

A Defenseless Creature

by Neil Simon



BASED ON A STORY BY

Anton Chekhov



The Leader (1840–1862), Honoré Daumier. Bronze, 6¼" × 2½" × 3¼". Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, gift of Joseph H. Hirshhorn, 1966. Photograph by Lee Stalsworth.

The lights come up on the office of a bank official, Kistunov. He enters on a crutch; his right foot is heavily encased in bandages, swelling it to three times its normal size. He suffers from the gout¹ and is very careful of any mishap which would only intensify his pain. He makes it to his desk and sits. An Assistant, rather harried, enters.



Assistant. (*With volume*) Good morning, Mr. Kistunov!

Kistunov. Shhh! Please. . . . Please lower your voice.

Assistant. (*Whispers*) I'm sorry, sir.

Kistunov. It's just that my gout is acting up again and my nerves are like little firecrackers. The least little friction can set them off.

1. **gout:** a condition that causes painful swelling of the joints, especially of the feet and hands.



The Representative Knitting His Stockings (1840–1862), Honoré Daumier. Bronze, 7" × 2¼" × 2½". Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, gift of Joseph H. Hirshhorn, 1966. Photograph by Lee Stalsworth.

Assistant. It must be very painful, sir.

Kistunov. Combing my hair this morning was agony.

Assistant. Mr. Kistunov. . . .

Kistunov. What is it, Pochatkin?

Assistant. There's a woman who insists on seeing you. We can't make head or tail out of her story, but she insists on seeing the directing manager. Perhaps if you're not well—

Kistunov. No, no. The business of the bank comes before my minor physical ailments. Show her in, please . . . quietly. (*The Assistant tiptoes out. A Woman enters. She is in her late forties, poorly dressed. She is of the working class. She crosses to the desk, a forlorn look on her face. She twists her bag nervously*) Good morning, madame. Forgive me for not standing, but I am somewhat incapacitated. Please sit down.

Woman. Thank you.

(*She sits*)

Kistunov. Now, what can I do for you?

Woman. You can help me, sir. I pray to God you can help. No one else in this world seems to care. . . .

(*And she begins to cry, which in turn becomes a wail—the kind of wail that melts the spine of*

strong men. Kistunov winces and grits teeth in pain as he grips the arms of his

Kistunov. Calm yourself, madame. I'll help you. Please calm yourself.

Woman. I'm sorry.

(*She tries to calm down.*)

Kistunov. I'm sure we can sort it all out. Let's approach the problem sensibly and quietly. . . . Now, what exactly is the trouble?

Woman. Well, sir. . . . It's my husband, Collegiate Assessor Schukin. He's been ill for five months. . . . Five agonizing

Kistunov. I know the horrors of illness. I can sympathize with you, madame. Tell me the nature of his illness?

Woman. It's a nervous disorder. Every day it grates on his nerves. If you so much touch him he'll scream out—

(*And without warning, she screams a bloodcurdling scream that sends Kistunov almost out of his seat.*)

How or why he got it, nobody knows.

Kistunov. (*Trying to regain his composure*) I have an inkling. . . . Please go on, but be less descriptively, if possible.

Woman. Well, while the poor man was in bed—

WORDS TO KNOW **incapacitated** (in'kə-pās'ī-tā'tīd) *adj.* deprived of the ability to engage in normal activities; disabled
composure (kəm-pō'zhər) *n.* an undisturbed state of mind; calmness

Kistunov. (*Braces himself*)

You're not going to scream again, are you?

Woman. Not that I don't have cause. . . . While he was lying in bed these five months, recuperating, he was dismissed from his job—for no reason at all.

Kistunov. That's a pity, certainly, but I don't quite see the connection with our bank, madame.

Woman. You don't know how I suffered during his illness. I nursed him from morning till night. Doctored him from night till morning. Besides cleaning my house, taking care of my children, feeding our dog, our cat, our goat, my sister's bird, who was sick. . . .

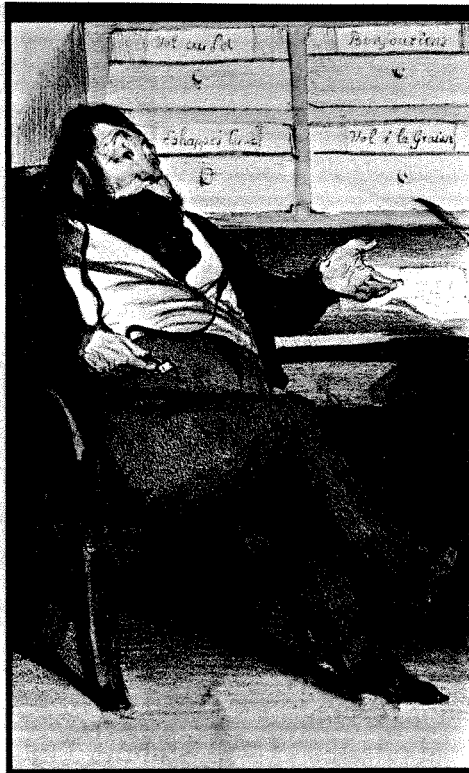
Kistunov. The bird was sick?

Woman. My *sister!* She gets dizzy spells. She's been dizzy a month now. And she's getting dizzier every day. . . .

Kistunov. Extraordinary. However—

Woman. I had to take care of *her* children and *her* house and *her* cat and *her* goat, and then her bird bit one of my children, and so our cat bit her bird, so my oldest daughter, the one with the broken arm, drowned my sister's cat, and now my sister wants my goat in exchange, or else she says she'll either drown my cat or break my oldest daughter's other arm—

Kistunov. Yes, well, you've certainly had your pack of troubles, haven't you? But I don't quite see—



Lithograph with hand coloring (detail), Honoré Daumier. Courtesy of the Boston Public Library, Print Department.

Woman. And then, when I went to get my husband's pay, they deducted twenty-four rubles² and thirty-six kopecks.³ For what? I asked. Because, they said, he borrowed it from the employees' fund. But that's impossible. He could never borrow without my approval. I'd break his arm. . . . Not while he was sick, of course. . . . I don't have the strength. I'm not well myself, sir. I have this racking cough that's a terrible thing to hear—

(*She coughs rackingly⁴—so rackingly that Kistunov is about to crack.*)

Kistunov. I can well understand why your husband took five months to recuperate. . . . But what is it you want from me, madame?

Woman. What rightfully belongs to my husband—his twenty-four rubles and thirty-six kopecks. They won't give it to me because I'm a woman, weak and defenseless. Some of them have laughed in my face, sir. . . . *Laughed!* (*She laughs loud and painfully.* Kistunov *clenches everything.*) Where's the humor, I wonder, in a poor, defenseless creature like myself?

(*She sobs.*)

Kistunov. None. . . . I see none at all. However, madame, I don't wish to be

2. rubles (rōō'bəl): units of Russian money.

3. kopecks (kō'pĕk): hundredths of a ruble.

4. rackingly: with heaves of painful effort.

WORDS
TO KNOW
clench (klĕnch) *v.* to hold or grip tightly

unkind, but I'm afraid you've come to the wrong place. Your petition, no matter how justified, has nothing to do with us. You'll have to go to the agency where your husband was employed.

Woman. *What do you mean? I've been to five agencies already and none of them will even listen to my petition. I'm about to lose my mind. The hair is coming out of my head. (She pulls out a handful.)* Look at my hair. By the fistful. *(She throws a fistful on his desk.)* Don't tell me to go to another agency!

Kistunov. *(Delicately and disgustedly, he picks up her fistful of hair and hands it back to her. She sticks it back in her hair.)* Please, madame, keep your hair in its proper place. Now listen to me carefully. This-is-a-bank. A bank! We're in the banking business. We bank money. Funds that are brought here are banked by us. Do you understand what I'm saying?

Woman. What are you saying?

Kistunov. I'm saying that I can't help you.

Woman. Are you saying you can't help me?

Kistunov. *(Sighs deeply)* I'm trying. I don't think I'm making headway.

Woman. Are you saying you won't believe my husband is sick? Here! Here is a doctor's certificate. *(She puts it on the desk and pounds it.)* There's the proof. Do you still



Lithograph (detail), Honoré Daumier. Snark/Art Resource, NY.

doubt that my husband is suffering from a nervous disorder?

Kistunov. Not only do I not doubt it, I would *swear* to it.

Woman. *Look at it!* You didn't look at it!

Kistunov. It's really not necessary. I know *full well* how your husband must be suffering.

Woman. *What's the point in a doctor's certificate you don't look at it?!* LOOK AT IT!

Kistunov. *(Frightened, quickly looks at it)* Oh, yes. . . . I see your husband is sick. It's right here on the doctor's

certificate. Well, you certainly have a good case, madame, but I'm afraid *you've still come to the wrong place.* *(Getting perplexed)* I'm getting excited.

Woman. *(Stares at him)* You lied to me. I took you as a man of your word and you lied to me.

Kistunov. I? LIE? WHEN?

Woman. *(Snatches the certificate)* When you said you read the doctor's certificate. You couldn't have. You couldn't have read the description of my husband's illness without seeing he was fired unjustly. *(She puts the certificate back on the desk.)* Don't take advantage of me just because I'm a weak, defenseless woman. Do me the simple courtesy of reading the doctor's certificate. That's all I ask. Read it, and then I'll go.

WORDS
TO
KNOW

petition (pe-tī'sh'ən) *n.* a formal request

Kistunov. But I *read* it! What's the point in reading something twice when I've already *read it once*?

Woman. You didn't read it carefully.

Kistunov. I read it *in detail*!

Woman. Then you read it too fast. Read it slower.

Kistunov. *I don't have to read it slower. I'm a fast reader.*

Woman. Maybe you didn't absorb it. Let it sink in this time.

Kistunov. (*Almost apoplectic*⁵) I *absorbed* it! It *sank* in! I could pass a *test* on what's written here, *but it doesn't make any difference because it has nothing to do with our bank!*

Woman. (*She throws herself on him from behind.*) Did you read the part where it says he has a nervous disorder? Read that part again and see if I'm wrong.

Kistunov. THAT PART? OH, YES! I SEE YOUR HUSBAND HAS A NERVOUS DISORDER. MY, MY, HOW TERRIBLE! ONLY I CAN'T HELP YOU! NOW PLEASE GO!

He falls back into his chair, exhausted.

Woman. (*Crosses to where his foot is resting*) I'm sorry, Excellency. I hope I haven't caused you any pain.

Kistunov. (*Trying to stop her*) Please, don't kiss my foot. (*He is too late—she has given his foot a most ardent embrace. He screams in pain.*) Agggghh! Can't you get this into your balding head? If you would just realize that to come to us with this kind of claim is as strange as your trying to get a haircut in a butcher shop.

Woman. You can't get a haircut in a butcher shop. Why would anyone go to a butcher

shop for a haircut? Are you laughing at me?

Kistunov. *Laughing!* I'm lucky I'm breathing. . . . Pochatkin!

Woman. Did I tell you I'm fasting? I haven't eaten in three days. I want to eat, but nothing stays down. I had the same cup of coffee three times today.

Kistunov. (*With his last burst of energy, screams*) POCHATKIN!

Woman. I'm skin and bones. I faint at the least provocation Watch. (*She swoons*⁶ to the floor) Did you see? You saw how I just fainted? Eight times a day that happens.

(The Assistant finally rushes in)

Assistant. What is it, Mr. Kistunov? What's wrong?

Kistunov. (*Screams*) GET HER OUT OF HERE! Who let her in my office?

Assistant. You did, sir. I asked you and you said, "Show her in."

Kistunov. I thought you meant a human being, not a lunatic with a doctor's certificate.

Woman. (*To Pochatkin*) He wouldn't even read it. I gave it to him, he threw it back in my face. . . . You look like a kind person. Have pity on me. *You* read it and see if my husband is sick or not.

(She forces the certificate on Pochatkin.)

Assistant. I read it, madame. Twice!

Kistunov. Me too. I had to read it twice too.

Assistant. You just showed it to me outside. You showed it to *everyone*. We *all* read it. Even the doorman.

5. **apoplectic** (ăp'ə-plĕk'tĭk): bursting with anger.

6. **swoons**: falls in a faint.

WORDS
TO
KNOW

provocation (prŏv'ə-kā'shən) *n.* something that produces an emotional or physical reaction



Lithograph with hand coloring, Honoré Daumier. Courtesy of the Boston Public Library, Print Department.

Woman. You just looked at it. You didn't read it.

Kistunov. Don't argue. Read it, Pochatkin. For God's sake, read it so we can get her out of here.

Assistant. (*Quickly scans it*) Oh, yes. It says your husband is sick. (*He looks up; gives it back to her.*) Now will you please leave, madame, or I will have to get someone to remove you.

Kistunov. Yes! Yes! Good! Remove her! Get the doorman and two of the guards. Be careful, she's strong as an ox.

Woman. (*To Kistunov*) If you touch me, I'll scream so loud they'll hear it all over the city. You'll lose all your depositors. No one will come to a bank where they beat weak, defenseless women. . . . I think I'm going to faint again. . . .

Kistunov. (*Rising*) WEAK? DEFENSELESS?

You are as defenseless as a charging rhinoceros! You are as weak as the King of the Jungle! You are a plague, madame! A plague that wipes out all that crosses your path! You are a raging river that washes out bridges and stately homes! You are a wind that blows villages over mountains! It is women like you who drive men like me to the condition of husbands like yours!

Woman. Are you saying you're not going to help me?

Kistunov. Hit her, Pochatkin! Strike her! I give you permission to knock her down. Beat some sense into her!

Woman. (*To Pochatkin*) You hear? You hear how I'm abused? He would have you hit an orphaned mother. Did you hear me cough? Listen to this cough.

(*She "racks" up another coughing spell.*)

Assistant. Madame, if we can discuss this in my office—

(*He takes her arm.*)

Woman. Get your hands off me. . . . Help! Help! I'm being beaten! Oh, merciful God, they're beating me!

Assistant. I am not beating you. I am just holding your arm.

Kistunov. Beat her, you fool. Kick her while you've got the chance. We'll never get her out of here. Knock her senseless!

(*He tries to kick her, misses and falls to the floor.*)

Woman. (*Pointing an evil finger at Kistunov, she jumps on the desk and punctuates each sentence by stepping on his desk bell.*) A curse! A curse on your bank! I put on a curse on you and your depositors! May the

money in your vaults turn to potatoes! May the gold in your cellars turn to onions! May your rubles turn to radishes, and your kopecks to pickles. . . .

Kistunov. STOP! Stop it, I beg of you! . . . Pochatkin, give her the money. Give her what she wants. Give her anything—only get her out of here!

Woman. (*To Pochatkin*) Twenty-four rubles and thirty-six kopecks. . . . Not a penny more. That's all that's due me and that's all I want.

Assistant. Come with me, I'll get you your money.

Woman. And another ruble to get me home. I'd walk but I have very weak ankles.

Kistunov. Give her enough for a taxi, anything, only get her out.

Woman. God bless you, sir. You're a kind man. I remove the curse. (*With a gesture*) Curse be gone! Onions to money, potatoes to gold—

Kistunov. (*Pulls on his hair*) REMOVE HERRRR! Oh, God, my hair is falling out! (*He pulls some hair out.*)

Woman. Oh, there's one other thing, sir. I'll need a letter of recommendation so my husband can get another job. Don't bother yourself about it today. I'll be back in the morning. God, bless you, sir. . . .

(*She leaves.*)

Kistunov. She's coming back. . . . She's coming back. . . . (*He slowly begins to go mad and takes his cane and begins to beat his bandaged leg*) She's coming back. . . . She's coming back. . . .

(*Dim-out*)

THINKING *through* the LITERATURE

Connect to the Literature

1. What Do You Think?

What were your feelings about the characters at the end of the play? Explain.

Comprehension Check

- What is the matter with Kistunov's foot?
- What does Mrs. Schukin do when she jumps up on Kistunov's desk?
- What does Mrs. Schukin ask for as she leaves?

Think Critically

2. How do you think Kistunov first perceives Mrs. Schukin? How do you think he plans on controlling her?
3. Do you think that the banker should have responded differently in any way to Mrs. Schukin? Explain.
4. By the end of the play, who turns out to be powerful and who is the defenseless creature?

Think About:

- ASSISTANT: "Come with me, I'll get your money."
- KISTUNOV: "You are as defenseless as a charging rhinoceros!"
- WOMAN: "I'll be back in the morning."

5. ACTIVE READING VISUALIZING

Get together with a small group of classmates and compare the notes you took in your

READER'S NOTEBOOK.

Did the members of your group visualize characters and events similarly? Discuss, using examples of dialogue to support your interpretations.

Twists in the Plot

Mrs. Schukin pulls out a fistful of hair.

Lines of Dialogue

After Mrs. Schukin screams and Kistunov says: "You're not going to scream again, are you?"

Absurd Situations

Mrs. Schukin's relationship with her sister.

Literary Analysis

FARCE A **farce** is a comedy that exaggerates plot, dialogue, and situation to amuse an audience. For example, the situation of *A Defenseless Creature* centers on Mrs. Schukin's efforts to force Kistunov to pay her money he doesn't owe her. Within that situation, what kind of wild twist and turns do the plot and dialogue take?

Paired Activity What elements of *A Defenseless Creature* fit the characteristics of a farce? Working with a partner, look over the script of *A Defenseless Creature* and jot down aspects of the play that seem exaggerated to really make you laugh.

Extend Interpretations

6. **Critic's Corner** One critic writes, "The pain the woman inflicts on Kistunov might be funny if Kistunov were presented as a figure deserving discomfort." What is your opinion? Does Kistunov "deserve" the treatment the woman gives him? Explain your answer.

REVIEW: MOOD **Mood** is the feeling, or atmosphere, that a writer creates for the reader. Word choice, dialogue, description, and plot complications are some of the techniques writers use to convey mood. How would you characterize the mood of *A Defenseless Creature*?