going to be secretive? And what's the point? People will soon keep quiet and leave us in peace, once they see it's an accomplished fact. Well, do you understand me, do you agree?

Chekhov If you don't want to come to Yalta, darling, that's up to you. Only I'm terribly reluctant to leave Yalta! I don't fancy railway compartments and hotels. Still, those are trifles, I'll be coming to Moscow - and that's that.

Knipper Anonymous letters always tell the truth. I fall in love and am unfaithful to you at every turn. It's quite true.

I have to be in Moscow in Holy Week as our house is being sold

.....love, Chekhov

and we have to vacate the apartment by May 1.

If the weather is good, could you come to Moscow? Couldn't you? And in the summer we could go to Sweden or Norway. I like the idea very much. Don't say no.

Chekhov I don't know if I'll go to Sweden this year. I'm tired of travel and my health is like an old man's. I'd look like your grandfather, not husband.

I've given up literature altogether, and, when I marry you, I'll make you give up the theatre.

I hug you, traitress, a hundred times. When we're married I shall beat you.

Knipper I would come to you, but after all we can't live now just as good friends. Don't you see I'm caught between two fires staying with you? Do say what you feel about this. You never say anything.....

Chekhov ***HEALTHY STOP WILL COME AFTER EASTER STOP GREETINGS STOP WAITING FOR LETTER***

Knipper ***ARRIVING YALTA TOMORROW***

Vishnievski Although the telegrams crossed, their bodies didn't. Olga yielded, and they spent time in Yalta together.

Knipper I'm finally back in Moscow, my dear Anton. I can't get away from the thought, that there was no reason for us to part in Yalta, since I'm not working. When I said that I was leaving with Masha, you didn't give the slightest indication that you'd like me to stay.

Everyone in Moscow is amazed to see me back. I tell them my mother sent for me about our apartment.

Today I inspected a new one. Mother asked me, oh so discreetly, whether I would be living with you. I just don't know what to tell her. I can't live alone on my salary. That's very difficult in the theatre.

Mother and I have to find an apartment by the 15th of May. If you come soon, I would like to discuss it with you.

.....love, Chekhov

What do you do all day long? Write me even the smallest detail and don't take refuge in jokes.

Chekhov Little doggie Olga! I'm coming in early May. As soon as you get a telegram, find out from the Hotel Dresden whether room 45 is free. What I mean is, find a cheap room.

If you agree, we'll go down the Volga like little sturgeons together.

If you give your word that no one in Moscow will know about our marriage until it has actually happened then I'll marry you the day I arrive.

Knipper I saw you in my dreams last night, dearest. We were travelling together and you were kissing me. Are you marrying Olga Mikhailovna soon? How big is the dowry?

Chekhov My darling, wonderful Knippschutz, I didn't try to detain you, because I hate being in Yalta and I thought I'd be seeing you soon in any case. Dear heart, you are getting worked up over nothing. I have no secret thoughts. I say what I think.

We can take the boat at Yaroslavl or Rybiusk and go down as far as Astrakhan, from there to Baku and from Baku to Batum. Will that suit you? Or we could sail north up the Dvina to Arkhangelsk and from there to the Solovietski islands. We will go wherever you like. For a full life, we don't want to take it like a spoonful of soup every hour.

Knipper So, you're coming and we'll get married and run off somewhere. To Yalta, if you don't want to go anywhere else. Your idea about the Volga is an excellent one. I'm terribly happy, delighted as a child. I've never seen the Volga.

Chekhov You write asking me to bring the documents we need for our marriage. But I don't have any documents, except a passport.

Knipper Horrid Vishnievski swears and vows by all that's holy that in a year or two I will be his wife! He's always making jokes like that and yesterday I almost got cross.

Chekhov If Vishnievski marries you some time it won't be out of love but out of self-interest. But you obviously think he's not such a bad

.....love, Chekhov

chap, so marry him. He must be counting on you soon being a widow. Tell him I'm vindictive: I'm making a will in which I forbid you to remarry.

Knipper ***WIRE HEALTH ARRIVAL***

Chekhov ***PROBABLY COMING FRIDAY STOP HEALTHY***

Chekhov Dearest Masha. The doctors say both lungs are worse. They say I have to take a koumiss cure for two months. Miles away. Travelling alone is boring.

Chekhov ***DEAR MAMA YOUR BLESSINGS STOP AM GETTING MARRIED STOP EVERYTHING WILL REMAIN AS BEFORE STOP AM OFF TO KOUMISS CURE***

Vishnievski They married on May 25, 1901. Very private, it was. Just four witnesses. No one from Chekhov's side. Chekhov had asked me to arrange a dinner for the two of them. Which I did. So, there we were, 25 of us in a restaurant on the other side of Moscow waiting to celebrate his marriage. But, they never turned up. We supped alone. The next thing I knew he was drinking fermented mare's milk in the back of beyond, fighting for his life.

Masha, as always the confidant of both of them, received very different letters from each of them.

Knipper Because of my headache, I could scarcely stay on my feet, and felt at one point that I was either going to burst out laughing - or crying. We were married by the same priest who buried your father, Masha. It wasn't a long ceremony. The witnesses congratulated us. Then Anton took me home, went off to collect his things and came back to us. At 8 we left for the railroad station to go to the koumiss cure.

Chekhov My dearest Masha. That I have married, you already know. My reasons? First, I'm over forty; second, Olga is from a good family; third, if I must leave her, I can do so without the slightest compunction, as if I'd never married in the first place - she is independent and supports herself. Another important consideration is that the marriage has not in the least altered either my own way of life or the way of life of those who have lived and continue to live with me. Everything, absolutely

.....love, Chekhov

everything, shall remain as before, and I will go on living alone in Yalta, and Mother likewise; and towards you, my relations will remain as invariably good and warm as they have been until now.

Vishnievski Olga Knipper had a miscarriage in March 1902. *THE CHERRY ORCHARD*, Chekhov's last play, premiered on his 44th birthday on January 17, 1904. He died less than six months later on July 2, 1904. His sister, Masha, spent her life as the director of the Chekhov Museum in Yalta. She died in 1957, in her 94th year. Olga Knipper never remarried and died in 1959 in her 91st year in Moscow.

As for me? I died in 1943.