The Minister's Wife

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Branislav Nušić

Adapted and translated by

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About the Author

Branislav Nušić (1864–1938) was a Serbian comedy writer, satirist, novelist, essayist and diplomat, one of the most important humorous writers of the Southeast Europe. He was born in Belgrade as Alkibijad Nuša, into an Aromanian merchant family, and later changed his name when he came of age.

In his youth he experienced the loss of the family fortune, which profoundly shaped his understanding of society. He was educated in Smederevo and Belgrade, graduated from the Faculty of Law, served in the Serbo-Bulgarian War, and was even sentenced to a year in prison because of a satirical poem about King Milan.

Nušić worked as a journalist, diplomat and theatre director in Belgrade, Novi Sad, Skopje and Sarajevo. His literary output includes comedies, novels, feuilletons, travelogues and the celebrated Autobiography. He is best known for the comedies The Minister's Wife, The People's Deputy, A Suspect Person, The Mourning Family and The Deceased, in which he exposed, with sharp humor, the bureaucracy, the petty bourgeoisie and the social failings of his time.

Nušić is regarded as a foundational creator of modern Serbian comedy and a pioneer of rhetoric in Serbia. His works remain extremely popular today, frequently staged and translated, as they remain relevant in their critique of authority, human folly and social customs.

Foreword

If you have ever observed more carefully everything that happens around you, if you have ever descended and delved into the relationships that govern the life of a society, and into the movements that this regulator causes — you must surely have noticed that through the life of every society one strong and straight line is clearly drawn. This line has been inscribed by conventions, traditions, despondency, spiritual impotence, and all those other negative human qualities under which individuals suffocate, while society helplessly surrenders to dullness.

Social mathematicians might call this line normal, and social physicists might call it the initial degree of heat or coldness, for it is indeed similar to that division on a thermometer below which it sinks when cooling.

Along this straight line moves the life of almost our entire society. Above this line rise only those individuals who have the mental powers and courage to raise themselves above conventions, above traditions, and above despondency. Above this line rise only those individuals who do not wait for the living mercury in the social thermometer to be warmed by external temperature, but find this warming themselves within, in their own mental powers. And below this line descend only those individuals who likewise have the mental powers to trample upon conventions and traditions and to shake off despondency. And those who in society descend below the line of normal, all the way to the social bottom, carry within themselves the dispositions for the cooling of the

soul and the cooling of feelings all the way to the point of freezing.

For someone to rise or descend above or below the line of normal in life, for someone to elevate himself above the crowd or descend below the crowd, one must be equally courageous. It is courage to be honest, noble, exalted, just as it is courage to be base and bad. One must have great moral strength within oneself to rise above the normal line, to be above others, above the crowd; just as one needs very great mental strength to descend below the line, to be below others, below the crowd: to be a criminal, a burglar, a slanderer, a robber, and a murderer. It is equal courage to rise into the air on the unreliable Icarus contraption that our age has perfected, as it is to descend in a diver's suit into the mud of the sea floor.

These people who rise above the straight line of life or descend below it also have great surges, great movements of the soul, great excitements and great emotions. A statesman stands trembling before the court of history because he has led the state and the nation down a fateful path; a great financier stands before the stock exchange with feverish excitement, where at this very moment his million-strong fortune will triple or collapse; every vein in a military commander plays with excitement when he leads armies into a fateful battle; a poet is stirred by inspiration, an artist by the moment of creation, a scientist by that unknown to which one must arrive through discovery. All these are great excitements, great emotions, great movements of the soul.

But such and similar great excitements, great emotions, great movements of the soul also exist in those who descend below the normal line. A robber experiences the greatest measure of excitement when he plunges a bloody knife into the breast of his victim; a burglar trembles and fears before the judge; a prostitute suffers under the brand of contempt, while a renegade beneath the gallows experiences the entire scale from pain and remorse to self-renunciation and apathy.

Into these regions, into the regions of great excitements, great emotions, great movements of the soul — whether above or below the line — the playwright gladly ventures, for there he will always find deep springs from which he can draw rich and abundant material! That is why the greatest number of dramas move within this region.

Much harder, however, is it to seek and find material in a small environment, in that society, among those people who have neither the power nor the courage to separate themselves from the straight line of life, whether upward or downward; among those people who have no power to be good, but likewise have no courage to be among those people who are bound and fettered by petty conventions, who are slaves of outdated traditions, and whose entire being is composed of despondency. The life of this environment flows monotonously and measuredly like a pendulum on a wall clock; the movements of this environment are small, quiet, without excitement, without great furrows, without stronger traces, like those gentle ripples that circle across standing water when a bird's feather falls on its surface.

In this small environment there are no storms, no tempests, no earthquakes nor fires; this environment is fenced by a thick wall against the storms and whirlwinds that rage through society. It lives in its own rooms, the street is for it a foreign world, abroad, for it events that stir continents are merely journalistic reading material.

In these small environments, which do not separate themselves from that straight line of life, there are no events, no emotions, no sensations. "Today is Aunt Savka's name day!" — behold, that is an event for this environment, and everyone becomes agitated, everyone moves, everyone dresses up, buys bouquets, writes congratulation cards, pays visits... an event, a real event! "Mila has left her husband, Uncle Steva's daughter!" — "Tsk, tsk, tsk — the whole family beats its breast — what will the world say!" And behold, that is an emotion that stirs an entire family, but the excitement is not so much caused by the fact that Mila left her husband as by that "what will the world say." And do you know what a sensation is in such small environments? "Daughter-in-law Zorka has given birth to twins!" And this sensation goes from house to house, it is spoken of only, it is discussed, explained, and this topic fills the interest of an entire family and an entire environment.

Pera got a grade, Đoka fell ill, Steva passed his exams, Jova was transferred, Mrs. Mica bought a new bedroom set, Mrs. Savka cut her hair, Mrs. Julka is having a new dress made of crepe de chine, Aunt Maci's bundt cake burned, and Aunt Anka spent one hundred and seventy dinars on a fresh-firšt. Behold, these are the sensations, these are the emotions, these are the events of a small environment.

And behold, from this and such an environment I took for amusement one good wife and good housekeeper — Mrs. Živka Popović — and swiftly, unexpectedly and suddenly carried her above her normal line of life. Such a disturbance on the scales of life is capable of causing people from a small environment to lose their balance and to no longer know how to stay on their feet. And behold, in this lies the content of The Minister's Wife, in this the entire simplicity of the problem that this play contains.

Nušić

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Characters

Sima Popović, the Minister.

Živka, his wife.

Dara, daughter.

Raka, little son.

Čeda Urošević, son-in-law.

Dr. Ninković, Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Uncle Vasa.

Aunt Savka.

Aunt Daca.

Jova pop-Arsin , son of Father Arsa.

Živka's relatives: Uncle Panta, Mile, his son, Soja, a divorcée, Uncle Jakov, Sava Mišić.

Mrs. Nata Stefanović, English teacher.

Police clerk.

Anka, maid.

Printing apprentice Rista Todorović.

Pera the tanner.

Kalenić Pera, clerk in the administrative department.

First gendarme.

Second gendarme.

First servant from the ministry.

Second servant from the ministry.

Girl seamstress.

First citizen.

Second citizen.

The action takes place at the meeting of the 19th and 20th centuries.

A Note on Pronunciation

The names in this play are Serbian, and they are pronounced as they are written, with each letter representing one sound. The following guide covers the letters that may be unfamiliar to English-speaking readers:

č — as ch in church

ć — a softer ch, close to *t* + *y*

š — as sh in ship

ž — as *s* in measure

đ — as *j* in jump

c — as ts in cats

j — as *y* in yes

The main characters' names may be pronounced as follows:

Name	**Pronunciation**
Živka	ZHEEV-kah
Sima	SEE-mah
Dara	DAH-rah
Raka	RAH-kah
Čeda	CHEH-dah
Vasa	VAH-sah

Savka	SAHV-kah
Daca	DAH-tsah
Nata	NAH-tah
Soja	SOY-yah
Rista	REES-tah
Ninković	NEEN-koh-veech
Popović	POH-poh-veech
Kalenić	KAH-leh-neech
Todorović	toh-DOH-roh-veech
Urošević	oo-ROH-sheh-veech

Stress generally falls on the first syllable in Serbian names, though there are exceptions; the guide above follows common usage.

Act One

A modest middle-class room.

An old three-seater sofa, two armchairs and a few simple dining chairs. Three doors: at the back, on the right and on the left, and one window on the right. In the middle of the room a large table covered with a tablecloth, on it the father's old trousers spread out, which Mrs. Živka will cut down for her son.

I

Characters: Živka, Savka

SAVKA (*sitting by the table*): What are you thinking about?

ŽIVKA (*standing behind the table, a tailor's tape measure hanging around her neck, and large*

scissors in her hand. She has rested the scissors on her lips and is lost in thought, looking at the trousers): I'm trying to see how to get around this worn spot.

SAVKA: You can't get around it, just patch a piece underneath.

ŽIVKA: Done, and even so they'll barely last him a week.

SAVKA: So he's growing, is he? Well, you know how it is, as long as he's alive and healthy, let him grow.

ŽIVKA: Oh, it's not that he's growing, auntie, but he tears through them like a wolf through a lamb.

SAVKA: Naughty, very naughty!

ŽIVKA (*meanwhile measuring and cutting*): There's just no keeping up with him, good God! We're not exactly rolling in it, for heaven's sake, we barely make ends meet.

SAVKA: But a nice salary.

ŽIVKA: Not even that. When you deduct the tax, pay the rent, buy firewood, you see that you're left with empty hands. It's hard to live on a salary these days, but my husband doesn't know how. He doesn't look after his own affairs and his own house, but has thrown himself into politics.

SAVKA: Really!

ŽIVKA: Well, others are involved too, and what they say, they struggle with politics, but somehow they look after themselves as well. These commissions, these evaluations, these sessions, and somehow they help themselves. But my husband doesn't know how. This won't do, it will harm the party's reputation, that won't do, the opposition will cry out. And so on. And the girl, look, we haven't paid her for three months, and we haven't paid last month's rent, let alone the small debts: the milk, the grocer and... you know!

SAVKA: It's hard, by God, these days...

ŽIVKA: Haven't you got your coffee yet? Oh, how rude this is, you have to tell her three times. (*exits*

through the back door) Anka, what's with the coffee?

ANKA'S VOICE (*from outside*): Coming!

ŽIVKA: There, and that's what's called the younger generation. At least let it be done properly, when you're paying for it.

II

Characters: the others, Anka

ANKA (*brings the coffee and serves it*): Here you are!

ŽIVKA: I have to ask three times for one coffee.

ANKA (*rudely*): Well, I wasn't sitting on the sofa, I had work to do. (*exits*)

III

Characters: Živka, Savka

ŽIVKA (*after Anka has left*): There, look at her! I feel like, by God, grabbing these scissors and smashing her head. But what can I do, I have to put up with it. I owe her three months' wages, so I have to put up with it.

SAVKA (*sipping coffee*): Eh, that's today's youth for you.

ŽIVKA: And that's exactly why I called you, Aunt Savka, to ask you to lend us two hundred dinars.

SAVKA (*startled*): Oh, dear child, where would I get it?

ŽIVKA: Well, what you have in your savings book.

SAVKA: Eh, that... don't even count on that, where would I take from it! I barely scraped it together to have as a reserve, God forbid!..

ŽIVKA: Good God, Aunt Savka, you'd think we weren't going to pay you back. We'll pay you

honestly and with interest, in three months you'll have your money. Listen, may I not be Živka if I don't force him to sneak into some commission. What's the party to me! Đoka, Draga's husband, built a house with the party, and my husband is tearing down his house.

SAVKA: Are you sure?

ŽIVKA: Of what?

SAVKA: Well, that he'll join a commission?

ŽIVKA: You doubt that we'll pay you back?

SAVKA: It's not that, but you know, I don't like touching that money, and I'm saying, if he doesn't join a commission...

ŽIVKA: Well, it doesn't have to be exactly a commission, it can be otherwise too. If there's absolutely no other way, then know that we'll borrow at least somewhere else and pay you back. Yours won't escape you.

SAVKA: If it's only for three months...

ŽIVKA: Not a single day more!..