

THE BARBARIAN

The drawing room of a country estate. Elyena Ivanovna Popova is dressed in deep mourning, the shades are drawn, an atmosphere of gloom pervades. She gazes at a small photograph with intense concentration. She and Luka, her aged manservant, have been engaged in heated discussion.

LUKA: What I'm trying to say, is that you shouldn't kill your spirit like this! Yes, kill your spirit! It's a beautiful summer day. Servants are picking berries, cats are chasing birds, and you sulk around in a house that's as dark and solemn as a convent! He died, not you! You've been at this for a year, now. The neighbors are getting scared...

POPOVA: Death only frightens the living. For those of us dead in spirit, it is merely... (she gestures dramatically, then sadly watches the gesture fade) The sun went down on my life when Nicolai... (she takes a moment to keep from crying, then stalwartly) A life unshared is a death indeed. This room is my tomb. I sit. I wait. Someday, I will pass imperceptibly into the shadows.

LUKA: Listen. Nicolai Mihailovich is food for worms, God's will. But it's nobody's will that you should die mourning him! When my wife died, I cried for a month. A month is plenty of time. More than a month is strange... disturbing. Alright. The neighbors are saying you've lost your mind. (she is outraged) Well look at us, a couple of spiders creeping around in the dark, why shouldn't they? My uniform needs to be worn. I don't wear it, it falls apart. A life is that way, too, you know. Get out! Do something!! The regiment at Riblovo has a dance every Friday. A bunch of handsome officers waltzing around, how's that, huh? You're still a looker, you're not too old for young men like those, but after another five or six years...

POPOVA: The subject is closed, Luka! And it won't come up again, do you understand? Nicolai Mihailovich has passed on. Now my life passes on. He is gone, I am gone. Symmetry. Ghosts don't dance and eat berries. (he throws up his arms in frustration) Alright, he wasn't perfect, we had our difficulties. He wandered, somewhat. Alright, more than somewhat. That was more my fault than his, you know. For not being dedicated enough. I should have taught him the meaning of real love, but I didn't. But it's not too late. He hadn't a notion what real love was, (a huge change of tone) so let him watch from the grave...!

LUKA: You'll show him, I know, I've heard it and I can't believe I'm hearing it again. Anything but more of this. The garden? How about we hitch up Toby and take a spin in the...

POPOVA: (in tears) Oh, Luka...!

LUKA: Alright, no Toby...

POPOVA: Toby! Toby was his favorite horse! He loved Toby! We'd visit the Korchatkins or the Vaslovs and he'd drive Toby. He loved that horse. They were like one being. How beautiful. (she sighs) Toby gets an extra portion of oats today, be sure and tell them.

LUKA: Whatever you say, madam.

A bell rings.

POPOVA: I'm indisposed, Luka. (he starts to go) No, wait! I'm not at home.

LUKA: Yes, madam. (he goes)

POPOVA: (to his portrait, perhaps) Nicolai, the world passes away, the body withers, but love is forever. You shall see. I will be a martyr to love. (she sighs) Of course, I've had plenty of practice. At least now I don't have to wonder where you are or who your with. That's some consolation.

LUKA: (entering, all excited) There's a... gentleman... he wants to... speak with you, madam, he says...

POPOVA: Luka, what did I just tell you?

LUKA: I know, I remember, and I told him, I told him, but he doesn't believe me. He says he wants to see you right now!

SMIRNOV: (offstage, yelling) And tell her I haven't got all day!

LUKA: You see?

POPOVA: Did you tell him I wasn't home?

LUKA: He doesn't believe me.

POPOVA: Make him believe you.

LUKA: He spoke to the neighbors. He says he's not leaving until you see him.

POPOVA: Well! It seems, then, I am left with no choice. (she sighs)

LUKA: So it seems, madam. (he goes off)

POPOVA: (while straightening up, as listlessly as she can manage) The neighbors. They think I've lost my mind, have they? Won't leave until I see him. A convent? What else has this house ever been to me except a convent? Why not take vows? Nothing to miss and at least everyone would leave me alone. That's actually a wonderful idea. Become a nun. Then let them talk about how I've lost my mind.

Grigory Stepanovich Smirnov enters, pushing his way past Luka who endeavors to announce him. He in a state of extreme agitation.

LUKA: Madam, Mister.. uh...

SMIRNOV: Dispense with the formalities and let me in, you old...! (seeing Elyena he struggles for some control) Madam, I am honored to make your acquaintance. I am Grigory Stepanovich Smirnov, landowner and lieutenant of artillery, retired. It distresses me to disturb you in your mourning, but I'm afraid the situation urgently requires your attention.

POPOVA: I would be most appreciative if you would kindly come to your point, sir.

SMIRNOV: Most happy to. Your late husband... and he was a good man, I am honored to have known him and to have had him as a customer... but your late husband died, you see, in my debt to the order of some twelve hundred rubles. I have two documents of credit here as proof, if you wish. (she declines) Tomorrow I have an large interest payment due on an agricultural loan, and since I was expecting to be repaid several months ago, I'm afraid I must ask you for the full amount immediately.

POPOVA: Twelve hundred rubles!

SMIRNOV: (offering the documents again) As you see.

POPOVA: (she takes the documents) What was the debt for?

SMIRNOV: Oats.

POPOVA: Oats!?

SMIRNOV: I supplied his oats.

POPOVA: Twelve hundred rubles for...? Luka. Luka, oats, for Toby? Now, please. (Luka goes) Yes. Oats. Well, Mister... I'm sorry, your name is...?

SMIRNOV: Smirnov. Grigory Stepanovich.

POPOVA: (reading it also) Yes, of course! Mister Smirnov. If my late husband died in debt to you, then there is no question of payment, is there?

SMIRNOV: Excellent!

POPOVA: You shall have the full amount when my manager returns from town.

SMIRNOV: Thank you.

POPOVA: Tomorrow.

SMIRNOV: Tomorrow?

POPOVA: You have my word.

SMIRNOV: Tomorrow?

POPOVA: Tomorrow. I promise you. Well, perhaps the day after, but you will have it all back, every ruble.

SMIRNOV: The day after?

POPOVA: For today, you must forgive me, it is seven months exactly since my dear late husband passed away, and I am in no frame of mind to deal with business. I'm sure you understand.

SMIRNOV: Understand? Madame Popova, no, wait, you must understand. Unless I get that money today by tomorrow I'll be shaking hands with your dear late husband. If I miss tomorrow's payment, they'll have my estate up for auction the day after, and then what? I need that money now!

POPOVA: I will pay you, sir, tomor... rather, the day after tomorrow.

SMIRNOV: (exploding) No! Not the day after tomorrow, today!

POPOVA: I'm sorry, but I can't pay you today.

SMIRNOV: Why not?

POPOVA: My manager is...

SMIRNOV: What, are you helpless?

POPOVA: I am not helpless. I merely wish to conduct this matter properly...

SMIRNOV: Then pay me now!

POPOVA: Please, Mister... uh...

SMIRNOV: Smirnov!

POPOVA: Mister Smirnov, you behave as if it I'd heard you were coming and deliberately sent my manager away!

SMIRNOV: (pacing) Smirnov! Smirnov!

POPOVA: How was I to know you would suddenly arrive demanding payment on a debt I knew nothing about?

SMIRNOV: That's it then?

POPOVA: What is it?

SMIRNOV: You're not paying me?

POPOVA: Of course I am paying you. The day after tomorrow.

SMIRNOV: What good will it do me the day after tomorrow?

POPOVA: I don't know and I don't care. I can't pay you today. The subject is closed.

SMIRNOV: Oooh. The subject is closed. Good words for a servant, heh? Excellent! Wonderful. I'll write that down on my list! "The subject is closed." I met a tax collector on the way. He counseled patience. "Don't get so worked up, relax, it's only money." "It's only money..." A tax collector, what does he know about patience? I've been on the road since yesterday at dawn. I've been to a dozen people that owe me. All of them promise to pay, but so sorry, not just now. Some other time when it's more convenient! So there I am after a full day on the road without so much as a mutilated kopek to show for it. I'm tired, I'm dusty, but I manage to scrounge a place on the filthy floor of a grimy road house next to their stinking vodka barrel. But I'm lucky, I tell myself. The next day looks better. Madame Popova will pay me, she will understand. So here I am. I approach you with all the dignity and calm that I am capable of mustering at this moment, and the subject is closed. Well, I'll tell you what, my dear, my patience is very nearly closed.

POPOVA: I am sorry to hear of your travail, sir. However, it is quite impossible for me to assist you until my manager has...

SMIRNOV: I came to see you! What the hell do I care about your goddamn manager! Excuse me please.

POPOVA: Mister Smirnov! I am not accustomed to such coarse language in my house. I am afraid that I cannot remain here and listen to such...

Elyena Ivanovna gets up to leave. She tries to get past Smirnov during this speech, and eventually succeeds.

SMIRNOV: ...language? What about your language? Do you think "the subject is closed" is any less offensive to me, than a few "goddamns" are to you? As if your delicate nature is somehow going to help me make my interest payment? You can afford to be delicate. Your manager is away! But what am I supposed to do about my loan payment? Escape in a balloon? I'll splatter my brains out against a brick wall, is more like it. Look at this list! Grozhdov, not at home. Yarosevich, skipped town. Kuritsin called me names and yelled. I threw him out his drawing room window. Mazutov -- oh, this is good -- an upset stomach. But you, you really take the cake. "Not in the frame of mind, today." Oh, yes, that rounds out the list handsomely. (writing) "Not in the frame of mind."

POPOVA: Please show yourself out. (she leaves)

SMIRNOV: (yelling after her) While I stand around and exercise patience! Well, guess what? I'm in no frame of mind either! I'm in no frame of mind to remain civilized! I'll happily stay here, right in this room and shout until you give me my money! Breaking a chair a minute until you run out and I have to break tables! You hear me? Servant! Because I'm in no frame of

mind to... Am I scaring you? Am I? Good! I intend to terrify you before I leave! And I can, too! I can rip this little parlor of yours up in ten minutes and have time left to kill the cat! Servant! (Luka appears, cowering at the door) If you want to see "no frame of mind", just you wait! What are you gawking at?

LUKA: You... shouted?

SMIRNOV: It's hot in here. I want some water. Because you know what? You know what? You're driving me out of my mind! Forget the frame. No frame here! Right out of it! Water! Now! (Luka goes) Alright. Fine. Maybe I'm getting a little carried away, here. Let's consider this rationally. A man she's done business with for years is about to disembowel himself right here on her carpet for want of a miserable, paltry twelve hundred rubles, and this widow, this silly girl, sits there, who would just as soon spit in my face as torture me, and tells me with no feeling at all that she's "not in the frame of mind, the subject is closed." There's as much rationale in that as blending your pipe tobacco with gunpowder! What do I expect from a woman, anyway? Business with a woman? It's like using a rock for sponge! What was I thinking, rational?

*Luka enters with a glass of water. Smirnov
downs most of it in one swallow.*

SMIRNOV: Bleught! What is this?

LUKA: You wanted water?

SMIRNOV: Water? Do I look like I want to bathe? I'm thirsty! I want vodka, idiot!

LUKA: I thought you said water.

SMIRNOV: I said vodka! Vod-ka! Vod-ka? Got it?

LUKA: I'm supposed to say that Madame is indisposed...

SMIRNOV: Vod-ka!.

LUKA: ...and that she will not be seeing...

SMIRNOV: Now! (Luka runs out) Indisposed, my ass. Perfectly alright, madam! You don't need to see me now. You can see me later, or tomorrow, or next spring! Because I'm not leaving this room until I have my money! Mourn as much as you like, I'll be here! (to himself) I know mourning, I've seen mourning, and that's not mourning, that's *dressed* for mourning. (moving to the window to shout) Semion, unhitch the horses, we're staying. (a second thought) And take them to the stable and feed them oats. Eat some yourself if you want! Stuff your pockets with them! Where is that vodka? Servant! I've got a headache. It's hot, no sleep, water instead of vodka, crooks and thieves everywhere and this widow girl with dimples is...

LUKA: Did you call?

SMIRNOV: Vod-ka! Vod-ka! Vodka, vodka, vodka, vodka, vodka! Now! (throwing himself into a chair) What a mess I am. I must look like a monster to her. Dust and straw, sweat, hair all over, stubble. Nah! When I call socially, I'll present myself. She's a debtor. I'll dress any damn way I please.

LUKA: (entering with vodka) Sir, if I may say so...

SMIRNOV: You may not.

LUKA: ...but I must speak for Madame in saying that you are kind of a barbarian...

SMIRNOV: What?

LUKA: ...nothing, just speaking for Madame, sir... nothing...

SMIRNOV: Shut up! Get out! Now!

LUKA: The devil'd be more welcome. (he goes)

SMIRNOV: Would he, now?! No problem. I'll smash the world to bits, and grind the pieces into dust! (laughs horribly, then reels) I'm too old for this.

Elyena Ivanovna enters, averting her gaze in order to keep her patience.

POPOVA: Sir. (he tries to speak, she stops him) For seven months I have observed a silence and a solitude far away from human voices. Above all, I have not heard -- am not accustomed to, cannot tolerate -- shouting. Please, out of respect for my widowhood, I beg you not to disturb me any further.

SMIRNOV: Let's trade. My respect for your debt.

POPOVA: Mister Smirnov, I believe I have told you several times already that I cannot pay you today, so, logically, it would seem you have no choice except to wait until the day after tomorrow. Need I say it again?

SMIRNOV: And I believe I told you, and I do say it again, unless you pay me now -- not tomorrow or the day after or a year from Shrove Tuesday -- come tomorrow morning you will have the singular honor of instructing your manager to cut me down from that oak by your front gate.

POPOVA: Even there I cannot help you, for my manager is away until the day after tomorrow.

SMIRNOV: Oh! Do you mean you're not paying me today?

POPOVA: Cannot pay you today.

SMIRNOV: Cannot, will not, let's not split hairs. You have a lovely parlor. I am

content to wait. (he sits, she is shocked) Tomorrow, next year, all the same to me! I like my meals on time. (leaping up) As do my creditors their interest payments! What do you think I am doing here? Come to amuse you?

POPOVA: You're not in the stables anymore, Mister Smirnov, please don't behave as if you were.

SMIRNOV: Funny, I thought I was. The air in here has the distinct aroma of horse shit.

POPOVA: Your manners, I must say, especially in the company of a lady, betray an utter ignorance of proper social conduct.

SMIRNOV: I am in the company of someone who owes me money, who will not pay, who is trying to put me off and who thereby has given up any dubious claim she might have ever had to proper social conduct. When a lady walks in I will behave accordingly.

POPOVA: I am not speaking of the sorts of "ladies" with whom you are I suspect most familiar, and with whom I have no doubt you have had financial dealings. I am speaking of women who customarily command respect by the very evidence of their breeding and impeccable reputations for honesty.

SMIRNOV: Oh, I'm so sorry, I forgot to address you in French! Silly me. Madame, je suis so delighted that vous ne pas give me le lucre you so generously owe me! Ah! Pardon moi, Madame, I have disturbement vous! Que belle hot weather we have today! Quel enchante and gay vous are in black, madame. Forgive me, I neglected to perfume my hankie.

POPOVA: You are an intolerable boor.

SMIRNOV: And utterly ignorant of proper social conduct. Look here, Madame Popova, women are no news to me, I've known herds of them. Three times I've dueled over them, twelve I've left in the lurch, and nine have paid me back in kind. I've played the fool, written poems, wept, languished, rejoiced, swooned and trembled with desire! I've loved hotly, tenderly and desperately. I've championed the equality of women while at the same time I was spending myself into penury trying to satisfy their whims. And what of it? Dark eyes smoldering with passion under rich lashes, moist red lips, warm dimpled cheeks, full round breasts heaving in the moonlight -- or the firelight, or the light of her smile or the light of my life -- none of it is worth a mutilated kopek! Women are lying, conniving, self-indulgent charlatans -- vain, niggling, merciless and irrational. Their conversation never rises above gossip, and is as insightful and articulate as a duck's quack. But do they know how to dress? Oh yes. Muslin and silk, hair up to here, skirts out to there, chiffon, feathers! A goddess! A crocodile in velvet, lusting for the kill. And somehow, somehow this reptile has convinced herself that she is the repository and sole professor

of the real nature of love. She who has never risen above infatuation for a lapdog. And while in reality a woman's heart yearns only for her silks and taffetas, a man's heart yearns for true love. For the true love of angels. And he sees one of these apparitions and confuses the two. And the apparition's response is to put the man's heart in a locket which she hangs around her neck to be taken out now and then as a conversation piece. Don't look so appalled. This is no news to you. If you want to be shocked, let me tell you about the one woman I ever knew who was faithful and pure, but she was so ugly she came to it by default. I've seen a two-headed cat and expect to see twelve more before I meet a woman who is faithful, except against her will and wishes.

POPOVA: You choose your own company, sir. May I debate you?

SMIRNOV: Be my guest.

POPOVA: You must admit that since fidelity is something that can be defined, that it must therefore exist somewhere, in some person. Agreed? Then where? Certainly not in the male. There is no evidence of any kind to support such a fantastic assertion.

SMIRNOV: Your view is colored by bias.

POPOVA: Indeed. And might your view of women be influenced by your own wish not to be alone in your baser qualities? The notion of virtue in a man is quite novel. You men talk about it a great deal, but like most things talked about, it is brought awake in words and falls asleep in silence. There was no finer man, Mister Smirnov, than my late husband Nicolai Mihailovich Popov. I loved him and I gave him everything; my youth, my passion, my joy and my worship. I especially gave him my money. And how did he repay me, this best of all men? By abandoning me for weeks at a time. By flirting with other women while I stood with my arm in his. By investing my money in speculations on romance. And his legacy to me was a drawer overflowing with love letters, none of them in my hand. And he aspired, according to you, to the love of angels. And he much enjoyed his wings. But it was I who remained earthbound so he could revel in his celestial romps, and it is I who creep around this spider's den mourning him and my dignity, as I will continue to do until the day I die, so help me God.

SMIRNOV: Your "mourning", madam, is your own speculation on romance. You're banking on some pretty-boy poet, or girl-faced officer to gaze up at your shutters, while you peek out between the slats and enjoy his musing on "the enigmatic and reputedly beautiful widow within." Play acting.

POPOVA: What a barbarian you are! Are you suggesting...?

SMIRNOV: I'm suggesting that black widow or not, you still manage to keep your face powdered.

POPOVA: How dare you shout! I demand an apology!

SMIRNOV: Is someone shouting? No, Madame Popova, as a man I'm not afraid to speak the plain, simple, unadorned truth, that's all! (exploding) And if you have to scream at someone wait until your damn manager returns the day after tomorrow!

POPOVA: Men are very good at shouting. Much better at it than women. You've made your point, now leave.

SMIRNOV: Not without my money, I won't.

POPOVA: Then it looks like you stay, for I have decided not to pay you, not now, not tomorrow, not ever!

SMIRNOV: We'll see about that!

POPOVA: I wouldn't lower myself to toss you one of your precious mutilated kopeks from one of my shuttered windows. Now get out!

SMIRNOV: If I were your husband, or your boyfriend, I would be expected to descend to this squabbling and as such it would be almost excusable. But I'm not, and I won't. I will simply wait for my due. (he sits)

POPOVA: What are you doing?

SMIRNOV: Sitting down.

POPOVA: Did I give you permission to sit?

SMIRNOV: Not that I remember.

POPOVA: I told you to go.

SMIRNOV: Did you? And I told you to pay me my money. Odd, we seem not to be listening to one another. (fiercely) But that's only to be expected. Serves me right for trying to reason with woman!

POPOVA: And me for trying to be civil to a man. I want you out. Now. (a pause, nothing happens) Do I make myself clear?

SMIRNOV: Oh yes.

POPOVA: Will you go?

SMIRNOV: No.

POPOVA: You're sure?

SMIRNOV: Yes.

POPOVA: Then you drive me to it. (she rings, Luka appears from behind the door where he has been hiding) Luka, show him out!