

THE DEVIL AND STEPASHKA

(a Two Act Drama inspired by Tolstoy's short story *The Devil*)

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CHARACTERS

Zhenya	A Russian landowner in his thirties - an intense but sincere man.
Lisa	His wife. A gentle, shy young woman.
Boris	A friend from Zhenya's student days - a worldly man with a cynical approach to life.
Stepashka	A voluptuous peasant woman.
Dasha	Her younger sister.

SET

The majority of the play's action takes place in a prison cell containing minimal furniture. Scenes set outside the cell can be represented with sound and lighting effects.

ACT ONE

Scene One

A prison cell in St Petersburg during the late 1860's. The room is sparsely furnished, containing a bunk bed, a small table and slop bucket. Stage left there is a door with small observation panel. An icon hangs on the wall by the bed. As the lights rise, Zhenya is sitting at the table observing his partially eaten meal.

Zhenya Please do have some more bilberries, Boris. They're fresh from the country.

Boris (shakes his head) Much as I'd love to. My digestion, you know. Not so good these days. Go on, don't mind me. Finish your meal.

Zhenya I've not appetite. Everything tastes like blotting paper here.

Boris It's a bad business, Zhenya. I can't believe you're in here. You, of all people.

Zhenya It still seems like a dream. Perhaps that's why the food tastes of blotting paper.

Boris You of all people, Zhenya. I'd have put money on you.

Zhenya You'd have put money on anything.

Boris Ha! That's true enough. Mind you, I steer well clear of the roulette, these days. My new passion is backgammon.

Zhenya It's good of you to take on the case, Boris. I don't know what I would have done without you.

Boris Hired another lawyer, no doubt. They're ten a penny in Petersburg these days. (sighs) I only wish we could have met up again in happier circumstances.

Zhenya Yes.

Boris If you will bury yourself in the country, old boy.

Zhenya It's a great comfort being able to rely on you, Boris. I can trust you, can't I? I want to tell you everything. Everything.

Boris You haven't changed. I was thinking that yesterday. You haven't changed a bit. Thinner, perhaps. A bit drawn, of course. But basically the same old Evgeni. You always did take life too seriously. (pats him on the back) Don't worry. It'll all be over before you've blinked.

Zhenya I've written that statement for you. (goes to the bed and picks up some papers) I spent most of last night writing it. (hands him the statement)

Boris How many pages are there, for heaven's sake?

Zhenya It brought everything back.

Boris Like a bad Stroganoff, eh?

Zhenya I wish I could remember how to laugh.

Boris Did you ever old boy? A joke, a joke, Zhenya. (glancing through the statement) I won't read it all now. It looks very thorough. (a line catches his eye) I say, this is a bit heavy handed, isn't it?

Zhenya I've hidden nothing.

Boris But your own wife . . . (quotes from notes) Thin legs and pitiful chest. Evgeni, old chap. We can't use this. They'll think we're referring to your horse. (puts the statement down on the table) A jury needs careful handling.

Zhenya (pause) Trial by jury. What's that going to be like?

Boris (rubbing his hands in glee) A lawyer's paradise. What would old Petrovsky say if he were alive today? The impossible has happened. A modern European system of justice, here, in this rusty old nation of ours. It's not one lone man up there any more. It's twelve. You can't bribe twelve people. You've got to win them over. I tell you, Zhenya. I'm champing at the bit.

Zhenya Will I know any of them?

Boris No. They're all from Petersburg, but that's no bad thing. There'll be no peasants, of course. There's a decent property qualification, thank God.

Zhenya Perhaps I should be judged by the peasants.

Boris Oh, don't get maudlin again. You'll be begging for a public flogging next.

Zhenya Would that be so wrong?

Boris The same old Zhenya. Does his dirt then wants his nose rubbed in it.

Zhenya But I'm guilty. You know that.

Boris Guilty, yes. But of what? That is the question. (takes up a flamboyant legal pose) Which of us has not lost his head once in a while? Which of us can put his hand on his heart and swear before almighty God that all his actions have been governed by a totally sane mind? (dramatic pause) I put it to you. None. Not one.

Zhenya Is it really such a game?

Boris Better than backgammon, mon vieux. A crime of passion, a moment of madness. Guilty, but temporarily of unsound mind. With your impeccable credentials, your devotion to family duty. And your remorse, Zhenya. Above all, your remorse. I'll eat my hat if you get more than two years. And even then I'll consider it a personal failure. (eying the bilberries) Oh, what the hell. (takes one)

Zhenya It's very hard on Lisa.

Boris Ah, wives. Wives are a tricky subject.

Zhenya You know she's come down, don't you? All the way from Semyonovka. Even my mother-in-law couldn't stop her.

Boris What character. (pause) Does she really have thin legs? (realising he's made a faux pas)
Not that it matters one iota, of course. I'm sure she's very pretty.

Zhenya She's determined to sit in on the trial.

Boris Court proceedings are public. We can't prevent her.

Zhenya But can't you see how painful it'll be for her? The things I have to say would expose her
to such bitter humiliation. I don't want to make her suffer any more than I already have.
God knows she's been through enough as it is. You have a wife, for heaven's sake, Boris.
Surely you can understand.

Boris My wife is quite impervious to humiliation, no matter how hard I try.

Zhenya Please, be serious. I simply won't stand up in court and publicly insult my wife. I won't
do it, Boris. I simply won't do it.

Boris I wouldn't dream of asking you to. (pause) It's all rather awkward. What wife in her
right mind would turn up in a case like this? It's unheard of. If you like I can have a
little chat with her, explain how you feel . .

Zhenya If you would, I'd be so grateful.

Boris And when will I have the pleasure of meeting your charming spouse?

Zhenya She's coming tomorrow.

Boris Leave it to me, old chap. Wives have a wonderful way of bouncing back. I'm convinced
mine's made of India rubber. But enough. We're here to work. To work, and to win.
(flicks through his note pad) There are still many gaps that need filling.

Zhenya Yes.

Boris So far we've concentrated on the end. Not a very pleasant affair. Rather messy. I'd have
thought you were a better shot than that. Anyway, today I want to concentrate on the
beginning. The root cause of it all. (an expectant pause) Let's go right back to the very
start. Tell me what you remember.

Zhenya (pause) Even with you . . . out loud . . . it's awkward, wretched.

Boris Dear God, man. We were students together. Don't go all coy on me.

Zhenya Sorry.

Boris Come on. Make an effort. For Lisa's sake.

Zhenya I wish I could have spared her this.

Boris Too late for regrets, Zhenya. What we need now is clear thinking.

Zhenya (pause) I suppose it all began when I left Petersburg. I'd graduated with good honours, as you know. I was all set for a promising career in the Ministry, then my father died.

Boris I remember.

Zhenya I was torn between staying in Petersburg or returning home for good. The estate was in a deplorable condition. Mama hadn't the faintest idea how to save money. The best part of our land was mortgaged, and the serfs had the smell of freedom in their nostrils. There was nothing for it. I had to settle back in the country and take over the estate.

Boris A gargantuan sacrifice, old boy, and one which won't be lost on a Petersburg jury. How does anyone survive in the country? All club foot and incest. (scribbling a few notes) Excellent. Devoted son sacrifices promising career to save family home and support widowed mother.

Zhenya It seemed a natural thing to do.

Boris Natural to you, perhaps.

Zhenya My dream was to resurrect the way of life which existed in my grandfather's day - everything on a grand scale, prosperity for everyone, order and contentment. I couldn't let the chance go.

Boris A man of vision. And a mere twenty six at the time.

Zhenya I didn't feel it right to marry until I'd settled our family affairs properly.

Boris Very wise.

Zhenya Of course, I hadn't lived the life of a monk up 'til then, as you well know. I'd had relations with a number of women. But I only indulged when it was absolutely necessary - for my health and freedom of mind.

Boris For medicinal purposes. Like a quick vodka to keep out the cold.

Zhenya Something of that order.

Boris We ploughed a few fields in our time, eh?

Zhenya Perhaps if I'd had less 'medicine' in Petersburg I would have suffered less when I went back to the country. It was like a sexual desert there. I knew no-one. No contact for that sort of thing at all.

Boris And then you met Stepashka Pechnikova.

Zhenya No. Far from it. I avoided our peasants like the plague. Never filthy your own nest; that was my motto. In Petersburg it had all been so anonymous, but in Semyonovka I felt I stuck out like a sore thumb. (pause) I took to watching the peasant women walk by. I'd

stare at the pretty ones. I was getting rather desperate after a few months. I even hid behind bushes one day by the river hoping they might go in for a dip. A man of my position!

Boris It's horrifying what the country can do to one.

Zhenya I was literally suffering from withdrawal symptoms. My health absolutely depended on finding a woman who was clean and who was willing. I wasn't particular so long as she wasn't monstrously ugly or unhealthy, of course. A soldier's wife would have been ideal.

Boris So how did you find her?

Zhenya Daniloff, our bailiff, was extremely obliging. I felt an oaf, as you can imagine. But he seemed to understand what I was after. He said he had just the woman for me.

Boris And he suggested Stepashka.

Zhenya Yes, because her husband worked away in town.

Boris And she was willing?

Zhenya Oh yes. Stepashka was always willing.

Boris What was she like, this Stepashka? What were your first impressions.

Zhenya To be honest, I hardly noticed the first time. (the lights dim over Zhenya as he starts to remember) I went to Daniloff's hut, just as he'd told me. But she wasn't there. I went past the copse. (pause) No-one. Nothing but nature all around me. It was hot. Steamy hot. Then suddenly, out of the silence, I heard a dry branch snap. (he swings round and Stepashka appears stage left, dressed in a white embroidered blouse, red skirt and red kerchief on her head. She exists only in Zhenya's mind)

Stepashka. Standing there, in a thicket beyond the gully. Barefoot, fresh, sturdy. She was woman. She was everything I'd been craving.

Stepashka I've been here such a long time, sir. (as Zhenya moves towards her) Ever such a long time.

Zhenya Stepashka!

Boris Evgeni, old chap? Are you alright?

Zhenya (moving slowly around Stepashka, as if she's a dangerous animal) Her skirt was red. Scarlet. It felt like sacking - rough to the skin. She was warm. She was eager. It was all over before I knew it. I paid her a rouble and she left. (he reaches forward to seize her hand, but she moves swiftly away and exits) I hadn't even looked into her eyes. (pause) She wasn't a whore, that's the strange thing. I gave her money, but it didn't degrade her.

Boris Look, let's not to think of her as she was. For our purposes, she's merely an accumulation of facts.

Zhenya If only it were that easy. (sighs) It's been happening more and more since they brought me here.

Boris What has?

Zhenya I see her. Or maybe I just remember her. I don't know. It's as if she's here. Always fresh, always sturdy, still waiting. Damn it, Boris. How can she still do this to me?

Boris You tell me.

Zhenya She had a wild beauty about her, there's no denying, but that doesn't explain it. She was free. She soared like an eagle - magnificent, afraid of no-one. But even that isn't enough.

Boris Quite a woman, eh?

Zhenya Within a week I'd arranged another meeting. I'd scarcely got to the gully when I saw her. Her hair was loose this time, her arms were bare to the shoulders. A great sense of freedom seemed to glow around her. She could have been floating above the wild grasses of the meadow. Perhaps she was. (pause) I raced through that gully as if my life depended on reaching her. It was full of nettles, but I swear to you, I felt nothing. Just a rush of desire, a maddening heat around my throat and chest. I didn't wait for her to loosen her blouse. I ripped it from her shoulders. She lay there, naked to the waist, smiling. Waiting to be had. (pause) And afterwards. How light and calm I felt. I'd never felt so . . . free. (distraught) She possessed me, I tell you. She possessed me. Heaven knows I was normal enough before. She drove me to it. I had no choice. There was no other way.

Boris (soothingly) I know, I know, Zhenya.

Zhenya I'd have shot myself, only . . . Believe me, I gave it plenty of thought. But to turn my child into an orphan, my wife into a widow, and with no explanation, because no explanation could possibly be given. No, Boris. It would have been cruel. (pause) Yes, perhaps I was a coward, too. (angrily) But is it a crime to safeguard your marriage, your reputation, your very sanity?

Boris If it requires the murder of an innocent party - and when I use the word innocent, I use it strictly in the legal sense - then yes, it is a crime. That's what the law says.

Zhenya I've told Lisa as little as possible.

Boris Very wise. A wife should never know too much. I wish mine knew less.

Zhenya She deserves an explanation, God knows, but I want to spare her any more agony.

Boris So what have you told her?

Zhenya I've vaguely mentioned black mail.

Boris Black mail? Is that a better motive?

Zhenya You should have seen the look on Lisa's face when the police brought me in. As if the world had come to an end. As if it were she who had lost her mind. Total incomprehension. (pause) What can she possibly understand of passion and depravity? She who's so pure, so utterly faithful in body and mind. How can I explain it to her, Boris? How can I find the right words?

Boris It's not going to be easy. I don't envy you. Perhaps black mail isn't such a bad idea. The important thing is to give wives the truth that's most amenable to them - as long as it's credible, of course. "It was a moment of blind panic, something inside me snapped, I only meant to frighten her". She'll clutch at any straw you throw her. (the sound of keys unlocking the door) Visitors?

Zhenya I'm not expecting anyone.

Boris (going to the door) I say, the most delicious creature. . .

Zhenya (a woman enters) Lisa! (she brushes down her skirts nervously) Lisa, I didn't expect . . . that is . . .

Lisa I'm sorry, I should have waited . . . (anxiously turns to go)

Zhenya No, no. Boris – this is my wife, Lisa Petrovna. Lisa . . . may I introduce Boris Nicholaevitch.

Boris (kisses her hand) Enchanté, Madame.

Lisa Pleased to meet you. I've heard many good things about you. You're a very kind man.

Boris At your service.

Zhenya You must sit down. Please. (wipes the chair) It's not exactly Louis Quinze, but . . .

Boris It does have four legs.

Zhenya Yes, yes. Four legs. Ha, ha, very funny. Boris is such a wit, Lisa. (she sits) A brilliant lawyer. Absolutely first class.

Boris He flatters me. (awkward silence) Dear lady, do have a bilberry. They're fresh from the country.

Lisa I know. I ordered them.

Boris Très charmante.

Lisa I hope you're not angry with me, Zhenya, but we arrived a day early.

Zhena No, no of course.

Lisa I couldn't stay a moment longer in that wretched hotel room. It was depressing. And we know no-one in Petersburg. No-one who'd accept my visit, that is.

Boris A most distressing time for you, Madame. (more silence, and Boris prepares to make his get away) I'm sure there are things I need to be getting on with.

Lisa Oh, please don't leave us, Boris Nicholaevitch. I want to be of assistance.

Boris My dear lady, I fail to see how . . .

Lisa My mind is made up. I've been thinking and thinking, and I'm certain I can do something to help save my husband. You've no idea how useless I feel at the moment.

Boris Useless? You're a veritable pillar of strength to him. I only wish more wives were as forgiving.

Lisa No, please, I dislike praise. I don't deserve it.

Boris (to Zhenya) Charmante.

Lisa I don't pretend to have your legal knowledge, Boris Nicholaevitch. I only understand my Zhenya, and I'm certain he could never have done anything I'd be utterly ashamed of. If I were to appear in court . . .

Zhenya Heaven forbid!

Lisa I could win them over. I know it. I'd tell them what a devoted husband he'd always been, how kind he was, what a loving father. I could put my innocence on trial, my modesty, my virtue. How could anyone possibly believe that I'd live with a monster, with a debaucher of women?

Boris (Zhenya desperately shakes his head at Boris) We have two excellent character witnesses already.

Lisa I knew it, I knew it. He doesn't want me here.

Zhenya (groans to himself) God.

Lisa Does his think I couldn't hold my head up in court, when already I've had to face the whole of Semyonovka, our peasants, my own mother. (weeps quietly and searches for her handkerchief) You can imagine what she's been saying. (Boris whisks out his own handkerchief and gallantly gives it to Lisa) Thank you. (she wipes her face delicately) Am I very blotchy?

Boris Not in the least.

Lisa The heat . . . it's such a trial . . . and all this worry.

Boris My dear lady, what can I say to make things better?

Lisa I may appear foolish and weak, but please believe me, I can be strong. I will be strong.

Boris And I believe you.

Lisa I want to know. I want to know why. Why her? He won't tell me, Boris Nicholaevitch.

Boris I believe your husband to be scrupulously honest, Madame.

Lisa How can I help him, if he won't tell me?

Boris (looks towards Zhenya for his cue) One is simply at a loss for words.

Lisa I've a right to know. I'm not a child. How can I be a wife to him, how can I be half his soul . . . (tearful) It makes me so angry. (she wipes her face again) I'm sorry. Please forgive me. I'm behaving abominably. You must think me dreadfully provincial. But it's all too much for me. And it's so hideously hot.

Boris May I get you a glass of water? (he pours out a glass of water, She notices the statement lying on the table and starts to read it)

Zhenya (realising what is happening) Lisa!

Lisa Yes? (he doesn't dare stop her)

Boris (taking evasive action) Just a few notes. You won't make head or tail of them. (again trying to retrieve the papers) Allow me. (she resists)

Zhenya (exhausted) Perhaps she's right.

Boris It's not entirely ethical, you know. Confidentiality and all that.

Zhenya (sinks back exhausted) Let her.

Boris (sighs) Against my advice, then.

Lisa (reading as if in a trance) Her high bosom lifting up the blouse; those black, glistening eyes, and all of this in the same walnut and maple thicket . . . (pause) Walnut and maple thicket? (to Zhenya) Near the river? Near Daniloff's hut?

Zhenya Yes.

Lisa (reading) Her smell - like cinnamon, warm and strong and welcoming. (she looks at Zhenya in disbelief then continues reading) That's not how you spell Pechnikova, Evgeni. It has a 'C'.

Zhenya This is unbearable.

Lisa (she winces at something she reads) Oh.

Zhenya (snatches away the papers) I loathe myself.

Lisa “Thin legs and pitiful chest. . .” (she weeps silently. Zhenya can find no words to comfort her)

Boris (picks up the papers from the floor) I'll be outside if you need me. (exit)

Lisa (after a long silence) Are you managing to sleep properly?

Zhenya They wake me at five.

Lisa Mimi sends her love. (pause) I've never been in prison before.

Zhenya Neither have I.

Lisa Is it always this hot?

Zhenya Stifling. They never open the windows. They're afraid we'll fly away.

Lisa (pause) I'm glad he's gone.

Zhenya People talk about freedom. But what do they mean? We've freed the serfs but they're still tied to the land. Even if I could break down these bars, would I have the strength to walk away? (pause) If only we could go back. Separate ourselves from this nightmare. How happy we were once, Lisa. I can even remember it. Our engagement. You seemed so pretty. I was devilishly nervous until you'd accepted me. Jealous as a cat.

Lisa Oh Zhenya, you didn't need to be. You know I fell in love with you the second I saw you. I dreamed of you day and night, I told you so. Didn't you believe me? I even fainted once out of love for you. No, it's true. I didn't tell you, of course. Mama warned me that men don't like fainting wives, so I kept quiet. But I did faint. Out cold. Oh, Zhenya. We were so happy.

Zhenya How could I ever have thought you sallow or plain?

Lisa (wincing as she remembers the statement) Such things hurt, Evgeni. They hurt.

Zhenya It was the devil's work.

Lisa With a peasant. How could you? With one of our own peasants.

Zhenya I never touched her after our engagement. I swear it, Lisa.

Lisa I don't know if I can believe you, Zhenya. I don't know if I trust you anymore.

Zhenya I swear to you. I swear to you on all that's holy. I struggled. God knows I struggled. She was always there, tempting me. Heavens, what charms she had.

Lisa She didn't even wash properly. None of them do.

Zhenya I desired her, dirty or clean.

Lisa Merciful heaven, am I so plain, so ugly, so . . . pitiful?

Zhenya Please, Lisa. Don't make me more unutterably miserable than I already am.

Lisa She's destroyed everything we built, everything we worked and longed for.

Zhenya No! (takes both her hands in his) No, we won't let her, Lisa. I'll come home. We'll start again. Boris says I might get away with less than two years.

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