

HANS KRÁSA

(1899–1944)

Betrothal in a Dream

(Verlobung im Traum)

Opera in two acts

Prologue

Archivist of the small town Mordasov narrates that he was visited by a writer called Fyodor Dostoevsky who wanted to know a story of a girl called Zina.

Act One

Barbara sends regards to Zina and gives her a bunch of flowers from Zina's lover, a sick teacher Fedya. Zina recollects the big plans he used to have and the moments she has spent with him. There are guests at the house of her mother Maria Alexandrovna—a young diplomat Paul and his relative Prince whose carriage broke down, for which they are forced to stay overnight. Maria Alexandrovna teases her sister-in-law Nastasya and warns her not to spoil her plans; she finds Prince's visit a great opportunity to have a rich groom for her daughter. But Nastasya would like to win him herself. Maria Alexandrovna describes all the benefits that proceed from Prince's marriage with her daughter—the young lady would care for him and would be his support. Prince does not find it suspicious at all and tells his personal (and a bit unbelievable) stories he has been through during his life. Afterwards, he needs to visit a governor and leaves Maria Alexandrovna. When the Prince is absent, Maria Alexandrovna tries to convince her daughter Zina of the benefits of the marriage by subtle trick—Prince is rich, his money can help Fedya to get treatment, and because he is also old, Zina can be a wealthy heiress very soon. After lunch, Maria Alexandrovna further elaborates on her plan. She speaks well about her daughter's qualities and wants Zina to entertain Prince by singing. Zina sings Norma's aria from Bellini's opera, but nobody listens to her and continues to have fun. Nonetheless, Prince is captivated by her and wants to have the family treasure brought in and given to Zina immediately. Then he needs to get some sleep. Paul, trying to win Zina, convince Zina to be with him, but she strictly refuses. Barbara comes again; this time, she has a letter from Fedya in which he begs Zina to visit him before he dies. Paul is the one who takes the letter and promises Barbara to hand it over to Zina. However, he realizes that if he conceals it, it may help him to win Zina's affection after all. Nastasya is upset and thinks out loud about how to win Prince. The neighbours—who curry favour with Maria Alexandrovna on one hand but actually hate her as much as Nastasya does on the other—might help. Preoccupied with their own thoughts, Paul and Nastasya do not pay attention to each other.

Act Two

After an afternoon nap, Prince preens himself in front of a mirror; it is not easy—there are so many parts of his physical appearance that are false. He confides in Paul that he has proposed Zina, but he is not sure whether he has acted recklessly or not. Paul has an idea. He convinces Prince that there was no betrothal, it was just a dream. Prince admits to having strange

dreams—dreams of being in a harem or playing a strange game of billiards. He agrees with Paul's suggestion to leave the house of Maria Alexandrovna the next day. Summoned by Nastasya, Mordasov women pile into the house under the pretext of an invitation to a charity party. Small-town gossips are a central topic of their conversation during the scene. Prince arrives and announces that he leaves to get new thoughts in abroad, setting free all of his serfs. There are so many tricks and lies that are way beyond their initiators. All the women want to know how it is with the betrothal, and Prince—supported by Paul—speaks of a betrothal in a dream. However, Maria Alexandrovna disagrees and claims that the proposal was real. Zina explains everything: her singing for Prince at her mother's request was a trap that was supposed to help Fedya, and she apologizes for it. Prince is generous, he apologizes as well and says goodbye. Maria Alexandrovna is devastated, and the neighbours are having a great time. Paul still hopes that Zina will listen to him after all, but it is all in vain. The news of Fedya's death arrives.

Epilogue

Archivist narrates the end of Zina's story. Together with her mother, they sold all their possessions and moved away from Mordasov to the east, where Zina married a local governor. Her beauty remained unchanged, but her heart turned cold. If it were not for the testimony, no one would believe that she loved Fedya once so dearly.