

# **Uncle Vanya**

by

Anton Chekhov

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# Uncle Vanya

<b>Characters .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>ACT I.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>ACT II.....</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>ACT III .....</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>ACT IV.....</b>	<b>40</b>

## Characters

ALEXANDER SEREBRAKOFF, a retired professor

HELENA, his wife, twenty-seven years old

SONIA, his daughter by a former marriage

MME. VOITSKAYA, widow of a privy councilor, and mother of Serebrakoff's first wife

IVAN (VANYA) VOITSKI, her son

MICHAEL ASTROFF, a doctor

ILIA (WAFFLES) TELEGIN, an impoverished landowner

MARINA, an old nurse

A WORKMAN

The scene is laid on SEREBRAKOFF'S country place

UNCLE VANYA

## ACT I

A country house on a terrace. In front of it a garden. In an avenue of trees, under an old poplar, stands a table set for tea, with a samovar, etc. Some benches and chairs stand near the table. On one of them is lying a guitar. A hammock is swung near the table. It is three o'clock in the afternoon of a cloudy day.

MARINA, a quiet, grey-haired, little old woman, is sitting at the table knitting a stocking.

ASTROFF is walking up and down near her.

MARINA. [Pouring some tea into a glass] Take a little tea, my son.

ASTROFF. [Takes the glass from her unwillingly] Somehow, I don't seem to want any.

MARINA. Then will you have a little vodka instead?

ASTROFF. No, I don't drink vodka every day, and besides, it is too hot now. [A pause] Tell me, nurse, how long have we known each other?

MARINA. [Thoughtfully] Let me see, how long is it? Lord--help me to remember. You first came here, into our parts--let me think--when was it? Sonia's mother was still alive--it was two winters before she died; that was eleven years ago--[thoughtfully] perhaps more.

ASTROFF. Have I changed much since then?

MARINA. Oh, yes. You were handsome and young then, and now you are an old man and not handsome any more. You drink, too.

ASTROFF. Yes, ten years have made me another man. And why? Because I am overworked. Nurse, I am on my feet from dawn till dusk. I know no rest; at night I tremble under my blankets for fear of being dragged out to visit some one who is sick; I have toiled without repose or a day's freedom since I have known you; could I help growing old? And then, existence is tedious, anyway; it is a senseless, dirty business, this life, and goes heavily. Every one about here is silly, and after living with them for two or three years one grows silly oneself. It is inevitable. [Twisting his moustache] See what a long moustache I have grown. A foolish, long moustache. Yes, I am as silly as the rest, nurse, but not as stupid; no, I have not grown stupid. Thank God, my brain is not addled yet, though my feelings have grown numb. I ask nothing, I need nothing, I love no one, unless it is yourself alone. [He kisses her head] I had a nurse just like you when I was a child.

MARINA. Don't you want a bite of something to eat?

**ASTROFF.** No. During the third week of Lent I went to the epidemic at Malitskoi. It was eruptive typhoid. The peasants were all lying side by side in their huts, and the calves and pigs were running about the floor among the sick. Such dirt there was, and smoke! Unspeakable! I slaved among those people all day, not a crumb passed my lips, but when I got home there was still no rest for me; a switchman was carried in from the railroad; I laid him on the operating table and he went and died in my arms under chloroform, and then my feelings that should have been deadened awoke again, my conscience tortured me as if I had killed the man. I sat down and closed my eyes--like this--and thought: will our descendants two hundred years from now, for whom we are breaking the road, remember to give us a kind word? No, nurse, they will forget.

**MARINA.** Man is forgetful, but God remembers.

**ASTROFF.** Thank you for that. You have spoken the truth.

Enter VOITSKI from the house. He has been asleep after dinner and looks rather dishevelled. He sits down on the bench and straightens his collar.

**VOITSKI.** H'm. Yes. [A pause] Yes.

**ASTROFF.** Have you been asleep?

**VOITSKI.** Yes, very much so. [He yawns] Ever since the Professor and his wife have come, our daily life seems to have jumped the track. I sleep at the wrong time, drink wine, and eat all sorts of messes for luncheon and dinner. It isn't wholesome. Sonia and I used to work together and never had an idle moment, but now Sonia works alone and I only eat and drink and sleep. Something is wrong.

**MARINA.** [Shaking her head] Such a confusion in the house! The Professor gets up at twelve, the samovar is kept boiling all the morning, and everything has to wait for him. Before they came we used to have dinner at one o'clock, like everybody else, but now we have it at seven. The Professor sits up all night writing and reading, and suddenly, at two o'clock, there goes the bell! Heavens, what is that? The Professor wants some tea! Wake the servants, light the samovar! Lord, what disorder!

**ASTROFF.** Will they be here long?

**VOITSKI.** A hundred years! The Professor has decided to make his home here.

**MARINA.** Look at this now! The samovar has been on the table for two hours, and they are all out walking!

**VOITSKI.** All right, don't get excited; here they come.

Voices are heard approaching. SEREBRAKOFF, HELENA, SONIA, and TELEGIN come in from the depths of the garden, returning from their walk.

**SEREBRAKOFF.** Superb! Superb! What beautiful views!

**TELEGIN.** They are wonderful, your Excellency.

**SONIA.** To-morrow we shall go into the woods, shall we, papa?

**VOITSKI.** Ladies and gentlemen, tea is ready.

**SEREBRAKOFF.** Won't you please be good enough to send my tea into the library? I still have some work to finish.

**SONIA.** I am sure you will love the woods.

HELENA, SEREBRAKOFF, and SONIA go into the house. TELEGIN sits down at the table beside MARINA.

**VOITSKI.** There goes our learned scholar on a hot, sultry day like this, in his overcoat and goloshes and carrying an umbrella!

**ASTROFF.** He is trying to take good care of his health.

**VOITSKI.** How lovely she is! How lovely! I have never in my life seen a more beautiful woman.

**TELEGIN.** Do you know, Marina, that as I walk in the fields or in the shady garden, as I look at this table here, my heart swells with unbounded happiness. The weather is enchanting, the birds are singing, we are all living in peace and contentment--what more could the soul desire? [Takes a glass of tea.]

**VOITSKI.** [Dreaming] Such eyes--a glorious woman!

**ASTROFF.** Come, Ivan, tell us something.

**VOITSKI.** [Indolently] What shall I tell you?

**ASTROFF.** Haven't you any news for us?

**VOITSKI.** No, it is all stale. I am just the same as usual, or perhaps worse, because I have become lazy. I don't do anything now but croak like an old raven. My mother, the old magpie, is still chattering about the emancipation of woman, with one eye on her grave and the other on her learned books, in which she is always looking for the dawn of a new life.

**ASTROFF.** And the Professor?

**VOITSKI.** The Professor sits in his library from morning till night, as usual--

"Straining the mind, wrinkling the brow,  
We write, write, write,  
Without respite  
Or hope of praise in the future or now."

Poor paper! He ought to write his autobiography; he would make a really splendid subject for a book! Imagine it, the life of a retired professor, as stale as a piece of hardtack, tortured by gout, headaches, and rheumatism, his liver bursting with jealousy and envy, living on the estate of his first wife, although he hates it, because he can't afford to live in town. He is everlastingly whining about his hard lot, though, as a matter of fact, he is extraordinarily lucky. He is the son of a common deacon and has attained the professor's chair, become the son-in-law of a senator, is called "your Excellency," and so on. But I'll tell you something; the man has been writing on art for twenty-five years, and he doesn't know the very first thing about it. For twenty-five years he has been chewing on other men's thoughts about realism, naturalism, and all such foolishness; for twenty-five years he has been reading and writing things that clever men have long known and stupid ones are not interested in; for twenty-five years he has been making his imaginary mountains out of molehills. And just think of the man's self-conceit and presumption all this time! For twenty-five years he has been masquerading in false clothes and has now retired absolutely unknown to any living soul; and yet see him! stalking across the earth like a demi-god!

**ASTROFF.** I believe you envy him.

**VOITSKI.** Yes, I do. Look at the success he has had with women! Don Juan himself was not more favoured. His first wife, who was my sister, was a beautiful, gentle being, as pure as the blue heaven there above us, noble, great-hearted, with more admirers than he has pupils, and she loved him as only beings of angelic purity can love those who are as pure and beautiful as themselves. His mother-in-law, my mother, adores him to this day, and he still inspires a sort of worshipful awe in her. His second wife is, as you see, a brilliant beauty; she married him in his old age and has surrendered all the glory of her beauty and freedom to him. Why? What for?

**ASTROFF.** Is she faithful to him?

**VOITSKI.** Yes, unfortunately she is.

**ASTROFF.** Why unfortunately?

**VOITSKI.** Because such fidelity is false and unnatural, root and branch. It sounds well, but there is no logic in it. It is thought immoral for a woman to deceive an old husband whom she hates, but quite moral for her to strangle her poor youth in her breast and banish every vital desire from her heart.

**TELEGIN.** [In a tearful voice] Vanya, I don't like to hear you talk so. Listen, Vanya; every one who betrays husband or wife is faithless, and could also betray his country.

**VOITSKI.** [Crossly] Turn off the tap, Waffles.

**TELEGIN.** No, allow me, Vanya. My wife ran away with a lover on the day after our wedding, because my exterior was unprepossessing. I have never failed in my duty since then. I love her and am true to her to this day. I help her all I can and have given my fortune to educate the daughter of herself and her lover. I have forfeited my happiness, but I have kept my pride. And she? Her youth has fled, her beauty has faded according to the laws of nature, and her lover is dead. What has she kept?

**HELENA** and **SONIA** come in; after them comes **MME. VOITSKAYA** carrying a book. She sits down and begins to read. Some one hands her a glass of tea which she drinks without looking up.

**SONIA.** [Hurriedly, to the nurse] There are some peasants waiting out there. Go and see what they want. I shall pour the tea. [Pours out some glasses of tea.]

**MARINA** goes out. **HELENA** takes a glass and sits drinking in the hammock.

**ASTROFF.** I have come to see your husband. You wrote me that he had rheumatism and I know not what else, and that he was very ill, but he appears to be as lively as a cricket.

**HELENA.** He had a fit of the blues yesterday evening and complained of pains in his legs, but he seems all right again to-day.

**ASTROFF.** And I galloped over here twenty miles at break-neck speed! No matter, though, it is not the first time. Once here, however, I am going to stay until to-morrow, and at any rate sleep quantum satis.

**SONIA.** Oh, splendid! You so seldom spend the night with us. Have you had dinner yet?

**ASTROFF.** No.

**SONIA.** Good. So you will have it with us. We dine at seven now. [Drinks her tea] This tea is cold!

**TELEGIN.** Yes, the samovar has grown cold.

**HELENA.** Don't mind, Monsieur Ivan, we will drink cold tea, then.

**TELEGIN.** I beg your pardon, my name is not Ivan, but Ilia, ma'am--Ilia Telegin, or Waffles, as I am sometimes called on account of my pock-marked face. I am Sonia's godfather, and his Excellency, your husband, knows me very well. I now live with you, ma'am, on this estate, and perhaps you will be so good as to notice that I dine with you every day.



**SONIA.** He is our great help, our right-hand man. [Tenderly] Dear godfather, let me pour you some tea.

**MME. VOITSKAYA.** Oh! Oh!

**SONIA.** What is it, grandmother?

**MME. VOITSKAYA.** I forgot to tell Alexander--I have lost my memory--I received a letter to-day from Paul Alexevitch in Kharkoff. He has sent me a new pamphlet.

**ASTROFF.** Is it interesting?

**MME. VOITSKAYA.** Yes, but strange. He refutes the very theories which he defended seven years ago. It is appalling!

**VOITSKI.** There is nothing appalling about it. Drink your tea, mamma.

**MME. VOITSKAYA.** It seems you never want to listen to what I have to say. Pardon me, Jean, but you have changed so in the last year that I hardly know you. You used to be a man of settled convictions and had an illuminating personality---

**VOITSKI.** Oh, yes. I had an illuminating personality, which illuminated no one. [A pause] I had an illuminating personality! You couldn't say anything more biting. I am forty-seven years old. Until last year I endeavoured, as you do now, to blind my eyes by your pedantry to the truths of life. But now--Oh, if you only knew! If you knew how I lie awake at night, heartsick and angry, to think how stupidly I have wasted my time when I might have been winning from life everything which my old age now forbids.

**SONIA.** Uncle Vanya, how dreary!

**MME. VOITSKAYA.** [To her son] You speak as if your former convictions were somehow to blame, but you yourself, not they, were at fault. You have forgotten that a conviction, in itself, is nothing but a dead letter. You should have done something.

**VOITSKI.** Done something! Not every man is capable of being a writer perpetuum mobile like your Herr Professor.

**MME. VOITSKAYA.** What do you mean by that?

**SONIA.** [Imploringly] Mother! Uncle Vanya! I entreat you!

**VOITSKI.** I am silent. I apologise and am silent. [A pause.]

**HELENA.** What a fine day! Not too hot. [A pause.]

**VOITSKI.** A fine day to hang oneself.

TELEGIN tunes the guitar. MARINA appears near the house, calling the chickens.

**MARINA.** Chick, chick, chick!

**SONIA.** What did the peasants want, nurse?

**MARINA.** The same old thing, the same old nonsense. Chick, chick, chick!

**SONIA.** Why are you calling the chickens?

**MARINA.** The speckled hen has disappeared with her chicks. I am afraid the crows have got her.

TELEGIN plays a polka. All listen in silence. Enter WORKMAN.

**WORKMAN.** Is the doctor here? [To ASTROFF] Excuse me, sir, but I have been sent to fetch you.

**ASTROFF.** Where are you from?

**WORKMAN.** The factory.

**ASTROFF.** [Annoyed] Thank you. There is nothing for it, then, but to go. [Looking around him for his cap] Damn it, this is annoying!

**SONIA.** Yes, it is too bad, really. You must come back to dinner from the factory.

**ASTROFF.** No, I won't be able to do that. It will be too late. Now where, where-- [To the WORKMAN] Look here, my man, get me a glass of vodka, will you? [The WORKMAN goes out] Where--where-- [Finds his cap] One of the characters in Ostroff's plays is a man with a long moustache and short wits, like me. However, let me bid you good-bye, ladies and gentlemen. [To HELENA] I should be really delighted if you would come to see me some day with Miss Sonia. My estate is small, but if you are interested in such things I should like to show you a nursery and seed-bed whose like you will not find within a thousand miles of here. My place is surrounded by government forests. The forester is old and always ailing, so I superintend almost all the work myself.

**HELENA.** I have always heard that you were very fond of the woods. Of course one can do a great deal of good by helping to preserve them, but does not that work interfere with your real calling?

**ASTROFF.** God alone knows what a man's real calling is.

**HELENA.** And do you find it interesting?

**ASTROFF.** Yes, very.

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