

The Devil's Disciple

by

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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-- very hard 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 damp, 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.

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