

THE BARTERED BRIDE

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ACT I: A small southern village in southern Bohemia is preparing to celebrate its spring feast day. The villagers are looking forward to a day of drinking and dancing, though the women complain that it is only the men who have a real rest from work, and there is some matrimonial bickering. They advise the young couple Marenka and Jeník not to rush headlong into marriage but, observing that they are unhappy, urge them to forget whatever is troubling them and join in the drinking and dancing. Marenka has been resisting Jeník's attempts to claim a kiss from her and tells him that she is unhappy because this feast day is the day that the marriage broker (Kecal) arrives to call on the family to remind her parents, Kruina and Ludmila, of the contract that Kruina signed many years ago. He agreed, as a way of giving a bond for debt, that his daughter should marry the son of his creditor, the landowner Tobia Mícha. In any case, her father couldn't consider Jeník as a suitor, as nothing is known of his parents or birthplace. The village has the small community's natural suspicion of strangers. Jeník is goaded by Marenka's doubting his fidelity into explaining that he was driven out of his father's prosperous farm by his stepmother, and that since then he has had to earn his living as an itinerant farmhand, sleeping in the straw loft above the stables. He speaks of the difference between a home and being homeless, and then he and Marenka promise one another that one day they will start a small farm of their own. This moment, as Jeník is about to succeed in kissing Marenka, is interrupted by the arrival of Kecal, the village marriage broker, with Marenka's parents, Kruina and Ludmila. Kecal insists on the letter of the contract and reminds Kruina that he has no choice in the matter and that Marenka must marry the son of Tobia Mícha. Marenka's mother, Ludmila, is reluctant and wants to know more about the boy that her daughter is being forced to marry through her husband's indebtedness. Kecal does his professional best to persuade them of the suitability of Vasek for their daughter, stressing his mild manner and reminding them of his money. Kecal is anxious to have the contract settled and earn his commission. When they confront Marenka, she stubbornly refuses to agree and says that she is already in love. Kecal boasts that he is a master of overcoming all obstacles and stresses that the contract is binding. As the feast day dancing begins to warm up, Kecal suggests that the two families meet to discuss things and assures Marenka's parents that a little cash will soon persuade the boy Marenka says she loves to give her up. The villagers dance a polka.

ACT II: The village inn. The men are well into the day's drinking and toast good beer as a great blessing and consolation in life. Jeník stands up for love as being better than any drink. Kecal, who has come in search of Jeník, argues that cash comes before either. The argument ends in a wild, drunken dance.

Vasek, the son of Tobia Mícha and Háta and the boy who is contracted to marry Marenka, stutters that his mother thinks it is high time he was married. He bumps into Marenka without realizing that she is the girl he is supposed to marry. Marenka tells Vasek how all the village pities him because Marenka is in love with someone else and that if she married him she would probably have him murdered. She also points out that there are many girls crazy about Vasek and that there is one girl desperately in love with him. She both coaxes and frightens Vasek into swearing that he will renounce Marenka as his bride-to-be.

Meanwhile Kecal tries to induce Jeník to renounce Marenka and offers him an alternative bride, one who comes with a dowry that would help Jeník realize his dream of making a new start in life with a small farm of his own. He also offers Jeník money. Finally Jeník agrees to "sell" Marenka

for 300 crowns on condition that the contract plainly says that Marenka will marry no one but the son of Tobia Mícha. Kecal thinks he has succeeded in buying off Jeník. The latter sits among the young men and muses on the true value of love, a value beyond all thought of money. Kecal summons the village to witness the contract and tells them and Marenka's parents that he has bought Jeník off for 300 crowns. They are shocked at Jeník's mercenary callousness, and their old suspicion of the homeless stranger returns. In their indignation they drive Jeník out of the village.

ACT III: Vasek, alone, worries about being murdered and marvels at how dangerous courting girls has turned out to be. He is soon distracted by the arrival of the traveling circus. The Circus Barker drums up trade by announcing the wonderful attractions he has to offer the village on its feast day, and the troupe, to draw a crowd, perform some of their tricks and dances. Esmeralda, the gypsy tightrope walker and dancer, flirts with the susceptible Vasek. Then the "Red Indian" enters breathlessly to tell the Circus Barker that Franta, who is the man who fits into the bearskin, is too drunk to stand, let alone to perform the "Bear Dance." They notice Vasek, who happens to be the right size for the bearskin, talking to Esmeralda and tell her to use her seductive charms as bait to induce Vasek to play the bear, to which, after much inducement, he finally agrees. His mother Háta finds him looking despondent and brooding about his day's strange experience with girls. Háta tells him to be cheerful and remember that today is the day he is to meet Marenka, his future bride. He tells his parents and the marriage broker that he won't marry Marenka because she's planning to have him murdered, but when Marenka arrives, he sees that she is the pretty girl he met earlier in the day and gladly agrees to marry her. Marenka, who has to be shown the contract to be convinced of Jeník's treachery and shameful deal, asks to be left alone to think.

She remembers the dream that is now shattered. Jeník enters, eager to tell her that now he has some money to start the farm, but Marenka simply forces him to admit that he has sold her. Jeník is exasperated by her stubborn refusal to let him explain. Kecal's arrival with cash and contract only adds proof to Jeník's confession and makes Marenka even angrier and more tearful. Jeník even offers to persuade her to marry the son of Tobia Mícha if Kecal will give him more money. He tells Marenka she is going to be happy in her new life and that Mícha's son loves her very much. Kecal wants the matter finally settled and calls in the two families. Jeník hides a while and then reappears. As soon as he does, Mícha recognizes his long-lost elder son, and Háta the stepson she had driven out of the house years ago. Jeník says that as the contract assigns Marenka to the son of Tobia Mícha, she is rightfully his and he has come to claim her and his rightful share of his father's farm and land. Kecal realizes that he, of all people, has been outwitted. The village begins to mock him, but he leaves pouring scorn on them all, and on love. Suddenly there is a commotion. The circus "bear" has escaped. The "bear" turns out to be Vasek. Everyone laughs except his mother, who chases him home. Mícha agrees to give Jeník his rightful share of the farm and land, embraces his son, and blesses both his son and his bride-to-be. The village gathers round to toast the "bartered" bride. The couple kiss and seal their betrothal.