**August Strindberg *The Father* (1887)**

Adapted by Jonathan Ellman

**Scene One**

*The telephone is ringing*

*The Captain enters and answers the telephone conversation.*

Captain: Hello. Pastor! Good evening. I see. Yes. I see. Yes, I wouldn’t like to be the magistrate who has to judge this case. I don’t suppose the lad’s completely innocent – one can’t be sure. But one thing you can be sure of. The girl’s guilty – if you can say anyone’s guilty.

*He turns his back completely on the audience and continues*

It’s not just her confirmation. It’s the whole questions of her upbringing. This house is stuffed with women every one of whom wants to bring up my child. My mother-in-law wants to make her a spiritualist, Laura wants her to be a painter, her governess wants her to be a Methodist, old Margaret wants her to be a Baptist, and the maids are trying to get her into the Salvation Army. Well, you can’t patch a soul together like a damned quite. I have the chief right to decide her future, and I’m obstructed whichever way I turn. I’ve got to get her out of this house.

*Pause*

You’re right, there are too many women running my home. It’s like a cage full of tigers – if I didn’t keep a red-hot iron in front of their noses, they’d claw me to the ground the first chance they got. Yes, you can laugh, you old fox! It wasn’t enough that I married your sister, you had to palm your old stepmother off on me too!

LAURA ENTERS, THE CAPTAIN CONTINUES TALKING WITHOUT REALISING

No, that’ll have to take its course. Chalk that one up to society’s conscience. I don’t intend to be a martyr for the sake of truth. I’m past all that. Goodbye! Give my regards to your wife.

**Scene Two**

Laura: Were you discussing Bertha with the pastor?

Captain: That’s none of your business.

Laura: The law is quite explicit in the matter

Captain: The law is not explicit as to who is the child’s father.

Laura: No. But one usually knows.

Captain: Wise men say one can never be sure about such things.

Laura: Not be sure about who is a child’s father?

Captain: They say not.

Laura: How extraordinary! Then how can the father have all these rights over her child?

Captain: If only there were some kind of a test. One day, science will provide one. Then your power over us will be diminished. [Exiting] You’ll see

Laura: I understand.

**Scene Three**

*The telephone rings. Laura answers it and talks with her back to the audience*

Laura: Hello. Doctor Ostermark!

*Pause*

Laura: The Captain is out, but he will be back shortly.

*Pause*

Laura: Yes, there’s a lot of illness around here just now. We lead such a lonely life out here in the country.

*Pause*

Laura: We’ve never had any serious illnesses, I am glad to say. But things aren’t quite as they should be - … I’m afraid they are not at all as we could wish … There are certain domestic matters which a woman’s honour and conscience require her to conceal from the world - … So I feel it is my painful duty to be quite open with you from the start … No doubt you’ve read his dissertations on mineralogy and have always received the impression of a powerful and lucid intelligence … Indeed, I should be most happy if it could be proved that we have all been mistaken … But is it reasonable for a man to claim that he can see in a microscope what is happening on another planet? … Yes, in a microscope … *If* it is so! You don’t believe me, Doctor. And I sit here telling you all our family secrets - … Any symptoms! We’ve been married for twenty years, and he has never yet taken a decision without reversing it … He always insists on having his own way, but once he has got it he loses interest and begs me to decide … God knows I’ve done my best to meet his wishes during all these long years of trial. Oh, if you knew the things I have had to put up with! If you knew!

*Pause*

You mean I must take care not to awake his suspicions? … Really? Yes, I understand. Yes. Yes.

*A bell rings within the house*

Excuse me, my mother wishes to speak with me. Wait a moment - this must be Adolf!

*Laura puts the phone down*

**Scene Four**

*Enter Captain*

Laura: You are afraid to ask Bertha what she wants, because you know she’ll agree with me

Captain: I happen to know she wants to leave home. But I also know that you have the power to alter her will at your pleasure.

Laura: Oh, am I so powerful?

Captain: Yes. You have a satanic genius for getting what you want. But that’s always the way with people who aren’t scrupulous about what means they use. How, for example, did you get rid of Dr. Norling, and find this new man?

Laura: Well, how did I?

Captain: You insulted Norling, so that he went, and got your brother to fix this fellow’s appointment.

Laura: Well, that was very simple, wasn’t it? And quite legal. Is Bertha to leave at once?

Captain: In a fortnight.

Laura: Is that final?

Captain: Yes.

Laura: Have you spoken to Bertha?

Captain: Yes.

Laura: Then I shall have to stop it.

Captain: You can’t.

Laura: Can’t? You think I’m prepared to let my daughter live with wicked people who’ll tell her that everything I taught her is nonsense, so that she’ll despise her mother for the rest of her life?

Captain: Do you think I am prepared to allow ignorant and conceited women to teach my daughter that her father is a charlatan?

Laura: That should matter less to you.

Captain: Why?

Laura: Because a mother is closer to her child. It has recently been proved than no one can be sure who is a child’s father.

Captain: What has that to do with us?

Laura: You can’t be sure that you are Bertha’s father.

Captain: I – can’t be sure – !

Laura: No. No one can be sure, so you can’t.

Captain: Are you trying to be funny?

Laura: I’m only repeating what you’ve taught me. Anyway, how do you know I haven’t been unfaithful to you?

Captain: I could believe almost anything of you, but not that. Besides, if it were true you wouldn’t talk about it.

Laura: Suppose I were prepared for anything – anything – to be driven out, despised, anything – rather than lose my child? Suppose I am telling you the truth now, when I say to you: ‘Bertha is my child, but not yours!’ Suppose -!

Captain: Stop!

Laura: Just suppose. Your power over her would be ended.

Captain: If you could prove I was not the father.

Laura: That wouldn’t be difficult. Would you like me to?

Captain. Stop it! At once!

Laura: I’d only need to name the true father, and tell you the time and place. For instance – when was Bertha born? Three years after our marriage –

Captain: Stop it, or - !

Laura: Or what? All right, I’ll stop. But think carefully before you take any decision. And, above all, don’t make yourself ridiculous.

Captain: God – I could almost weep - !

Laura Then you *will* be ridiculous.

Captain: But not you!

Laura: No. Things have been arranged more wisely for us.

Captain: That is why one cannot fight with you.

Laura: Why try to fight with an enemy who is so much stronger?

Captain: Stronger?

Laura: Yes. It’s strange, but I’ve never been able to look at a man without feeling that I am stronger than him.

Captain: Well, for once you’re going to meet your match. And I’ll see you never forget it.

Laura: That’ll be interesting.

Nurse: (*enters*). Dinner’s ready. Will you come and eat?

Laura: Thank you.

*The* Captain *hesitates, then sits in a chair by the table, next to the sofa*

Laura: Aren’t you going to eat?

Captain: No, thank you. I don’t want anything.

Laura: Are you sulking?

Captain: No. I'm not hungry.

Laura: Come along, or there’ll be questions asked. Be good now. Oh, very well. If you won’t, you’d better go on sitting there. (*Goes*)

Nurse: Mr Adolf! What is all this?

Captain: I don’t know. Can you explain to me how it is that you women can treat an old man as though her were a child?

Nurse: Don't’ ask me. I suppose it’s because, whether you’re little boys or grown men, you’re all born of woman.

Captain: But no woman is born of man. Yes, but I *am* Bertha’s father! Tell me, Margaret! You do believe that? Don’t you?

Nurse: Lord, what a child you are! Of course you’re your own daughter’s father. Come and eat now, and don’t sit there sulking. There! There now, come along!

Captain: (Gets up) Get out, woman! Back to hell, you witches!

*Captain exits*

Nurse: Captain! Now, listen - !

Captain: *From offstage* Don’t expect me home before midnight!

Nurse: Blessed Jesus preserve us, how’s things all going to end?

*Nurse sits down in a rocking chair (if possible)*

**Scene Five**

Nurse reads her ‘dark’ prayer from her prayer book

[Note – this version is taken from: <http://www.fullbooks.com/Plays-The-Father-Countess-Julie-The-Outlaw1.html> )

NURSE. Ah, yes, ah yes!  
[Reads half aloud]  
Ah woe is me, how sad a thing  
Is life within this vale of tears,  
Death's angel triumphs like a king,  
And calls aloud to all the spheres--  
Vanity, all is vanity.  
Yes, yes! Yes, yes!  
[Reads again]  
All that on earth hath life and breath  
To earth must fall before his spear,  
And sorrow, saved alone from death,  
Inscribes above the mighty bier.  
Vanity, all is vanity.  
Yes, Yes.

*The lights go down gently and the nurse remains in silence*

**Scene Six**

*The lights slowly return to demonstrate late at night. The nurse remains in her chair. The Captain enters, dishevelled, drunk*

Nurse: Mr. Adolf, what is it?

Captain: (*has a revolver in his hand)* Have you taken the cartridges?

Nurse: Yes, I’ve hidden them away. But sit down and calm yourself, and I’ll bring them back to you.

*She takes the* Captain *by the arm and coaxes him down into the chair, where he remains sitting dully. Then she takes the straitjacket and goes behind his chair.*

Nurse: Do you remember, Mr Adolf, when you were my dear little baby, how I used to tuck you up at night and say your prayers with you? And do you remember how I used to get up in the night to fetch you a drink? Do you remember how I lit the candle and told you pretty stories when you had bad dreams and couldn’t sleep? Do you remember?

Captain: Go on talking, Margaret. It soothes my head so. Go on talking.

Nurse: All right, but you must listen, then. Do you remember how once you took the big carving knife and wanted to make boats, and how I came in and had to get the knife away from you by telling you a story? You were such a silly baby, so we had to tell you stories, because you thought we all wanted to hurt you. Give me that snake, I said, otherwise he’ll bite you. And you let go of the knife. (*Takes the gun from the* Captain’s *hand*) And then, when you had to get dressed and you didn’t want to. Then I had to coax you and say I’d give you a gold coat and dress you like a prince. And I took your little body-garment, which was only of green wool, and held it in front of you and said: ‘Put your arms in’, and then I said: ‘Sit still, now, and be a good boy while I button up the back!’ (*She has got the straitjacket on him.*) And then I said: ‘Stand up now, and walk nicely, so I can see how you look.’ (*She leads him to the sofa.*) And then I said: ‘Now it’s time to go to bed.’

Captain: What’s that, Nanny? Must I go to bed when I’m dressed? Damnation! What have you done to me? (*Tries to free himself.*) Oh, you damned woman! Who would’ve believed you could be so cunning? (*Lies down on the sofa.*) Caught, cropped, and cozened! And not to be allowed to die!

Nurse: Forgive me, Mr Adolf, forgive me! But I wanted to stop you from killing the child!

Captain: Why didn’t you let me kill the child? Life is a hell, and death a heaven, and the child belongs to heaven.

Nurse: What do you know about what comes after death?

Captain: That is all one does know. About life, one knows nothing. Oh, if one had only known from the beginning!

Nurse: Mr Adolf! Humble your proud heart and pray to God for mercy. It still isn’t too late. It wasn’t too late for the robber on the cross, when our Saviour said to him: ‘Today shalt thou be with me in Paradise’.

**Scene Seven**

*Laura enters*

Captain: Omphale! Omphale! Now you play with the club while Hercules winds your wool!

Laura: (*Comes over to the sofa*) Adolf! Look at me! Do you think I am your enemy?

Captain: Yes, I do. I think you are all my enemies. My mother was my enemy. She didn’t want to bring me into the world because my birth would cause her pain. She robbed my first embryo of its nourishment, so that I was born half-crippled. My sister was my enemy, when she taught me that I was her inferior. The first woman I kissed was my enemy – she gave me ten years of disease in return for the love I gave her. My daughter became my enemy, when you forced her to choose between you and me. And you, my wife, you were my mortal enemy, for you didn’t let go of me until there was no life left in me.

Laura: I don’t know that I ever planned, or intended, what you think I have done. There may have been in me a vague desire to be rid of you, because you were an obstacle in my path; but if you see a plan in the way I have acted, then perhaps there was one, though I wasn't aware of it. I didn’t plot any of this – it just glided forward on rails which you laid yourself – and before God and my conscience, I feel that I am innocent, even if I am not. Your presence has been like a stone on my heart, pressing and pressing until my heart rebelled against its suffocating weight. This is the truth, and if I have unintentionally hurt you, I ask your forgiveness.

Captain: That all sounds plausible. But how does it help me? And who is to blame? Perhaps our idea of marriage is to blame? In the old days, one married a wife; now one forms a partnership with a businesswoman, or moves in with a friend. And then one beds the partner, or defiles the friend. What became of love – healthy, sensuous love? It dies, starved. And what is the offspring of this broker’s-love, a blank cheque drawn on a bankrupt account? Who will honour it when the crash comes? Who is the father of our child?

Laura: Those suspicious of yours about the child are completely unfounded.

Captain: That’s just what’s so horrible. If they were real, at least one would have something to grip on, something to cling to. Now there are only shadows, hiding in the bushes and poking out their heads to laugh – it’s like fighting with air, a mock battle with blank cartridges. A real betrayal would have acted as a challenge, roused my soul to action. But now my thoughts dissolve in twilight, my brain grinds emptiness until it catches fire! Give me a pillow under my head! And put something over me, I’m cold. I’m so terrible cold!

Laura *takes her shawl and spreads it over him. The* Nurse *goes out to fetch a pillow*

Laura: Give me your hand, friend.

Captain: My hand! Which you have tied behind my back? Omphale! Omphale! But I feel your soft shawl against my mouth. It’s warm and smooth like your arm, and it smells of vanilla, as your hair did when you were young. Laura – when you were young – and we walked in the birch woods among the primroses – and thrushes sang! Beautiful, beautiful! How beautiful life was! And now it has become like this. You didn’t want it to be like this, I didn’t want it, and yet it happened. Who rules our lives?

Laura: God alone rules –

Captain: The God of battle, then. Or the goddess, nowadays! Take away this cat that’s lying on me! Take it away! (*The* Nurse *enters with the pillow and removes the shawl.*) Give me my tunic. Put it over me! (*The* Nurse *takes his military tunic from the clothes-hanger and drapes it over him.*) Ah, my brave lion’s skin, that you would take from me! Omphale! Omphale! O cunning woman, who so loved peace that you discovered the art of disarming men! Awake, Hercules, before they take your club from you! You would rob us of our armour and have us believe that it is only tinsel. No, it was iron before it became tinsel. In the old days it was the smith who forged the soldier’s tunic; now it is the seamstress. Omphale! Omphale! Strength has been vanquished by craft and weakness! Curse you, damned woman, and all your sex! (*Raises himself to spit, but falls back on the couch*). What kind of a pillow have you given me, Margaret? It’s so hard, and so cold! Come and sit beside me here, on the chair. That’s right. May I rest my head in your lap? So. That’s warm! Bend over so that I can feel your breast. Oh, it is sweet to sleep at a woman’s breast, whether a mother’s or a mistress’s, but sweetest at a mother’s!

Laura: Do you want to see your child, Adolf? Speak!

Captain: My child? A man has no children. Only women have children, and so the future belongs to them, while we die childless. Gentle Jesus, meek and mild, look upon this little child – ‘

Nurse: Listen! He’s praying to God!

Captain: No, to you, to send me to sleep. I’m so tired, so tired. Good night, Margaret. Blessed be thou amongst women –

*He raises himself, but falls with a cry in the* Nurse’s *lap.*

**THE END**