

LOVE IN THE MEADOW

A One Act Stage Play
Inspired by Tolstoy's short story 'The Devil'

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MAIN CHARACTERS

Zhenya A Russian landowner in his thirties. He is an intense but sincere man.
Lisa His wife. A gentle, shy young woman.
Boris A friend from Zhenya's student days. A good-living, worldly man with a cynical approach to life.
Stepashka A voluptuous peasant woman.
Dasha Her younger sister.
Assorted cameo roles which can double up with main characters.

SET

There is an open set, with the majority of the play's action taking place in a prison cell containing minimal furniture. Scenes set outside the cell can be represented with sound and lighting effects.

SCENE ONE

As the lights rise, a Russian Orthodox requiem mass is heard, punctuated by the occasional cough and crying baby. The stage is lit to suggest the dim interior of a church. Three Russian peasant women of varying ages stand front of stage. Each holds a candle.

Woman1 Lord, I've never heard a choir so good in all my years and they number a few summers, that's for sure.

Woman 2 It's the mistress what sent for them.

Woman 3 Yes. She's paying for the whole lot.

Woman1 Really?

Woman 3 Two hundred roubles, they say.

Woman1 Two hundred ! Lord, that's a lot of money.

Woman 3 Well, it's only right and proper she gives Stepashka a good send off. Poor girl. Who'd have thought she'd die like that? And barely in her thirtieth year.

Woman 2 They say the master was possessed.

Woman 3 My Mitya saw him being carted off by the police.

Woman 1 Did he?

Woman 3 Gave himself up without a struggle. They handcuffed him all the same.

Woman 1 The master? Handcuffed? Where's their respect?

Woman 3 He's locked up now. Good and proper. Mitya brings him his provisions. Oh, yes. Locked up good and proper.

Woman 2 And all because he dilly dallied with that Stepashka. Who'd have thought, eh?

Woman 1 (to someone standing behind her) Hey, stop that pushing. (pause) Look, look. There goes the Archdeacon. Gold and silver. Nothing but. Ooh, it's a rare treat.

Woman 2 Do you reckon the mistress knows. . . you know . . . ?

Woman 3 About his affair? Who knows? Everyone else does.

Woman 2 Do you reckon he'll go to Siberia?

Woman 3 Hard to say. If it was my Mitya, they'd cart him off to Siberia before you could say cabbage soup. But he's the master, isn't he? That's different.

Woman 1 (weepy) Lord knows she played around, but we've all got our sins. Come on girls. Let's show some respect. (through wails) Lord spare her. Lord have mercy on her. Lord spare her. Lord have mercy on her. (the other women join in)

(the Orthodox choir swells in volume, and the three women walk off stage still carrying their candles. Black out)

SCENE TWO

The choral singing fades down and when the lights rise, they reveal a stark prison cell. It contains a bunk bed, a small table and slop bucket. Zhenya is seated on the only chair. Boris stands and looks out of the barred window. Stage left there is a door with small observation panel.

Boris It's a bad business, Zhenya. A bad business. I still can't believe you're in here. You, of all people. Are they treating you alright?

Zhenya I can't complain.

Boris Good news on the jury front. All of them from Petersburg. Not a peasant among them. Thank God there's a decent property qualification.

Zhenya Perhaps I should be judged by the peasants.

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

Zhenya Would it be so wrong?

Boris Yes it would.

Zhenya But I'm guilty. I shot her.

Boris Guilty, yes. But of what? That is the question. A crime of passion, a moment of madness. Guilty, but temporarily of unsound mind. With your impeccable credentials, your devotion to public duty, your exemplary family life. And your remorse, Zhenya. Above all, your remorse. I'll eat my hat if you get more than two years penitentiary. And even then I'll consider it a personal failure.

Zhenya It's very hard on Lisa. I wish to God I could have spared her this.

Boris Two years, or I'll eat my hat.

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

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

Zhenya She's my wife, Boris. Can't you see how painful it'll be for her? Hearing the things I have to say. Knowing things she should never have to know. She's so pure. So innocent. I can't bear it.

Boris Wives have a wonderful way of bouncing back, old chap. I'm convinced mine's made of india rubber. But enough of that. What, in the name of heaven, made you take up with one of your own peasants in the first place? There are perfectly good women in town.

Zhenya (rises) Why don't you sit down? If there were another chair . . .

Boris No thanks, old chap. A lawyer thinks best on his feet. Besides. (looking out of the window) I'm admiring the view. Fascinating brickwork.

Zhenya I wish I could be more hospitable. Would you like a glass of water?

Boris Good God. You know me better than that. (pats his breast pocket) Vodka or nothing. Now. (gets out his note pad) Do you mind if I take notes? (Zhenya shakes his head and indicates approval) Good. Let's start at the beginning. The root cause of it all. (an expectant pause)

Zhenya I . . . er. . . (sighs) It's not easy, even with you, Boris. Even after all these years . . .

Boris Good God, man. We were students together. You don't need to hide anything from me. I'm a man of the world.

Zhenya I know.

Boris I must have material to work on, Zhenya. We've got to arouse the jury, stir their imaginations. When you've captured a man's imagination you're within a stone's throw of his compassion. And compassion's the name of the game here. Without compassion they'll crack down on you like a ton of bricks. (Zhenya sighs) Come on, now. For Lisa's sake.

Zhenya Yes, yes. For Lisa's sake. (pause) I suppose it all started when I left Petersburg after graduation. The estate was in a deplorable condition. Mamma hadn't the faintest idea how to save money. There was nothing for it. I had to leave Petersburg and settle in the country.

Boris A gargantuan sacrifice, old boy, and one which won't be lost on a Petersburg jury. How does anyone survive in the country without committing murder? Or suicide. (pause) Go on.

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

Boris Very wise.

Zhenya Of course, I hadn't lived the life of a monk up 'til then, as you 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, as it were.

Zhenya Perhaps if I'd had less 'medicine' in Petersburg I would have suffered fewer torments 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.

Zhenya No. Far from it. I avoided our peasants like the plague. In Petersburg it had all been so anonymous, but at Semyonovskoe 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 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 terrifying what the country can do to one.

Zhenya I was suffering withdrawal symptoms, Boris. 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, without asking too many awkward questions. 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 sighs) Cigar? They're wonderful for steadying the nerves.

Zhenya No thank you. (goes slowly over to the window) If I stand right here and crane my neck, I can just see the sky. They can't take that away from me. And if I listen very carefully. If I try really hard. I can just hear the trees rustling down by the square.

(Almost to himself) The trees were rustling then too. It was a hot summer day. I was as nervous as hell. I went straight to Daniloff's meadow, just as he'd told me to. But she wasn't there. Nothing but nature all around me.

(he closes his eyes and is lost in his own thoughts. The lights fade a little and country sounds of birds and rustling leaves are heard in the background)

Phew. It's hot. Steamy hot. Or is it me? Is this sweat nerves? Will she come? What sort of a woman is she? (pause) Still no-one. (more rustling leaves and bird song) Nothing. Nobody. Just sky, sky all around. Oh I need her. Whoever she is. I need her. I need her now. (Zhenya swings round with a look of surprise on his face. Stepashka has appeared and stands at a distance from both men. Boris is not aware of her presence)

Stepashka (she wears a red skirt and white embroidered blouse, and is humming a Russian peasant song) Hello, Sir. (laughs seductively) Don't look so nervous.

Zhenya (Horried) Stepashka ! (Stepashka stands smiling. Zhenya struggles to keep a grip on himself) She was standing there. Barefoot, fresh . . . sturdy like a young heifer. She was a woman. She was what I'd been craving.

Boris Take it easy, Zhenya. Take it easy, old man.

Zhenya (moving slowly around Stepashka, as if she's a dangerous animal) Her skirt was red. 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 ruble and she left. (he reaches forward to touch her, but she exits immediately. The country sounds cease) I hadn't even looked into her eyes.

Boris A rouble's a bit steep for a country tart. (Zhenya is silent) Look, try not to think about her too much. For our purposes, she's simply an accumulation of facts.

Zhenya Why won't she leave me in peace?

Boris Try and relax. I know it's difficult, but you must try.

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 remains silent. Zhenya calms down a little)

 Within a week I'd arranged another meeting. Her hair was loose this time, her arms were bare to the shoulders. A great sense of freedom seemed to hang around her. She could have been floating. (pause) And afterwards. How light and calm I felt. I'd never felt so . . . free.

Boris Have you told your wife any of this?

Zhenya As little as possible.

Boris A wife should never know too much. I wish my wife knew less.

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 disbelief. How can I explain it to her, Boris? How can I find the right words?

 (the lights fade down to black out)

SCENE THREE

The lights rise to reveal Zhenya in the prison cell. Boris and an elegantly dressed young woman are just entering the room. The door is bolted behind them.

Boris (Lisa and Zhenya continue staring wordlessly at each other) If you'd rather I stayed outside . . .

Lisa Zhenya? You've lost weight. Are they feeding you properly?

Zhenya Thank God you've come. (they rush towards each other and embrace) I didn't think . . . I couldn't hope . . . (he takes her hands and places them against his face)

Lisa Mimi is well and blows you a kiss.

Zhenya Does she?

Lisa It's a sad little kiss. But she sends it all the same.

Zhenya Kiss her for me, won't you?

Lisa Yes.

Zhenya Tell her how much I love her.

Lisa (close to tears) Yes.

Zhenya Tell her I love her because she has her mother's beautiful, trusting clear eyes.

Lisa (breaking down) Oh Zhenya, how could you do it ? What made you? Why? (no response) Boris Nicholaevitch, please ! You've no idea how useless I feel.

Boris My dear Lisa Petrovna . . .

Lisa I don't pretend to have your legal knowledge. I only understand my Zhenya, and I know there must be an explanation.

Zhenya Boris, I can't. For her sake, I can't.

Lisa How can I be a wife to him? How can I be half his soul, if he won't share with me?

Zhenya (Zhenya looks beseechingly at Lisa. Her gaze remains firm) Oh Lisa.

Lisa I may appear foolish and weak, but please believe me, Boris Nicholaevitch. I can be strong. And I will be strong. Tell me. Tell me all there is to tell.

Zhenya (after a long pause) Show her the statement.

Boris (taken a back) But Zhenya . . .

Zhenya It was only meant for Boris' use. Read it, if you must.

Lisa Thank you. Thank you for trusting me.

Zhenya Read it, then damn me. (to Boris) Go on. Give it to her. (Boris does so)

(Zhenya moves apart from the others as Lisa begins to read the statement. Boris goes to her side as if expecting her to faint. A spot light plays on Zhenya, who recites the words that Lisa is reading to herself)

We always met at midday in the meadow behind Daniloff's hut. At first monthly, but in time the urge grew stronger and I had to have her, to hold her, to smell her at least once a week. She would stand in the clearing, perhaps chewing a leaf, or stretching her strong, brown arms. I had to see those glistening, black eyes, smiling at me. I had to feel the firmness of her breasts pushing out from under the rough peasant blouse she wore. And her smell . . . like cinnamon, warm and strong and welcoming.

When I married, all that came to an end. Or such was my intention. But when my wife became pregnant I found the old desire returning.

In comparison, my wife seemed pale and unexciting, with her thin legs and pitiful chest . . .

Lisa (to Zhenya) Her thin legs and pitiful chest?

Zhenya (normal lighting) Oh, this is unbearable.

Lisa (to herself) Thin legs . . .

Zhenya Lisa, I never intended . . . she was nothing. Please . . . look at me.

Lisa (still stunned) . . . pitiful chest.

Zhenya Look at me.

Lisa (she does so) With a peasant. How could you? She didn't even wash properly. None of them do.

(Black out)

SCENE FOUR

Boris, in wig and gown, stands front stage resting against a wooden lectern. Zhenya, stands alone on a raised dais. He is handcuffed.

Boris Can you tell the court at which point you first began to experience this feeling of, shall we call it . . . possession?

Zhenya (pause) It happened gradually, I suppose. Wherever I went she seemed to turn up. At first I thought it was sheer coincidence, but then I realised she must be trying to renew our relationship.

Boris And did you want that?

Zhenya No. Definitely not. I was happily married. But something seemed to be driving me to her. Every day I told myself I wouldn't go to the woods where they collect grass for their cows. But every day I went. She'd never seemed so attractive. I felt I was losing all self-control - that I was becoming almost insane.

Boris Insanity is a strong word.

Zhenya I was no longer myself.

Boris You felt possessed by some force stronger than yourself.

Zhenya Yes. That's it exactly. I was like a tinderbox near a pile of brushwood. I only needed to touch her, brush past her even, and I'd have abandoned myself to my fiercest desires.

Boris And did you fight against this devil's temptation? Sorry, m'Lud. This woman's temptation?

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