The Devil's Disciple - Act I

di George Bernard Shaw (1897)

ACT I

At the most wretched hour between a black night and a wintry morning in the year 1777, Mrs. Dudgeon, of New Hampshire, is sitting up in the kitchen and general dwelling room of her farm house on the outskirts of the town of Websterbridge. She is not a prepossessing woman. No woman looks her best after sitting up all night; and Mrs. Dudgeon's face, even at its best, is grimly trenched by the channels into which the barren forms and observances of a dead Puritanism can pen a bitter temper and a fierce pride. She is an elderly matron who has worked hard and got nothing by it except dominion and detestation in her sordid home, and an unquestioned reputation for piety and respectability among her neighbors, to whom drink and debauchery are still so much more tempting than religion and rectitude, that they conceive goodness simply as self-denial. This conception is easily extended to others—denial,and finally generalized as covering anything disagreeable. So Mrs. Dudgeon, being exceedingly disagreeable, is held to be exceedingly good. Short of flat felony, she enjoys complete license except for amiable weaknesses of any sort, and is consequently, without knowing it, the most licentious woman in the parish on the strength of never having broken the seventh commandment or missed a Sunday at the Presbyterian church.

The year 1777 is the one in which the passions roused of the breaking off of the American colonies from England, more by their own weight than their own will, boiled up to shooting point, the shooting being idealized to the English mind as suppression of rebellion and maintenance of British dominion, and to the American as defence of liberty, resistance to tyranny, and selfsacrifice on the altar of the Rights of Man. Into the merits of these idealizations it is not here necessary to inquire: suffice it to say, without prejudice, that they have convinced both Americans and English that the most high minded course for them to pursue is to kill as many of one another as possible, and that military operations to that end are in full swing, morally supported by confident requests from the clergy of both sides for the blessing of God on their arms.

Under such circumstances many other women besides this disagreeable Mrs. Dudgeon find themselves sitting up all night waiting for news. Like her, too, they fall asleep towards morning at the risk of nodding themselves into the kitchen fire. Mrs. Dudgeon sleeps with a shawl over her head, and her feet on a broad fender of iron laths, the step of the domestic altar of the fireplace, with its huge hobs and boiler, and its hinged arm above the smoky mantel-shelf for roasting. The plain kitchen table is opposite the fire, at her elbow, with a candle on it in a tin sconce. Her chair, like all the others in the room, is uncushioned and unpainted; but as it has a round railed back and a seat conventionally moulded to the sitter's curves, it is comparatively a chair of state. The room has three doors, one on the same side as the fireplace, near the corner, leading to the best bedroom; one, at the opposite end of the opposite wall, leading to the scullery and washhouse; and the house door, with its latch, heavy lock, and clumsy wooden bar, in the front wall, between the window in its middle and the corner next the bedroom door. Between the door and the window a rack of pegs suggests to the deductive observer that the men of the house are all away, as there are no hats or coats on them. On the other side of the window the clock hangs on a nail, with its white wooden dial, black iron weights, and brass pendulum. Between the clock and the corner, a big cupboard, locked, stands on a dwarf dresser full of common crockery.

On the side opposite the fireplace, between the door and the corner, a shamelessly ugly black horsehair sofa stands against the wall. An inspection of its stridulous surface shows that Mrs. Dudgeon is not alone. A girl of sixteen or seventeen has fallen asleep on it. She is a wild, timid looking creature with black hair and tanned skin. Her frock, a scanty garment, is rent, weatherstained, berrystained, and by no means scrupulously clean. It hangs on her with a freedom which, taken with her brown legs and bare feet, suggests no great stock of underclothing.

Suddenly there comes a tapping at the door, not loud enough to wake the sleepers. Then knocking, which disturbs Mrs. Dudgeon a little. Finally the latch is tried, whereupon she springs up at once.

MRS. DUDGEON: *threateningly.* Well, why don't you open the door? *She sees that the girl is asleep and immediately raises a clamor of heartfelt vexation.* Well, dear, dear me! Now this is—*shaking her* wake up, wake up: do you hear?

THE GIRL: *sitting up.* What is it?

MRS. DUDGEON: Wake up; and be ashamed of yourself, you unfeeling sinful girl, falling asleep like that, and your father hardly cold in his grave.

THE GIRL: *half asleep still.* I didn't mean to. I dropped off—

MRS. DUDGEON: *cutting her short.* Oh yes, you've plenty of excuses, I daresay. Dropped off! *Fiercely, as the knocking recommences.* Why don't you get up and let your uncle in? after me waiting up all night for him! *She pushes her rudely off the sofa.* There: I'll open the door: much good you are to wait up. Go and mend that fire a bit.

The girl, cowed and wretched, goes to the fire and puts a log on. Mrs. Dudgeon unbars the door and opens it, letting into the stuffy kitchen a little of the freshness and a great deal of the chill of the dawn, also her second son Christy, a fattish, stupid, fair-haired, round-faced man of about 22, muffled in a plaid shawl and grey overcoat. He hurries, shivering, to the fire, leaving Mrs. Dudgeon to shut the door.

CHRISTY: *at the fire.* F—f—f—but it is cold. *Seeing the girl, and staring lumpishly at her.* Why, who are you?

THE GIRL: *shyly.* Essie.

MRS. DUDGEON: Oh you may well ask. *To Essie.* Go to your room, child, and lie down since you haven't feeling enough to keep you awake. Your history isn't fit for your own ears to hear.

ESSIE: I—

MRS. DUDGEON: *peremptorily.* Don't answer me, Miss; but show your obedience by doing what I tell you. *Essie, almost in tears, crosses the room to the door near the sofa.* And don't forget your prayers. *Essie goes out.* She'd have gone to bed last night just as if nothing had happened if I'd let her.

CHRISTY: *phlegmatically.* Well, she can't be expected to feel Uncle Peter's death like one of the family.

MRS. DUDGEON: What are you talking about, child? Isn't she his daughter—the punishment of his wickedness and shame? *She assaults her chair by sitting down.*

CHRISTY: *staring.* Uncle Peter's daughter!

MRS. DUDGEON: Why else should she be here? D'ye think I've not had enough trouble and care put upon me bringing up my own girls, let alone you and your good-for-nothing brother, without having your uncle's bastards—

CHRISTY: *interrupting her with an apprehensive glance at the door by which Essie went out.* Sh! She may hear you.

MRS. DUDGEON: *raising her voice.* Let her hear me. People who fear God don't fear to give the devil's work its right name. *Christy, soullessly indifferent to the strife of Good and Evil, stares at the fire, warming himself.* Well, how long are you going to stare there like a stuck pig? What news have you for me?

CHRISTY: *taking off his hat and shawl and going to the rack to hang them up.* The minister is to break the news to you. He'll be here presently.

MRS. DUDGEON: Break what news?

CHRISTY: *standing on tiptoe, from boyish habit, to hang his hat up, though he is quite tall enough to reach the peg, and speaking with callous placidity, considering the nature of the announcement.* Father's dead too.

MRS. DUDGEON: *stupent.* Your father!

CHRISTY: *sulkily, coming back to the fire and warming himself again, attending much more to the fire than to his mother.* Well, it's not my fault. When we got to Nevinstown we found him ill in bed. He didn't know us at first. The minister sat up with him and sent me away. He died in the night.

MRS. DUDGEON: *bursting into dry angry tears.* Well, I do think this is hard on me—veryhard on me. His brother, that was a disgrace to us all his life, gets hanged on the public gallows as a rebel; and your father, instead of staying at home where his duty was, with his own family, goes after him and dies, leaving everything on my shoulders. After sending this girl to me to take care of, too! *She plucks her shawl vexedly over her ears.* It's sinful, so it is; downright sinful.

CHRISTY: *with a slow, bovine cheerfulness, after a pause.* I think it's going to be a fine morning, after all.

MRS. DUDGEON: *railing at him.* A fine morning! And your father newly dead! Where's your feelings, child?

CHRISTY: *obstinately.* Well, I didn't mean any harm. I suppose a man may make a remark about the weather even if his father's dead.

MRS. DUDGEON: *bitterly.* A nice comfort my children are to me! One son a fool, and the other a lost sinner that's left his home to live with smugglers and gypsies and villains, the scum of the earth!

Someone knocks.

CHRISTY: *without moving.* That's the minister.

MRS. DUDGEON: *sharply.* Well, aren't you going to let Mr. Anderson in?

Christy goes sheepishly to the door. Mrs. Dudgeon buries her face in her hands, as it is her duty as a widow to be overcome with grief. Christy opens the door, and admits the minister, Anthony Anderson, a shrewd, genial, ready Presbyterian divine of about 50, with something of the authority of his profession in his bearing. But it is an altogether secular authority, sweetened by a conciliatory, sensible manner not at all suggestive of a quite thoroughgoing other-worldliness. He is a strong, healthy man, too, with a thick, sanguine neck; and his keen, cheerful mouth cuts into somewhat fleshy corners. No doubt an excellent parson, but still a man capable of making the most of this world, and perhaps a little apologetically conscious of getting on better with it than a sound Presbyterian ought.

ANDERSON: *to Christy, at the door, looking at Mrs. Dudgeon whilst he takes off his cloak.* Have you told her?

CHRISTY: She made me. *He shuts the door; yawns; and loafs across to the sofa where he sits down and presently drops off to sleep.*

Anderson looks compassionately at Mrs. Dudgeon. Then he hangs his cloak and hat on the rack. Mrs. Dudgeon dries her eyes and looks up at him.

ANDERSON: Sister: the Lord has laid his hand very heavily upon you.

MRS. DUDGEON: *with intensely recalcitrant resignation.* It's His will, I suppose; and I must bow to it. But I do think it hard. What call had Timothy to go to Springtown, and remind everybody that he belonged to a man that was being hanged?—and*spitefully* that deserved it, if ever a man did.

ANDERSON: *gently.* They were brothers, Mrs. Dudgeon.

MRS. DUDGEON: Timothy never acknowledged him as his brother after we were married: he had too

much respect for me to insult me with such a brother. Would such a selfish wretch as Peter have come thirty miles to see Timothy hanged, do you think? Not thirty yards, not he. However, I must bear my cross as best I may: least said is soonest mended.

ANDERSON: *very grave, coming down to the fire to stand with his back to it.* Your eldest son was present at the execution, Mrs. Dudgeon.

MRS. DUDGEON: *disagreeably surprised.* Richard?

ANDERSON: *nodding.* Yes.

MRS. DUDGEON: *vindictively.* Let it be a warning to him. He may end that way himself, the wicked, dissolute, godless—[she suddenly stops; her voice fails; and she asks, with evident dread] Did Timothy see him?

ANDERSON: Yes.

MRS. DUDGEON: *holding her breath.* Well?

ANDERSON: He only saw him in the crowd: they did not speak. *Mrs. Dudgeon, greatly relieved, exhales the pent up breath and sits at her ease again.* Your husband was greatly touched and impressed by his brother's awful death. *Mrs. Dudgeon sneers. Anderson breaks off to demand with some indignation* Well, wasn't it only natural, Mrs. Dudgeon? He softened towards his prodigal son in that moment. He sent for him to come to see him.

MRS. DUDGEON: *her alarm renewed.* Sent for Richard!

ANDERSON: Yes; but Richard would not come. He sent his father a message; but I'm sorry to say it was a wicked message—an awful message.

MRS. DUDGEON: What was it?

ANDERSON: That he would stand by his wicked uncle, and stand against his good parents, in this world and the next.

MRS. DUDGEON: *implacably.* He will be punished for it. He will be punished for it—in both worlds.

ANDERSON: That is not in our hands, Mrs. Dudgeon.

MRS. DUDGEON: Did I say it was, Mr. Anderson. We are told that the wicked shall be punished. Why should we do our duty and keep God's law if there is to be no difference made between us and those who follow their own likings and dislikings, and make a jest of us and of their Maker's word?

ANDERSON: Well, Richard's earthly father has been merciful and his heavenly judge is the father of us all.

MRS. DUDGEON: *forgetting herself.* Richard's earthly father was a softheaded—

ANDERSON: *shocked.* Oh!

MRS. DUDGEON: *with a touch of shame.* Well, I am Richard's mother. If I am against him who has any right to be for him? *Trying to conciliate him.* Won't you sit down, Mr. Anderson? I should have asked you before; but I'm so troubled.

ANDERSON: Thank you—*He takes a chair from beside the fireplace, and turns it so that he can sit comfortably at the fire. When he is seated he adds, in the tone of a man who knows that he is opening a difficult subject.* Has Christy told you about the new will?

MRS. DUDGEON: *all her fears returning.* The new will! Did Timothy—? *She breaks off, gasping, unable to complete the question.*

ANDERSON: Yes. In his last hours he changed his mind.

MRS. DUDGEON: *white with intense rage.* And you let him rob me?

ANDERSON: I had no power to prevent him giving what was his to his own son.

MRS. DUDGEON: He had nothing of his own. His money was the money I brought him as my marriage portion. It was for me to deal with my own money and my own son. He dare not have done it if I had been with him; and well he knew it. That was why he stole away like a thief to take advantage of the law to rob me by making a new will behind my back. The more shame on you, Mr. Anderson,—you, a minister of the gospel—to act as his accomplice in such a crime.

ANDERSON: *rising.* I will take no offence at what you say in the first bitterness of your grief.

MRS. DUDGEON: *contemptuously.* Grief!

ANDERSON: Well, of your disappointment, if you can find it in your heart to think that the better word.

MRS. DUDGEON: My heart! My heart! And since when, pray, have you begun to hold up our hearts as trustworthy guides for us?

ANDERSON: *rather guiltily.* I—er—

MRS. DUDGEON: *vehemently.* Don't lie, Mr. Anderson. We are told that the heart of man is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked. My heart belonged, not to Timothy, but to that poor wretched brother of his that has just ended his days with a rope round his neck—aye, to Peter Dudgeon. You know it: old Eli Hawkins, the man to whose pulpit you succeeded, though you are not worthy to loose his shoe latchet, told it you when he gave over our souls into your charge. He warned me and strengthened me against my heart, and made me marry a Godfearing man—as he thought. What else but that discipline has made me the woman I am? And you, you who followed your heart in your marriage, you talk to me of what I find in my heart. Go home to your pretty wife, man; and leave me to my prayers. *She turns from him and leans with her elbows on the table, brooding over her wrongs and taking no further notice of him.*

ANDERSON: *willing enough to escape.* The Lord forbid that I should come between you and the source of all comfort! *He goes to the rack for his coat and hat.*

MRS. DUDGEON: *without looking at him.* The Lord will know what to forbid and what to allow without your help.

ANDERSON: And whom to forgive, I hope—Eli Hawkins and myself, if we have ever set up our preaching against His law. *He fastens his cloak, and is now ready to go.* Just one word—on necessary business, Mrs. Dudgeon. There is the reading of the will to be gone through; and Richard has a right to be present. He is in the town; but he has the grace to say that he does not want to force himself in here.

MRS. DUDGEON: He shall come here. Does he expect us to leave his father's house for his convenience? Let them all come, and come quickly, and go quickly. They shall not make the will an excuse to shirk half their day's work. I shall be ready, never fear.

ANDERSON: *coming back a step or two.* Mrs. Dudgeon: I used to have some little influence with you. When did I lose it?

MRS. DUDGEON: *still without turning to him.* When you married for love. Now you're answered.

ANDERSON: Yes: I am answered. *He goes out, musing.*

MRS. DUDGEON: *to herself, thinking of her husband.* Thief! Thief!! *(She shakes herself angrily out of the chair; throws back the shawl from her head; and sets to work to prepare the room for the reading of the will, beginning by replacing Anderson's chair against the wall, and pushing back her own to the window. Then she calls, in her hard, driving, wrathful way)* Christy. *No answer: he is*

fast asleep. Christy. *She shakes him roughly.* Get up out of that; and be ashamed of yourself—sleeping, and your father dead! *She returns to the table; puts the candle on the mantelshelf; and takes from the table drawer a red table cloth which she spreads.*

CHRISTY: *rising reluctantly.* Well, do you suppose we are never going to sleep until we are out of mourning?

MRS. DUDGEON: I want none of your sulks. Here: help me to set this table. *(They place the table in the middle of the room, with Christy's end towards the fireplace and Mrs. Dudgeon's towards the sofa. Christy drops the table as soon as possible, and goes to the fire, leaving his mother to make the final adjustments of its position.)* We shall have the minister back here with the lawyer and all the family to read the will before you have done toasting yourself. Go and wake that girl; and then light the stove in the shed: you can't have your breakfast here. And mind you wash yourself, and make yourself fit to receive the company. *(She punctuates these orders by going to the cupboard; unlocking it; and producing a decanter of wine, which has no doubt stood there untouched since the last state occasion in the family, and some glasses, which she sets on the table. Also two green ware plates, on one of which she puts a barmbrack with a knife beside it. On the other she shakes some biscuits out of a tin, putting back one or two, and counting the rest.)* Now mind: there are ten biscuits there: let there be ten there when I come back after dressing myself. And keep your fingers off the raisins in that cake. And tell Essie the same. I suppose I can trust you to bring in the case of stuffed birds without breaking the glass? *She replaces the tin in the cupboard, which she locks, pocketing the key carefully.*

CHRISTY: *lingering at the fire.* You'd better put the inkstand instead, for the lawyer.

MRS. DUDGEON: That's no answer to make to me, sir. Go and do as you're told. *Christy turns sullenly to obey.* Stop: take down that shutter before you go, and let the daylight in: you can't expect me to do all the heavy work of the house with a great heavy lout like you idling about.

Christy takes the window bar out of its damps, and puts it aside; then opens the shutter, showing the grey morning. Mrs. Dudgeon takes the sconce from the mantelshelf; blows out the candle; extinguishes the snuff by pinching it with her fingers, first licking them for the purpose; and replaces the sconce on the shelf.

CHRISTY: *looking through the window.* Here's the minister's wife.

MRS. DUDGEON: *displeased.* What! Is she coming here?

CHRISTY: Yes.

MRS. DUDGEON: What does she want troubling me at this hour, before I'm properly dressed to receive people?

CHRISTY: You'd better ask her.

MRS. DUDGEON: *threateningly.* You'd better keep a civil tongue in your head. *He goes sulkily towards the door. She comes after him, plying him with instructions.* Tell that girl to come to me as soon as she's had her breakfast. And tell her to make herself fit to be seen before the people. *Christy goes out and slams the door in her face.* Nice manners, that! *Someone knocks at the house door: she turns and cries inhospitably.* Come in. *(Judith Anderson, the minister's wife, comes in. Judith is more than twenty years younger than her husband, though she will never be as young as he in vitality. She is pretty and proper and ladylike, and has been admired and petted into an opinion of herself sufficiently favorable to give her a self-assurance which serves her instead of strength. She has a pretty taste in dress, and in her face the pretty lines of a sentimental character formed by dreams. Even her little self-complacency is pretty, like a child's vanity. Rather a pathetic creature to any sympathetic observer who knows how rough a place the world is. One feels, on the whole, that Anderson might have chosen worse, and that she, needing protection, could not*

have chosen better.) Oh, it's you, is it, Mrs. Anderson?

JUDITH: *very politely—almost patronizingly.* Yes. Can I do anything for you, Mrs. Dudgeon? Can I help to get the place ready before they come to read the will?

MRS. DUDGEON: *stiffly.* Thank you, Mrs. Anderson, my house is always ready for anyone to come into.

MRS. ANDERSON: *with complacent amiability.* Yes, indeed it is. Perhaps you had rather I did not intrude on you just now.

MRS. DUDGEON: Oh, one more or less will make no difference this morning, Mrs. Anderson. Now that you're here, you'd better stay. If you wouldn't mind shutting the door! *Judith smiles, implying "How stupid of me" and shuts it with an exasperating air of doing something pretty and becoming.* That's better. I must go and tidy myself a bit. I suppose you don't mind stopping here to receive anyone that comes until I'm ready.

JUDITH: *graciously giving her leave.* Oh yes, certainly. Leave them to me, Mrs. Dudgeon; and take your time. *She hangs her cloak and bonnet on the rack.*

MRS. DUDGEON: *half sneering.* I thought that would be more in your way than getting the house ready. *Essie comes back.* Oh, here you are! *Severely* Come here: let me see you. *(Essie timidly goes to her. Mrs. Dudgeon takes her roughly by the arm and pulls her round to inspect the results of her attempt to clean and tidy herself—results which show little practice and less conviction.)* Mm! That's what you call doing your hair properly, I suppose. It's easy to see what you are, and how you were brought up. *She throws her arms away, and goes on, peremptorily.* Now you listen to me and do as you're told. You sit down there in the corner by the fire; and when the company comes don't dare to speak until you're spoken to. *Essie creeps away to the fireplace.* Your father's people had better see you and know you're there: they're as much bound to keep you from starvation as I am. At any rate they might help. But let me have no chattering and making free with them, as if you were their equal. Do you hear?

ESSIE: Yes.

MRS. DUDGEON: Well, then go and do as you're told. *Essie sits down miserably on the corner of the fender furthest from the door.* Never mind her, Mrs. Anderson: you know who she is and what she is. If she gives you any trouble, just tell me; and I'll settle accounts with her. *Mrs. Dudgeon goes into the bedroom, shutting the door sharply behind her as if even it had to be made to do its duty with a ruthless hand.*

JUDITH: *patronizing Essie, and arranging the cake and wine on the table more becomingly.* You must not mind if your aunt is strict with you. She is a very good woman, and desires your good too.

ESSIE: *in listless misery.* Yes.

JUDITH: *annoyed with Essie for her failure to be consoled and edified, and to appreciate the kindly condescension of the remark.* You are not going to be sullen, I hope, Essie.

ESSIE: No.

JUDITH: That's a good girl! *She places a couple of chairs at the table with their backs to the window, with a pleasant sense of being a more thoughtful housekeeper than Mrs. Dudgeon.* Do you know any of your father's relatives?

ESSIE: No. They wouldn't have anything to do with him: they were too religious. Father used to talk about Dick Dudgeon; but I never saw him.

JUDITH: *ostentatiously shocked.* Dick Dudgeon! Essie: do you wish to be a really respectable and grateful girl, and to make a place for yourself here by steady good conduct?

ESSIE: *very half-heartedly.* Yes.

JUDITH: Then you must never mention the name of Richard Dudgeon—never even think about him. He is a bad man.

ESSIE: What has he done?

JUDITH: You must not ask questions about him, Essie. You are too young to know what it is to be a bad man. But he is a smuggler; and he lives with gypsies; and he has no love for his mother and his family; and he wrestles and plays games on Sunday instead of going to church. Never let him into your presence, if you can help it, Essie; and try to keep yourself and all womanhood unspotted by contact with such men.

ESSIE: Yes.

JUDITH: *again displeased.* I am afraid you say Yes and No without thinking very deeply.

ESSIE: Yes. At least I mean—

JUDITH: *severely.* What do you mean?

ESSIE: *almost crying.* Only—my father was a smuggler; and—*Someone knocks.*

JUDITH: They are beginning to come. Now remember your aunt's directions, Essie; and be a good girl. *Christy comes back with the stand of stuffed birds under a glass case, and an inkstand, which he places on the table.* Good morning, Mr. Dudgeon. Will you open the door, please: the people have come.

CHRISTY: Good morning. *He opens the house door.*

The morning is now fairly bright and warm; and Anderson, who is the first to enter, has left his cloak at home. He is accompanied by Lawyer Hawkins, a brisk, middleaged man in brown riding gaiters and yellow breeches, looking as much squire as solicitor. He and Anderson are allowed precedence as representing the learned professions. After them comes the family, headed by the senior uncle, William Dudgeon, a large, shapeless man, bottle-nosed and evidently no ascetic at table. His clothes are not the clothes, nor his anxious wife the wife, of a prosperous man. The junior uncle, Titus Dudgeon, is a wiry little terrier of a man, with an immense and visibly purse-proud wife, both free from the cares of the William household.

Hawkins at once goes briskly to the table and takes the chair nearest the sofa, Christy having left the inkstand there. He puts his hat on the floor beside him, and produces the will. Uncle William comes to the fire and stands on the hearth warming his coat tails, leaving Mrs. William derelict near the door. Uncle Titus, who is the lady's man of the family, rescues her by giving her his disengaged arm and bringing her to the sofa, where he sits down warmly between his own lady and his brother's. Anderson hangs up his hat and waits for a word with Judith.

JUDITH: She will be here in a moment. Ask them to wait. *She taps at the bedroom door. Receiving an answer from within, she opens it and passes through.*

ANDERSON: *taking his place at the table at the opposite end to Hawkins.* Our poor afflicted sister will be with us in a moment. Are we all here?

CHRISTY: *at the house door, which he has just shut.* All except Dick.

The callousness with which Christy names the reprobate jars on the moral sense of the family. Uncle William shakes his head slowly and repeatedly. Mrs. Titus catches her breath convulsively through her nose. Her husband speaks.

UNCLE TITUS: Well, I hope he will have the grace not to come. I hope so.

The Dudgeons all murmur assent, except Christy, who goes to the window and posts himself there, looking out. Hawkins smiles secretively as if he knew something that would change their tune if they

knew it. Anderson is uneasy: the love of solemn family councils, especially funereal ones, is not in his nature. Judith appears at the bedroom door.

JUDITH: *with gentle impressiveness.* Friends, Mrs. Dudgeon. *(She takes the chair from beside the fireplace; and places it for Mrs. Dudgeon, who comes from the bedroom in black, with a clean handkerchief to her eyes. All rise, except Essie. Mrs. Titus and Mrs. William produce equally clean handkerchiefs and weep. It is an affecting moment.)*

UNCLE WILLIAM: Would it comfort you, sister, if we were to offer up a prayer?

UNCLE TITUS: Or sing a hymn?

ANDERSON: *rather hastily.* I have been with our sister this morning already, friends. In our hearts we ask a blessing.

ALL: *except Essie.* Amen.

They all sit down, except Judith, who stands behind Mrs. Dudgeon's chair.

JUDITH: *to Essie.* Essie: did you say Amen?

ESSIE: *scaredly.* No.

JUDITH: Then say it, like a good girl.

ESSIE: Amen.

UNCLE WILLIAM: *encouragingly.* That's right: that's right. We know who you are; but we are willing to be kind to you if you are a good girl and deserve it. We are all equal before the Throne.

This republican sentiment does not please the women, who are convinced that the Throne is precisely the place where their superiority, often questioned in this world, will be recognized and rewarded.

CHRISTY: *at the window.* Here's Dick.

Anderson and Hawkins look round sociably. Essie, with a gleam of interest breaking through her misery, looks up. Christy grins and gapes expectantly at the door. The rest are petrified with the intensity of their sense of Virtue menaced with outrage by the approach of flaunting Vice. The reprobate appears in the doorway, graced beyond his alleged merits by the morning sunlight. He is certainly the best looking member of the family; but his expression is reckless and sardonic, his manner defiant and satirical, his dress picturesquely careless. Only his forehead and mouth betray an extraordinary steadfastness, and his eyes are the eyes of a fanatic.

RICHARD: *on the threshold, taking off his hat.* Ladies and gentlemen: your servant, your very humble servant. *(With this comprehensive insult, he throws his hat to Christy with a suddenness that makes him jump like a negligent wicket keeper, and comes into the middle of the room, where he turns and deliberately surveys the company.)* How happy you all look! how glad to see me! *He turns towards Mrs. Dudgeon's chair; and his lip rolls up horribly from his dog tooth as he meets her look of undisguised hatred.* Well, mother: keeping up appearances as usual? that's right, that's right. *(Judith pointedly moves away from his neighborhood to the other side of the kitchen, holding her skirt instinctively as if to save it from contamination. Uncle Titus promptly marks his approval of her action by rising from the sofa, and placing a chair for her to sit down upon.)* What! Uncle William! I haven't seen you since you gave up drinking. *Poor Uncle William, shamed, would protest; but Richard claps him heartily on his shoulder, adding* you have given it up, haven't you? *releasing him with a playful push* of course you have: quite right too; you overdid it. *He turns away from Uncle William and makes for the sofa.* And now, where is that upright horsedealer Uncle Titus? Uncle Titus: come forth. *He comes upon him holding the chair as Judith sits down.* As usual, looking after the ladies.

UNCLE TITUS: *indignantly.* Be ashamed of yourself, sir—

RICHARD: *interrupting him and shaking his hand in spite of him.* I am: I am; but I am proud of my uncle—proudof all my relatives *again surveying them* who could look at them and not be proud and joyful? *Uncle Titus, overborne, resumes his seat on the sofa. Richard turns to the table.* Ah, Mr. Anderson, still at the good work, still shepherding them. Keep them up to the mark, minister, keep them up to the mark. Come! *with a spring he seats himself on the table and takes up the decanter* clink a glass with me, Pastor, for the sake of old times.

ANDERSON: You know, I think, Mr. Dudgeon, that I do not drink before dinner.

RICHARD: You will, some day, Pastor: Uncle William used to drink before breakfast. Come: it will give your sermons unction. *He smells the wine and makes a wry face.* But do not begin on my mother's company sherry. I stole some when I was six years old; and I have been a temperate man ever since. *He puts the decanter down and changes the subject.* So I hear you are married, Pastor, and that your wife has a most ungodly allowance of good looks.

ANDERSON: *quietly indicating Judith.* Sir: you are in the presence of my wife. *Judith rises and stands with stony propriety.*

RICHARD: *quickly slipping down from the table with instinctive good manners.* Your servant, madam: no offence. *He looks at her earnestly.* You deserve your reputation; but I'm sorry to see by your expression that you're a good woman. *(She looks shocked, and sits down amid a murmur of indignant sympathy from his relatives. Anderson, sensible enough to know that these demonstrations can only gratify and encourage a man who is deliberately trying to provoke them, remains perfectly goodhumored.)* All the same, Pastor, I respect you more than I did before. By the way, did I hear, or did I not, that our late lamented Uncle Peter, though unmarried, was a father?

UNCLE TITUS: He had only one irregular child, sir.

RICHARD: Only one! He thinks one a mere trifle! I blush for you, Uncle Titus.

ANDERSON: Mr. Dudgeon you are in the presence of your mother and her grief.

RICHARD: It touches me profoundly, Pastor. By the way, what has become of the irregular child?

ANDERSON: *pointing to Essie.* There, sir, listening to you.

RICHARD: *shocked into sincerity.* What! Why the devil didn't you tell me that before? Children suffer enough in this house without—*He hurries remorsefully to Essie.* Come, little cousin! never mind me: it was not meant to hurt you. *She looks up gratefully at him. Her tearstained face affects him violently, and he bursts out, in a transport of wrath* Who has been making her cry? Who has been ill-treating her? By God—

MRS. DUDGEON: *rising and confronting him.* Silence your blasphemous tongue. I will hear no more of this. Leave my house.

RICHARD: How do you know it's your house until the will is read? *(They look at one another for a moment with intense hatred; and then she sinks, checkmated, into her chair. Richard goes boldly up past Anderson to the window, where he takes the railed chair in his hand.)* Ladies and gentlemen: as the eldest son of my late father, and the unworthy head of this household, I bid you welcome. By your leave, Minister Anderson: by your leave, Lawyer Hawkins. The head of the table for the head of the family. *He places the chair at the table between the minister and the attorney; sits down between them; and addresses the assembly with a presidential air.* We meet on a melancholy occasion: a father dead! an uncle actually hanged, and probably damned. *He shakes his head deploringly. The relatives freeze with horror.* That's right: pull your longest faces *his voice suddenly sweetens gravely as his glance lights on Essie* provided only there is hope in the eyes of the child. *Briskly.* Now then, Lawyer Hawkins: business, business. Get on with the will,

man.

TITUS: Do not let yourself be ordered or hurried, Mr. Hawkins.

HAWKINS: *very politely and willingly.* Mr. Dudgeon means no offence, I feel sure. I will not keep you one second, Mr. Dudgeon. Just while I get my glasses—[he fumbles for them. The Dudgeons look at one another with misgiving].

RICHARD: Aha! They notice your civility, Mr. Hawkins. They are prepared for the worst. A glass of wine to clear your voice before you begin. *He pours out one for him and hands it; then pours one for himself.*

HAWKINS: Thank you, Mr. Dudgeon. Your good health, sir.

RICHARD: Yours, sir. *With the glass half way to his lips, he checks himself, giving a dubious glance at the wine, and adds, with quaint intensity.* Will anyone oblige me with a glass of water?

Essie, who has been hanging on his every word and movement, rises stealthily and slips out behind Mrs. Dudgeon through the bedroom door, returning presently with a jug and going out of the house as quietly as possible.

HAWKINS: The will is not exactly in proper legal phraseology.

RICHARD: No: my father died without the consolations of the law.

HAWKINS: Good again, Mr. Dudgeon, good again. *Preparing to read* Are you ready, sir?

RICHARD: Ready, aye ready. For what we are about to receive, may the Lord make us truly thankful. Go ahead.

HAWKINS: *reading.* "This is the last will and testament of me Timothy Dudgeon on my deathbed at Nevinstown on the road from Springtown to Websterbridge on this twenty-fourth day of September, one thousand seven hundred and seventy seven. I hereby revoke all former wills made by me and declare that I am of sound mind and know well what I am doing and that this is my real will according to my own wish and affections."

RICHARD: *glancing at his mother.* Aha!

HAWKINS: *shaking his head.* Bad phraseology, sir, wrong phraseology. "I give and bequeath a hundred pounds to my younger son Christopher Dudgeon, fifty pounds to be paid to him on the day of his marriage to Sarah Wilkins if she will have him, and ten pounds on the birth of each of his children up to the number of five."

RICHARD: How if she won't have him?

CHRISTY: She will if I have fifty pounds.

RICHARD: Good, my brother. Proceed.

HAWKINS: "I give and bequeath to my wife Annie Dudgeon, born Annie Primrose"—you see he did not know the law, Mr. Dudgeon: your mother was not born Annie: she was christened so—"an annuity of fifty-two pounds a year for life *Mrs. Dudgeon, with all eyes on her, holds herself convulsively rigid* to be paid out of the interest on her own money"—there's a way to put it, Mr. Dudgeon! Her own money!

MRS. DUDGEON: A very good way to put God's truth. It was every penny my own. Fifty-two pounds a year!

HAWKINS: "And I recommend her for her goodness and piety to the forgiving care of her children, having stood between them and her as far as I could to the best of my ability."

MRS. DUDGEON: And this is my reward! *raging inwardly* You know what I think, Mr. Anderson you

know the word I gave to it.

ANDERSON: It cannot be helped, Mrs. Dudgeon. We must take what comes to us. *To Hawkins.* Go on, sir.

HAWKINS: "I give and bequeath my house at Websterbridge with the land belonging to it and all the rest of my property soever to my eldest son and heir, Richard Dudgeon."

RICHARD: Oho! The fatted calf, Minister, the fatted calf.

HAWKINS: "On these conditions—"

RICHARD: The devil! Are there conditions?

HAWKINS: "To wit: first, that he shall not let my brother Peter's natural child starve or be driven by want to an evil life."

RICHARD: *emphatically, striking his fist on the table.* Agreed.

Mrs. Dudgeon, turning to look malignantly at Essie, misses her and looks quickly round to see where she has moved to; then, seeing that she has left the room without leave, closes her lips vengefully.

HAWKINS: "Second, that he shall be a good friend to my old horse Jim"—[again slacking his head] he should have written James, sir.

RICHARD: James shall live in clover. Go on.

HAWKINS: "—and keep my deaf farm laborer Prodger Feston in his service."

RICHARD: Prodger Feston shall get drunk every Saturday.

HAWKINS: "Third, that he make Christy a present on his marriage out of the ornaments in the best room."

RICHARD: *holding up the stuffed birds.* Here you are, Christy.

CHRISTY: *disappointed.* I'd rather have the China peacocks.

RICHARD: You shall have both. *Christy is greatly pleased.* Go on.

HAWKINS: "Fourthly and lastly, that he try to live at peace with his mother as far as she will consent to it."

RICHARD: *dubiously.* Hm! Anything more, Mr. Hawkins?

HAWKINS: *solemnly.* "Finally I gave and bequeath my soul into my Maker's hands, humbly asking forgiveness for all my sins and mistakes, and hoping that he will so guide my son that it may not be said that I have done wrong in trusting to him rather than to others in the perplexity of my last hour in this strange place."

ANDERSON: Amen.

THE UNCLES AND AUNTS: Amen.

RICHARD: My mother does not say Amen.

MRS. DUDGEON: *rising, unable to give up her property without a struggle.* Mr. Hawkins: is that a proper will? Remember, I have his rightful, legal will, drawn up by yourself, leaving all to me.

HAWKINS: This is a very wrongly and irregularly worded will, Mrs. Dudgeon; though *turning politely to Richard* it contains in my judgment an excellent disposal of his property.

ANDERSON: *interposing before Mrs. Dudgeon can retort.* That is not what you are asked, Mr. Hawkins. Is it a legal will?

HAWKINS: The courts will sustain it against the other.

ANDERSON: But why, if the other is more lawfully worded?

HAWKINS: Because, sir, the courts will sustain the claim of a man—and that man the eldest son—against any woman, if they can. I warned you, Mrs. Dudgeon, when you got me to draw that other will, that it was not a wise will, and that though you might make him sign it, he would never be easy until he revoked it. But you wouldn't take advice; and now Mr. Richard is cock of the walk. *He takes his hat from the floor; rises; and begins pocketing his papers and spectacles.*

This is the signal for the breaking-up of the party. Anderson takes his hat from the rack and joins Uncle William at the fire. Uncle Titus fetches Judith her things from the rack. The three on the sofa rise and chat with Hawkins. Mrs. Dudgeon, now an intruder in her own house, stands erect, crushed by the weight of the law on women, accepting it, as she has been trained to accept all monstrous calamities, as proofs of the greatness of the power that inflicts them, and of her own wormlike insignificance. For at this time, remember, Mary Wollstonecraft is as yet only a girl of eighteen, and her Vindication of the Rights of Women is still fourteen years off. Mrs. Dudgeon is rescued from her apathy by Essie, who comes back with the jug full of water. She is taking it to Richard when Mrs. Dudgeon stops her.

MRS. DUDGEON: *threatening her.* Where have you been? *Essie, appalled, tries to answer, but cannot.* How dare you go out by yourself after the orders I gave you?

ESSIE: He asked for a drink—[she stops, her tongue cleaving to her palate with terror].

JUDITH: *with gentler severity.* Who asked for a drink? *Essie, speechless, points to Richard.*

RICHARD: What! I!

JUDITH: *shocked.* Oh Essie, Essie!

RICHARD: I believe I did. *He takes a glass and holds it to Essie to be filled. Her hand shakes.* What! afraid of me?

ESSIE: *quickly.* No. I—*She pours out the water.*

RICHARD: *tasting it.* Ah, you've been up the street to the market gate spring to get that. *He takes a draught.* Delicious! Thank you. *(Unfortunately, at this moment he chances to catch sight of Judith's face, which expresses the most prudish disapproval of his evident attraction for Essie, who is devouring him with her grateful eyes. His mocking expression returns instantly. He puts down the glass; deliberately winds his arm round Essie's shoulders; and brings her into the middle of the company. Mrs. Dudgeon being in Essie's way as they come past the table, he says)* By your leave, mother *and compels her to make way for them.* What do they call you? Bessie?

ESSIE: Essie.

RICHARD: Essie, to be sure. Are you a good girl, Essie?

ESSIE: *greatly disappointed that he, of all people should begin at her in this way* Yes. *She looks doubtfully at Judith.* I think so. I mean I—I hope so.

RICHARD: Essie: did you ever hear of a person called the devil?

ANDERSON: *revolted.* Shame on you, sir, with a mere child—

RICHARD: By your leave, Minister: I do not interfere with your sermons: do not you interrupt mine. *To Essie.* Do you know what they call me, Essie?

ESSIE: Dick.

RICHARD: *amused: patting her on the shoulder.* Yes, Dick; but something else too. They call me the Devil's Disciple.

ESSIE: Why do you let them?

RICHARD: *seriously.* Because it's true. I was brought up in the other service; but I knew from the first that the Devil was my natural master and captain and friend. I saw that he was in the right, and that the world cringed to his conqueror only through fear. I prayed secretly to him; and he comforted me, and saved me from having my spirit broken in this house of children's tears. I promised him my soul, and swore an oath that I would stand up for him in this world and stand by him in the next. *Solemnly* That promise and that oath made a man of me. From this day this house is his home; and no child shall cry in it: this hearth is his altar; and no soul shall ever cower over it in the dark evenings and be afraid. Now *turning forcibly on the rest* which of you good men will take this child and rescue her from the house of the devil?

JUDITH: *coming to Essie and throwing a protecting arm about her.* I will. You should be burnt alive.

ESSIE: But I don't want to. *She shrinks back, leaving Richard and Judith face to face.*

RICHARD: *to Judith.* Actually doesn't want to, most virtuous lady!

UNCLE TITUS: Have a care, Richard Dudgeon. The law—

RICHARD: *turning threateningly on him.* Have a care, you. In an hour from this there will be no law here but martial law. I passed the soldiers within six miles on my way here: before noon Major Swindon's gallows for rebels will be up in the market place.

ANDERSON: *calmly.* What have we to fear from that, sir?

RICHARD: More than you think. He hanged the wrong man at Springtown: he thought Uncle Peter was respectable, because the Dudgeons had a good name. But his next example will be the best man in the town to whom he can bring home a rebellious word. Well, we're all rebels; and you know it.

ALL THE MEN: *except Anderson.* No, no, no!

RICHARD: Yes, you are. You haven't damned King George up hill and down dale as I have; but you've prayed for his defeat; and you, Anthony Anderson, have conducted the service, and sold your family bible to buy a pair of pistols. They mayn't hang me, perhaps; because the moral effect of the Devil's Disciple dancing on nothing wouldn't help them. But a Minister! *Judith, dismayed, clings to Anderson* or a lawyer! *Hawkins smiles like a man able to take care of himself* or an upright horsedealer! *Uncle Titus snarls at him in rags and terror* or a reformed drunkard *Uncle William, utterly unnerved, moans and wobbles with fear* eh? Would that show that King George meant business—ha?

ANDERSON: *perfectly self-possessed.* Come, my dear: he is only trying to frighten you. There is no danger. *He takes her out of the house. The rest crowd to the door to follow him, except Essie, who remains near Richard.*

RICHARD: *boisterously derisive.* Now then: how many of you will stay with me; run up the American flag on the devil's house; and make a fight for freedom? *They scramble out, Christy among them, hustling one another in their haste.* Ha ha! Long live the devil! *To Mrs. Dudgeon, who is following them* What mother! are you off too?

MRS. DUDGEON: *deadly pale, with her hand on her heart as if she had received a deathblow.* My curse on you! My dying curse! *She goes out.*

RICHARD: *calling after her.* It will bring me luck. Ha ha ha!

ESSIE: *anxiously.* Mayn't I stay?

RICHARD: *turning to her.* What! Have they forgotten to save your soul in their anxiety about their own bodies? Oh yes: you may stay. *He turns excitedly away again and shakes his fist after them. His*

left fist, also clenched, hangs down. Essie seizes it and kisses it, her tears falling on it. He starts and looks at it. Tears! The devil's baptism! *She falls on her knees, sobbing. He stoops goodnaturedly to raise her, saying* Oh yes, you may cry that way, Essie, if you like.

Le note di scena sono tra parentesi *quadre* o *(tonde).*

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