

**ANTON
PAVLOVICH
CHEKHOV**

THE SEA-GULL

АНТОН ЧЕХОВ

The Sea-Gull

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Anton Pavlovich Chekhov

The Sea-Gull

CHARACTERS

IRINA ABKADINA, an actress

CONSTANTINE TREPLIEFF, her son

PETER SORIN, her brother

NINA ZARIETCHNAYA, a young girl, the daughter of a rich landowner

ILIA SHAMRAEFF, the manager of SORIN'S estate

PAULINA, his wife

MASHA, their daughter

BORIS TRIGORIN, an author

EUGENE DORN, a doctor

SIMON MEDVIEDENKO, a schoolmaster

JACOB, a workman

A COOK

A MAIDSERVANT

The scene is laid on SORIN'S estate. Two years elapse between the third and fourth acts.

ACT I

The scene is laid in the park on SORIN'S estate. A broad avenue of trees leads away from the audience toward a lake which lies lost in the depths of the park. The avenue is obstructed by a rough stage, temporarily erected for the performance of amateur theatricals, and which screens the lake from view. There is a dense growth of bushes to the left and right of the stage. A few chairs and a little table are placed in front of the stage. The sun has just set. JACOB and some other workmen are heard hammering and coughing on the stage behind the lowered curtain

MASHA and MEDVIEDENKO come in from the left, returning from a walk.

MEDVIEDENKO. Why do you always wear mourning?

MASHA. I dress in black to match my life. I am unhappy.

MEDVIEDENKO. Why should you be unhappy? [Thinking it over] I don't understand it. You are healthy, and though your father is not rich, he has a good competency. My life is far harder than yours. I only have twenty-three roubles a month to live on, but I don't wear mourning. [They sit down].

MASHA. Happiness does not depend on riches; poor men are often happy.

MEDVIEDENKO. In theory, yes, but not in reality. Take my case, for instance; my mother, my two sisters, my little brother and I must all live somehow on my salary of twenty-three roubles a month. We have to eat and drink, I take it. You wouldn't have us go without tea and sugar, would you? Or tobacco? Answer me that, if you can.

MASHA. [Looking in the direction of the stage] The play will soon begin.

MEDVIEDENKO. Yes, Nina Zarietchnaya is going to act in Treplieff's play. They love one another, and their two souls will unite to-night in the effort to interpret the same idea by different means. There is no ground on which your soul and mine can meet. I love you. Too restless and sad to stay at home, I tramp here every day, six miles and back, to be met only by your indifference. I am poor, my family is large, you can have no inducement to marry a man who cannot even find sufficient food for his own mouth.

MASHA. It is not that. [She takes snuff] I am touched by your affection, but I cannot return it, that is all. [She offers him the snuff-box] Will you take some?

MEDVIEDENKO. No, thank you. [A pause.]

MASHA. The air is sultry; a storm is brewing for to-night. You do nothing but moralise or else talk about money. To you, poverty is the greatest misfortune that can befall a man, but I think it is a thousand times easier to go begging in rags than to – You wouldn't understand that, though.

SORIN leaning on a cane, and TREPLIEFF come in.

SORIN. For some reason, my boy, country life doesn't suit me, and I am sure I shall never get used to it. Last night I went to bed at ten and woke at nine this morning, feeling as if, from oversleep, my brain had stuck to my skull. [Laughing] And yet I accidentally dropped off to sleep again after dinner, and feel utterly done up at this moment. It is like a nightmare.

TREPLIEFF. There is no doubt that you should live in town. [He catches sight of MASHA and MEDVIEDENKO] You shall be called when the play begins, my friends, but you must not stay here now. Go away, please.

SORIN. Miss Masha, will you kindly ask your father to leave the dog unchained? It howled so last night that my sister was unable to sleep.

MASHA. You must speak to my father yourself. Please excuse me; I can't do so. [To MEDVIEDENKO] Come, let us go.

MEDVIEDENKO. You will let us know when the play begins?

MASHA and MEDVIEDENKO go out.

SORIN. I foresee that that dog is going to howl all night again. It is always this way in the country; I have never been able to live as I like here. I come down for a month's holiday, to rest and all, and am plagued so by their nonsense that I long to escape after the first day. [Laughing] I have always been glad to get away from this place, but I have been retired now, and this was the only place I had to come to. Willy-nilly, one must live somewhere.

JACOB. [To TREPLIEFF] We are going to take a swim, Mr. Constantine.

TREPLIEFF. Very well, but you must be back in ten minutes.

JACOB. We will, sir.

TREPLIEFF. [Looking at the stage] Just like a real theatre! See, there we have the curtain, the foreground, the background, and all. No artificial scenery is needed. The eye travels direct to the lake, and rests on the horizon. The curtain will be raised as the moon rises at half-past eight.

SORIN. Splendid!

TREPLIEFF. Of course the whole effect will be ruined if Nina is late. She should be here by now, but her father and stepmother watch her so closely that it is like stealing her from a prison to get her away from home. [He straightens SORIN'S collar] Your hair and beard are all on end. Oughtn't you to have them trimmed?

SORIN. [Smoothing his beard] They are the tragedy of my existence. Even when I was young I always looked as if I were drunk, and all. Women have never liked me. [Sitting down] Why is my sister out of temper?

TREPLIEFF. Why? Because she is jealous and bored. [Sitting down beside SORIN] She is not acting this evening, but Nina is, and so she has set herself against me, and against the performance of the play, and against the play itself, which she hates without ever having read it.

SORIN. [Laughing] Does she, really?

TREPLIEFF. Yes, she is furious because Nina is going to have a success on this little stage. [Looking at his watch] My mother is a psychological curiosity. Without doubt brilliant and talented, capable of sobbing over a novel, of reciting all Nekrasoff's poetry by heart, and of nursing the sick like an angel of heaven, you should see what happens if any one begins praising Duse to her! She alone must be praised and written about, raved over, her marvellous acting in "La Dame aux Camelias" extolled to the skies. As she cannot get all that rubbish in the country, she grows peevish and cross, and thinks we are all against her, and to blame for it all. She is superstitious, too. She dreads burning three candles, and fears the thirteenth day of the month. Then she is stingy. I know for a fact that she has seventy thousand roubles in a bank at Odessa, but she is ready to burst into tears if you ask her to lend you a penny.

SORIN. You have taken it into your head that your mother dislikes your play, and the thought of it has excited you, and all. Keep calm; your mother adores you.

TREPLIEFF. [Pulling a flower to pieces] She loves me, loves me not; loves – loves me not; loves – loves me not! [Laughing] You see, she doesn't love me, and why should she? She likes life and love and gay clothes, and I am already twenty-five years old; a sufficient reminder to her that she is no longer young. When I am away she is only thirty-two, in my presence she is forty-three, and she hates me for it. She knows, too, that I despise the modern stage. She adores it, and imagines that she is working on it for the benefit of humanity and her sacred art, but to me the theatre is merely the vehicle of convention and prejudice. When the curtain rises on that little three-walled room, when those mighty geniuses, those high-priests of art, show us people in the act of eating, drinking, loving, walking, and wearing their coats, and attempt to extract a moral from their insipid talk; when playwrights give us under a thousand different guises the same, same, same old stuff, then I must needs run from it, as Maupassant ran from the Eiffel Tower that was about to crush him by its vulgarity.

SORIN. But we can't do without a theatre.

TREPLIEFF. No, but we must have it under a new form. If we can't do that, let us rather not have it at all. [Looking at his watch] I love my mother, I love her devotedly, but I think she leads a stupid life. She always has this man of letters of hers on her mind, and the newspapers are always frightening her to death, and I am tired of it. Plain, human egoism sometimes speaks in my heart, and I regret that my mother is a famous actress. If she were an ordinary woman I think I should be a happier man. What could be more intolerable and foolish than my position, Uncle, when I find myself the only nonentity among a crowd of her guests, all celebrated authors and artists? I feel that they only endure me because I am her son. Personally I am nothing, nobody. I pulled through my third year at college by the skin of my teeth, as they say. I have neither money nor brains, and on my passport you may read that I am simply a citizen of Kiev. So was my father, but he was a well-known actor. When the celebrities that frequent my mother's drawing-room deign to notice me at all, I know they only look at me to measure my insignificance; I read their thoughts, and suffer from humiliation.

SORIN. Tell me, by the way, what is Trigorin like? I can't understand him, he is always so silent.

TREPLIEFF. Trigorin is clever, simple, well-mannered, and a little, I might say, melancholic in disposition. Though still under forty, he is surfeited with praise. As for his stories, they are – how shall I put it? – pleasing, full of talent, but if you have read Tolstoi or Zola you somehow don't enjoy Trigorin.

SORIN. Do you know, my boy, I like literary men. I once passionately desired two things: to marry, and to become an author. I have succeeded in neither. It must be pleasant to be even an insignificant author.

TREPLIEFF. [Listening] I hear footsteps! [He embraces his uncle] I cannot live without her; even the sound of her footsteps is music to me. I am madly happy. [He goes quickly to meet NINA, who comes in at that moment] My enchantress! My girl of dreams!

NINA. [Excitedly] It can't be that I am late? No, I am not late.

TREPLIEFF. [Kissing her hands] No, no, no!

NINA. I have been in a fever all day, I was so afraid my father would prevent my coming, but he and my stepmother have just gone driving. The sky is clear, the moon is rising. How I hurried to get here! How I urged my horse to go faster and faster! [Laughing] I am *so* glad to see you! [She shakes hands with SORIN.]

SORIN. Oho! Your eyes look as if you had been crying. You mustn't do that.

NINA. It is nothing, nothing. Do let us hurry. I must go in half an hour. No, no, for heaven's sake do not urge me to stay. My father doesn't know I am here.

TREPLIEFF. As a matter of fact, it is time to begin now. I must call the audience.

SORIN. Let me call them – and all – I am going this minute. [He goes toward the right, begins to sing "The Two Grenadiers," then stops.] I was singing that once when a fellow-lawyer said to me: "You have a powerful voice, sir." Then he thought a moment and added, "But it is a disagreeable one!" [He goes out laughing.]

NINA. My father and his wife never will let me come here; they call this place Bohemia and are afraid I shall become an actress. But this lake attracts me as it does the gulls. My heart is full of you. [She glances about her.]

TREPLIEFF. We are alone.

NINA. Isn't that some one over there?

TREPLIEFF. No. [They kiss one another.]

NINA. What is that tree?

TREPLIEFF. An elm.

NINA. Why does it look so dark?

TREPLIEFF. It is evening; everything looks dark now. Don't go away early, I implore you.

NINA. I must.

TREPLIEFF. What if I were to follow you, Nina? I shall stand in your garden all night with my eyes on your window.

NINA. That would be impossible; the watchman would see you, and Treasure is not used to you yet, and would bark.

TREPLIEFF. I love you.

NINA. Hush!

TREPLIEFF. [Listening to approaching footsteps] Who is that? Is it you, Jacob?

JACOB. [On the stage] Yes, sir.

TREPLIEFF. To your places then. The moon is rising; the play must commence.

NINA. Yes, sir.

TREPLIEFF. Is the alcohol ready? Is the sulphur ready? There must be fumes of sulphur in the air when the red eyes shine out. [To NINA] Go, now, everything is ready. Are you nervous?

NINA. Yes, very. I am not so much afraid of your mother as I am of Trigorin. I am terrified and ashamed to act before him; he is so famous. Is he young?

TREPLIEFF. Yes.

NINA. What beautiful stories he writes!

TREPLIEFF. [Coldly] I have never read any of them, so I can't say.

NINA. Your play is very hard to act; there are no living characters in it.

TREPLIEFF. Living characters! Life must be represented not as it is, but as it ought to be; as it appears in dreams.

NINA. There is so little action; it seems more like a recitation. I think love should always come into every play.

NINA and TREPLIEFF go up onto the little stage; PAULINA and DORN come in.

PAULINA. It is getting damp. Go back and put on your goloshes.

DORN. I am quite warm.

PAULINA. You never will take care of yourself; you are quite obstinate about it, and yet you are a doctor, and know quite well that damp air is bad for you. You like to see me suffer, that's what it is. You sat out on the terrace all yesterday evening on purpose.

DORN. [Sings]

“Oh, tell me not that youth is wasted.”

PAULINA. You were so enchanted by the conversation of Madame Arkadina that you did not even notice the cold. Confess that you admire her.

DORN. I am fifty-five years old.

PAULINA. A trifle. That is not old for a man. You have kept your looks magnificently, and women still like you.

DORN. What are you trying to tell me?

PAULINA. You men are all ready to go down on your knees to an actress, all of you.

DORN. [Sings]

“Once more I stand before thee.”

It is only right that artists should be made much of by society and treated differently from, let us say, merchants. It is a kind of idealism.

PAULINA. When women have loved you and thrown themselves at your head, has that been idealism?

DORN. [Shrugging his shoulders] I can't say. There has been a great deal that was admirable in my relations with women. In me they liked, above all, the superior doctor. Ten years ago, you remember, I was the only decent doctor they had in this part of the country – and then, I have always acted like a man of honour.

PAULINA. [Seizes his hand] Dearest!

DORN. Be quiet! Here they come.

ARKADINA comes in on SORIN'S arm; also TRIGORIN, SHAMRAEFF, MEDVIEDENKO, and MASHA.

SHAMRAEFF. She acted most beautifully at the Poltava Fair in 1873; she was really magnificent. But tell me, too, where Tchadin the comedian is now? He was inimitable as Rasplueff, better than Sadofski. Where is he now?

ARKADINA. Don't ask me where all those antediluvians are! I know nothing about them. [She sits down.]

SHAMRAEFF. [Sighing] Pashka Tchadin! There are none left like him. The stage is not what it was in his time. There were sturdy oaks growing on it then, where now but stumps remain.

DORN. It is true that we have few dazzling geniuses these days, but, on the other hand, the average of acting is much higher.

SHAMRAEFF. I cannot agree with you; however, that is a matter of taste, *de gustibus*.

Enter TREPLIEFF from behind the stage.

ARKADINA. When will the play begin, my dear boy?

TREPLIEFF. In a moment. I must ask you to have patience.

ARKADINA. [Quoting from Hamlet] My son,

“Thou turn'st mine eyes into my very soul;
And there I see such black grained spots
As will not leave their tinct.”

[A horn is blown behind the stage.]

TREPLIEFF. Attention, ladies and gentlemen! The play is about to begin. [A pause] I shall commence. [He taps the door with a stick, and speaks in a loud voice] O, ye time-honoured, ancient mists that drive at night across the surface of this lake, blind you our eyes with sleep, and show us in our dreams that which will be in twice ten thousand years!

SORIN. There won't be anything in twice ten thousand years.

TREPLIEFF. Then let them now show us that nothingness.

ARKADINA. Yes, let them – we are asleep.

The curtain rises. A vista opens across the lake. The moon hangs low above the horizon and is reflected in the water. NINA, dressed in white, is seen seated on a great rock.

NINA. All men and beasts, lions, eagles, and quails, horned stags, geese, spiders, silent fish that inhabit the waves, starfish from the sea, and creatures invisible to the eye – in one word, life – all, all life, completing the dreary round imposed upon it, has died out at last. A thousand years have passed since the earth last bore a living creature on her breast, and the unhappy moon now lights her lamp in vain. No longer are the cries of storks heard in the meadows, or the drone of beetles in the groves of limes. All is cold, cold. All is void, void, void. All is terrible, terrible – [A pause] The bodies of all living creatures have dropped to dust, and eternal matter has transformed them into stones and water and clouds; but their spirits have flowed together into one, and that great world-soul am I! In me is the spirit of the great Alexander, the spirit of Napoleon, of Caesar, of Shakespeare, and of the tiniest leech that swims. In me the consciousness of man has joined hands with the instinct of the animal; I understand all, all, all, and each life lives again in me.

[The will-o-the-wisps flicker out along the lake shore.]

ARKADINA. [Whispers] What decadent rubbish is this?

TREPLIEFF. [Imploringly] Mother!

NINA. I am alone. Once in a hundred years my lips are opened, my voice echoes mournfully across the desert earth, and no one hears. And you, poor lights of the marsh, you do not hear me. You are engendered at sunset in the putrid mud, and flit wavering about the lake till dawn, unconscious, unreasoning, unwarmed by the breath of life. Satan, father of eternal matter, trembling lest the spark

of life should glow in you, has ordered an unceasing movement of the atoms that compose you, and so you shift and change for ever. I, the spirit of the universe, I alone am immutable and eternal. [A pause] Like a captive in a dungeon deep and void, I know not where I am, nor what awaits me. One thing only is not hidden from me: in my fierce and obstinate battle with Satan, the source of the forces of matter, I am destined to be victorious in the end. Matter and spirit will then be one at last in glorious harmony, and the reign of freedom will begin on earth. But this can only come to pass by slow degrees, when after countless eons the moon and earth and shining Sirius himself shall fall to dust. Until that hour, oh, horror! horror! horror! [A pause. Two glowing red points are seen shining across the lake] Satan, my mighty foe, advances; I see his dread and lurid eyes.

ARKADINA. I smell sulphur. Is that done on purpose?

TREPLIEFF. Yes.

ARKADINA. Oh, I see; that is part of the effect.

TREPLIEFF. Mother!

NINA. He longs for man —

PAULINA. [To DORN] You have taken off your hat again! Put it on, you will catch cold.

ARKADINA. The doctor has taken off his hat to Satan father of eternal matter —

TREPLIEFF. [Loudly and angrily] Enough of this! There's an end to the performance. Down with the curtain!

ARKADINA. Why, what are you so angry about?

TREPLIEFF. [Stamping his foot] The curtain; down with it! [The curtain falls] Excuse me, I forgot that only a chosen few might write plays or act them. I have infringed the monopoly. I – I — He would like to say more, but waves his hand instead, and goes out to the left.

ARKADINA. What is the matter with him?

SORIN. You should not handle youthful egoism so roughly, sister.

ARKADINA. What did I say to him?

SORIN. You hurt his feelings.

ARKADINA. But he told me himself that this was all in fun, so I treated his play as if it were a comedy.

SORIN. Nevertheless —

ARKADINA. Now it appears that he has produced a masterpiece, if you please! I suppose it was not meant to amuse us at all, but that he arranged the performance and fumigated us with sulphur to demonstrate to us how plays should be written, and what is worth acting. I am tired of him. No one could stand his constant thrusts and sallies. He is a wilful, egotistic boy.

SORIN. He had hoped to give you pleasure.

ARKADINA. Is that so? I notice, though, that he did not choose an ordinary play, but forced his decadent trash on us. I am willing to listen to any raving, so long as it is not meant seriously, but in showing us this, he pretended to be introducing us to a new form of art, and inaugurating a new era. In my opinion, there was nothing new about it, it was simply an exhibition of bad temper.

TRIGORIN. Everybody must write as he feels, and as best he may.

ARKADINA. Let him write as he feels and can, but let him spare me his nonsense.

DORN. Thou art angry, O Jove!

ARKADINA. I am a woman, not Jove. [She lights a cigarette] And I am not angry, I am only sorry to see a young man foolishly wasting his time. I did not mean to hurt him.

MEDVIEDENKO. No one has any ground for separating life from matter, as the spirit may well consist of the union of material atoms. [Excitedly, to TRIGORIN] Some day you should write a play, and put on the stage the life of a schoolmaster. It is a hard, hard life.

ARKADINA. I agree with you, but do not let us talk about plays or atoms now. This is such a lovely evening. Listen to the singing, friends, how sweet it sounds.

PAULINA. Yes, they are singing across the water. [A pause.]

ARKADINA. [To TRIGORIN] Sit down beside me here. Ten or fifteen years ago we had music and singing on this lake almost all night. There are six houses on its shores. All was noise and laughter and romance then, such romance! The young star and idol of them all in those days was this man here, [Nods toward DORN] Doctor Eugene Dorn. He is fascinating now, but he was irresistible then. But my conscience is beginning to prick me. Why did I hurt my poor boy? I am uneasy about him. [Loudly] Constantine! Constantine!

MASHA. Shall I go and find him?

ARKADINA. If you please, my dear.

MASHA. [Goes off to the left, calling] Mr. Constantine! Oh, Mr. Constantine!

NINA. [Comes in from behind the stage] I see that the play will never be finished, so now I can go home. Good evening. [She kisses ARKADINA and PAULINA.]

SORIN. Bravo! Bravo!

ARKADINA. Bravo! Bravo! We were quite charmed by your acting. With your looks and such a lovely voice it is a crime for you to hide yourself in the country. You must be very talented. It is your duty to go on the stage, do you hear me?

NINA. It is the dream of my life, which will never come true.

ARKADINA. Who knows? Perhaps it will. But let me present Monsieur Boris Trigorin.

NINA. I am delighted to meet you. [Embarrassed] I have read all your books.

ARKADINA. [Drawing NINA down beside her] Don't be afraid of him, dear. He is a simple, good-natured soul, even if he is a celebrity. See, he is embarrassed himself.

DORN. Couldn't the curtain be raised now? It is depressing to have it down.

SHAMRAEFF. [Loudly] Jacob, my man! Raise the curtain!

NINA. [To TRIGORIN] It was a curious play, wasn't it?

TRIGORIN. Very. I couldn't understand it at all, but I watched it with the greatest pleasure because you acted with such sincerity, and the setting was beautiful. [A pause] There must be a lot of fish in this lake.

NINA. Yes, there are.

TRIGORIN. I love fishing. I know of nothing pleasanter than to sit on a lake shore in the evening with one's eyes on a floating cork.

NINA. Why, I should think that for one who has tasted the joys of creation, no other pleasure could exist.

ARKADINA. Don't talk like that. He always begins to flounder when people say nice things to him.

SHAMRAEFF. I remember when the famous Silva was singing once in the Opera House at Moscow, how delighted we all were when he took the low C. Well, you can imagine our astonishment when one of the church cantors, who happened to be sitting in the gallery, suddenly boomed out: "Bravo, Silva!" a whole octave lower. Like this: [In a deep bass voice] "Bravo, Silva!" The audience was left breathless. [A pause.]

DORN. An angel of silence is flying over our heads.

NINA. I must go. Good-bye.

ARKADINA. Where to? Where must you go so early? We shan't allow it.

NINA. My father is waiting for me.

ARKADINA. How cruel he is, really. [They kiss each other] Then I suppose we can't keep you, but it is very hard indeed to let you go.

NINA. If you only knew how hard it is for me to leave you all.

ARKADINA. Somebody must see you home, my pet.

NINA. [Startled] No, no!

SORIN. [Imploringly] Don't go!

NINA. I must.

SORIN. Stay just one hour more, and all. Come now, really, you know.

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