

A GRAPHIC  
MYSTERY

# THE THIN MAN IN **THE CHERRY ORCHARD**



**BAMBI EVERSON**

## **THE THIN MAN IN THE CHERRY ORCHARD**

Approximately 100 minutes with one optional intermission

### **CHARACTERS**

**MADAME (MME) RANEVSKAYA (50s)** - Matriarch of the family. Elegant and refined in appearance. She is a spendthrift, and dirt poor, but wants to hold on to any shred of dignity left in her.

**ANYA RANEVSKAYA (20s)** - MME. Ranevskaya's youngest daughter. Hopeful, impulsive.

**VARYA RANEVSKAYA (20s)** - MME. Ranevskaya's adopted daughter, a few years older than Anya. Anxious, protective.

**PETER TROVIMOV (30s)** - Perpetual student and philosopher. Former tutor to MME. Ranevskaya's son and former paramour of Anya.

**SIMON SMIRNOV (30s)** - Caretaker of Cherry manor. Overworked, anxious and slightly bitter. Secretly in love with Varya.

**NICK CHARLES (40s)** - The world famous detective. Witty and urbane. Devoted to his wife.

**NORA CHARLES (40s)** - A charming and witty sophisticate. Independently wealthy and madly in love with her husband.

**INSPECTOR IVANOVICH (40s-50s)** - Career law enforcement officer. Ineffectual, arrogant and stiff.

**PLACE:** A suburb in Russia, not too far from Moscow.

**TIME:** 1940s.

### **SYNOPSIS:**

In this sardonic mashup, Dashiell Hammet's hard-boiled, glamorously pickled American sleuths, Nick and Nora Charles, meet their cousins, the stoic inhabitants of Chekhov's bleak Russian tundra. Naturally, a murder, and hilarity, ensues. Can Nick solve the crime before they run out of vodka?

### **SETS AND LIGHTING:**

Single interior set; Most of the action takes place in a living room; Lighting changes should suffice for two scenes, an outdoor bench and the interior of a train compartment.

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** Nick and Nora (of "The Thin Man" fame) are the perfect sophisticated couple. They drink a lot but should never appear drunk (hung over, yes, but never drunk). Their banter with each other is teasing and light hearted, never angry. They speak in the quick, snappy mode of 1940s screwball comedies, in direct contrast to the Chekovian characters, but they clearly adore each other.

**SCENE LIST**

SCENE 1 - Living room of the Cherry Manor Home.

SCENE 2 - The interior of a train compartment.

SCENE 3 - Early morning in Cherry Manor.

SCENE 4 - A few hours later.

SCENE 5 - Later that afternoon.

SCENE 6 - A bench outside the house.

SCENE 7 - In the dining area.

SCENE 8 - The next morning.

SCENE 9 - Moments later.

SCENE 10 - A few minutes later.

## SCENE 1

**BLACKOUT***OPENING MONTAGE:*

*These notes are based on the choreography by Job Christenson for the staging at the 2019 NYC Fringe Festival at The Metropolitan Playhouse. Consider them a guide, not a strict set of orders. Future productions should feel free to adapt them to suit their needs and purposes.*

*The idea is to portray something like a cinematic montage to introduce the characters and set the mood, alternating between the Ranevskaya mansion, and a train station.*

*Suggested music: Jack Hylton - Life is Just a Bowl of Cherries (1931).*

*NICK appears, center stage, wearing a trench coat and fedora, with his back to the audience. He flicks open his 1940s cigarette lighter with its signature metallic ching, and lights a cigarette. The flame from the lighter is the only illumination on stage at first, then a spotlight from above fades in on NICK as he exhales a large puff of smoke, permeating the stage. NICK snaps the lighter shut, turns towards the audience, checks his watch, looks around for NORA, pulls a newspaper out of his pocket, sticks his nose in it and starts to leave. The headline is about him cracking a case. NORA enters, crosses to NICK and slaps the paper down to get his attention. They smile at each other, NICK gallantly takes NORA's arm and they exit. Lights fade.*

*Lights up on the dining area of the Ranevskaya house. SIMON enters and begins straightening up the place settings. Pours himself a cup of coffee. PETER enters, unceremoniously takes the cup for himself, ignoring SIMON's angry stare, and exits.*

*SIMON continues to straighten up. VARYA enters. SIMON crosses to meet her and help her out of her coat, but ends up twisting her arms a little, which annoys her slightly. SIMON takes her coat sheepishly and exits. VARYA exits in the opposite direction. Lights fade.*

*Lights up on ANYA as she enters, wearing a heavy coat and carrying a suitcase. She hurriedly crosses, looking for her train, and exits. Lights fade.*

*Lights up on NORA as she enters, a suitcase in one hand, a picnic basket in the other. NICK enters close behind her, his nose in his newspaper, taking occasional slugs from his hip flask. NORA stops, and holds out her arms to signal NICK to take the bags. He ignores her and strides past, his nose still in his paper. NORA unceremoniously drops the suitcase to the floor with a BANG to get his attention. Smiling indulgently and solicitously, NICK hurries back to her and picks up the suitcase, as NORA crosses in front of him, her nose in the air, still carrying the picnic basket, and exits. NICK dutifully follows close behind.*

*Lights and music fade. End of Montage.*

*Lights up on the living room of the Cherry Manor Home. It is decorated like a cheap facsimile of a Victorian home. There is a sidebar against one wall with alcohol in decanters, plush armchairs (slightly frayed) and a sofa that has seen better days. There is a large, nearly empty bookcase filled with tacky knickknacks, snow globes, souvenirs, and a photo of the owner, Mr. Yepikov, in better days. There is a window that looks out on the guest cottages, pool, and the barren cherry orchard, but it is pitch black at night, only visible during the daytime scenes. At opening, VARYA is examining the room.*

*She is clearly anxious, fixing her hair, and pacing. SIMON is setting up the bar. There is a tense silence for a few moments.*

VARYA

So where is he?

SIMON

How should I know? The telegram said he was arriving yesterday. Typical. I knocked myself out making this place presentable!

VARYA

How long has it looked like this?

SIMON

After a couple of years, the dirt doesn't get any worse. This is too much for one person to manage, you know. Your fiancé fled like a rat from a sinking ship.

*VARYA starts cleaning.*

VARYA

He's NOT my fiancé!

SIMON

Sorry.

VARYA

Don't mention it.

SIMON

It's just that everyone expected that you two...

VARYA

I said don't mention it! Why do people keep bringing it up?

*(Pause)*

I'm fine now. I'm absolutely fine!

SIMON

Sorry.

VARYA

He's the one who should be sorry. I waited for him to make his move. He literally watched me pack my bags. I gave him every opportunity. He just stood there like a monk who had taken a vow of silence.

SIMON  
*(sighing)*

That's despicable, really.

VARYA

All this time, I have been less than 50 miles away. Don't push, they said. No one likes an aggressive female. He's just gun shy. For a woman, the years slip away quickly.

SIMON

You look more lovely than ever, Ms. Varya. Mr. Yepikov is going to regret losing you.

VARYA

What? Did he say anything? Has he mentioned me? He knows I'm coming back right?

SIMON

No. No. And Yes.

VARYA

Well, I don't care. I am just here for Mama and Anya.

SIMON

You have some dirt on your forehead.

*VARYA hurriedly rubs it off and checks herself.*

VARYA

Weren't they supposed to be on the evening train? It's getting late.

SIMON

Relax. They should be here any minute. Traffic is worse than ever since they put the highway in. No one takes this road anymore. No one remembers.

VARYA

Any minute? Oh, she can't see it like this. What happened to the carpeting?

SIMON

I sold the carpets to an antique dealer from Minsk just to keep the gas on.

VARYA

Good heavens! Hand me that cloth. At least I can get rid of these cobwebs.

SIMON

Don't kill the spiders.

VARYA

You have all of us for company now, Simon.

*She starts tidying.*

VARYA (CONT'D)

What happened to the tenants?

SIMON

Gone. I couldn't afford to heat the cottages so they've been empty for some time. Everything fell to me. When Yepikov let Peter live here, I was afraid I was going to be let go, but no, Peter is just another mouth for me to feed.

VARYA

Ugh! Peter! He's always been a freeloader! But maybe Gregor - I mean, Mr. Yepikov - sees the error of his ways. Maybe he wants to give Cherry Manor back to us!

SIMON

It's all very confusing. Yepikov just asked that we all get together for the holidays. Rather short notice, if you ask me. I was going mad from boredom, so I invited my American cousin, Nora, and her husband here for a visit. They were well on their way when I got word from Yepikov. I don't know how we'll manage.

VARYA

Simon! You never told any of us about your family. I always assumed you just grew here. Part of the landscape.

SIMON

You never asked. I lived in America until I was 14. Nora is my mother's brother's child. Old money from his wife's side. They're rolling in it. Nora and I were very close as children, She had this *je ne sais quoi*. A devil-may-care attitude, even at ten. She inherited buckets of money but apparently she - um... married beneath herself. An amateur detective of sorts. Drinks like a fish. Caused quite the scandal.

VARYA

Not everyone grows up with the same values they had as a child.

SIMON

Nora did. We've kept up correspondence. She's still a pip.

VARYA

Being fabulously wealthy doesn't hurt, either.

SIMON

Well... yes. That fact did not escape me. So please, be nice to the both of them. Especially her deadbeat husband. She worships him. Heaven knows why. This means NO flirting, Varya. Keep those feminine wiles of yours under wraps, for once.

VARYA

Oh Simon, you spoil all my fun.

*The door flings open. MME. RANEVSKAYA and ANYA enter with suitcases.*

ANYA

We're here! We made it!

*(runs to VARYA)*

Oh, Varya. It's so good to see you. Let me look at you. Oh, it's been too long! And you, Simon...

*(hugs him quickly and tentatively)*

Would you help Mama with the bags?

SIMON

Certainly. Welcome home, Madame Ranevskaya.

*MME. RANEVSKAYA steps in, gasping at the sight of things.*

MME. RANEVSKAYA

Home? You call this home? I have no home! I have been living like an animal for months. The jungle is my home!

ANYA

*(Hugging her mother)*

Oh Mama - such histrionics! Paris wasn't exactly the jungle.

MME. RANEVSKAYA

Oh, my sweet child. You have no idea. You were off in school. You don't know what I endured. Whatever possessed me to return to that beast?

VARYA

We warned you, Mama, but you felt there was no option after... Never mind... you're here now. That's what matters. I've missed you so.

*(Hugs her)*

Please sit down. Can I get you a drink?

MME. RANEVSKAYA

*(Examining the room with great distaste)*

Yes. I shall need one. I am guessing it's the maid's day off?

*She dusts the sofa with her handkerchief. ANYA is looking around nostalgically.*

VARYA

*(brings a drink)*

Oh, Mama. I know it looks bad.

MME. RANEVSKAYA

Bad? Kafka would find it too depressing!

ANYA

It just needs a little sprucing up, Mama. Some new curtains and a coat of paint.

MME. RANEVSKAYA

It's like sitting on a memory. And flattening it beyond recognition.

*SIMON returns with many suitcases under his arms. No one offers to help.*

SIMON

I'll put you in your old room shall I, Madame? And Anya - is the nursery all right? Varya has settled in the second bedroom.

MME. RANEVSKAYA

*(distracted)*

Yes. Fine.

ANYA

*(also distracted)*

Thank you.

*MME. RANEVSKAYA looks around, disgusted.*

VARYA

Mama, I have a feeling things are going to turn out all right. After all, why would Gregor... I mean Mr. Yepikov invite us here after all this time? Maybe he's ready to do what he should have done in the first place.

MME. RANEVSKAYA

I don't trust Gregor to do anything that doesn't benefit Gregor. The man has stabbed me in the back before. Where is he? I am exhausted.

VARYA

Simon thought he should have arrived by now. He'll probably be on the next train.

MME. RANEVSKAYA

I wait for no man. I am turning in. I hope someone has aired out the sheets.  
*(stares at SIMON who has recently returned)*

Anya?

ANYA

In a minute, Mama.

MME. RANEVSKAYA

Simon, will there be coffee in the morning? You know how unpleasant I can be without my morning coffee.

SIMON

Everything will be as you wish, Madame. It is good to have you home again.

MME. RANEVSKAYA

Yes. The reception has been quite touching.

*MME. RANEVSKAYA exits upstairs.*

SIMON

The marching band was on hiatus.

ANYA

You had to expect she would react that way. It is an awful shock.

SIMON

Get ready for another one. Peter's here too!

ANYA

Peter? Where?

SIMON

He's been staying in one of the guest cottages finishing one of his many dissertations on the meaninglessness of life. Shall I go wake him?

ANYA

No. I look awful.

VARYA

Let him sleep. It's the one thing he's been successful at. Well, that and eating our food. You will see him at breakfast, darling. Let's go upstairs. I'll help you unpack and you can tell me all about your adventures.

ANYA

Goodnight, Simon. You won't forget Mama's coffee, will you?

SIMON

I'll see to it all now. Goodnight, ladies.

*Ladies exit. SIMON watches them go, then goes to the bar and pours himself a stiff drink. He looks out at the darkened cherry orchard.*

SIMON (CONT'D)

Fasten your seatbelts. It's going to be a bumpy ride.  
*(Takes a drink)*

**BLACKOUT**

## SCENE 2

*Suggested transition music: Ronnie Munro - Me & My Girl (1938).*

*The interior of a train compartment. NICK and NORA are sitting across from each other. NORA is eating a sandwich. NICK is hidden behind a newspaper, pretending to read.*

NORA

Sandwich, Nicky?

*(He ignores her)*

Blini?

*(offers him a bottle)*

Tarkun?

*(grabs his paper away)*

Oh, for goodness sake, Nicky. Stop sulking.

NICK

*(grabs paper back)*

I am not sulking! I just don't happen to like mysterious brown meat and onions. It doesn't become you, either.

*NORA takes a drink, gargles a bit, then comes over and kisses him.*

NORA

Is this better?

NICK

*(kisses her back for a moment)*

Hmmm... reminds me that I miss our dog!

NORA

Oh, Nicky! You know we couldn't possibly bring Asta. He would have to be quarantined for months.

NICK

So instead, I'm quarantined. I really don't see why we needed to make this ridiculous journey. The plane was insufferable. Watered down drinks and ugly stewardesses, and now... three days on this Godforsaken train... sleeping in those bunks... I feel like the china plates we only use when your mother visits.

NORA

We needed to get far away, Nicky. You almost got killed back there.

NICK

I was merely pushing the envelope, my dear Mrs. Charles.

NORA

You were lucky. If I hadn't hit that man on the head with my tray of canapés, you might have been pushing up daisies! Honestly, Nicky, the people you invite for dinner!

NICK

He's been sent up the river for 20 years, darling. Out of sight, out of mind. I don't know why we needed to be exiled to Siberia as well...

NORA

I haven't seen my cousin Simon since we were children.

NICK

If he's like the rest of your family, that might be fortuitous.

NORA

Well, I remember him fondly. I always say, "Never judge a book by its mother." Simon never had the disadvantage of being spoiled by wealth... like some people. I wish we didn't have to travel all the way to Russia for a little R and R, but at least we won't risk running into any of your nefarious adversaries.

NICK

I can't help it if I am sought after, my dear. Lucky for you, you reeled me in.

NORA

And I don't intend to cut you loose again.

*(kisses him)*

A couple of weeks in the middle of nowhere will be good for us. No doorbells ringing in the middle of the night. No mysterious women from your past popping up, desperate for help. Just you and me, quiet moonlit nights, nothing more exciting than a game of Scrabble.

NICK

Last time you hit me with your shoe when I got 300 points for "QUETZALS." You realize, Russian Scrabble has 104 alphabet tiles. We won't even know what we are spelling. But I do like the idea of you in the moonlight, Mrs. Charles.

NORA

Simon has been making his own brand of cherry vodka for years. I bet if you behave yourself, he'll let you sample some.

NICK

Why didn't you say that in the first place, darling?

*(takes out his flask)*

To you, my dark-haired enchantress and the ineffable pleasure of drinking at someone else's expense. You always make mouth watering decisions. Onward Ho!

*Train sounds and Russian patriotic music such as the Red Army choir plays as the lights fade.*

**BLACKOUT**