

Wilde Oscar

Vera: or, The Nihilists



Oscar Wilde
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Vera; Or, The Nihilists

PERSONS IN THE PROLOGUE

Peter Sabouroff (an Innkeeper).

Vera Sabouroff (his Daughter).

Michael (a Peasant).

Colonel Kotemkin.

Scene, Russia. Time, 1795

PERSONS IN THE PLAY

Ivan the Czar.

Prince Paul Maraloffski (Prime Minister of Russia).

Prince Petrovitch.

Count Rouvaloff.

Marquis de Poivnard.

Baron Raff.

General Kotemkin.

A Page.

Nihilists

Peter Tchernavitch, President of the Nihilists.

Michael.

Alexis Ivanacievitch, known as a Student of Medicine.

Professor Marfa.

Vera Sabouroff.

Soldiers, Conspirators, &c

Scene, Moscow. Time, 1800

PROLOGUE

Scene. —*A Russian Inn*

**Large door opening on snowy
landscape at back of stage**

Peter Sabouroff *and* Michael

Peter (*warming his hands at a stove*). Has Vera not come back yet, Michael?

Mich. No, Father Peter, not yet; 'tis a good three miles to the post office, and she has to milk the cows besides, and that dun one is a rare plaguey creature for a wench to handle.

Peter. Why didn't you go with her, you young fool? she'll never love you unless you are always at her heels; women like to be bothered.

Mich. She says I bother her too much already, Father Peter, and I fear she'll never love me after all.

Peter. Tut, tut, boy, why shouldn't she? you're young and wouldn't be ill-favoured either, had God or thy mother given

thee another face. Aren't you one of Prince Maraloffski's gamekeepers; and haven't you got a good grass farm, and the best cow in the village? What more does a girl want?

Mich. But Vera, Father Peter —

Peter. Vera, my lad, has got too many ideas; I don't think much of ideas myself; I've got on well enough in life without 'em; why shouldn't my children? There's Dmitri! could have stayed here and kept the inn; many a young lad would have jumped at the offer in these hard times; but he, scatter-brained featherhead of a boy, must needs go off to Moscow to study the law! What does he want knowing about the law! let a man do his duty, say I, and no one will trouble him.

Mich. Ay! but Father Peter, they say a good lawyer can break the law as often as he likes, and no one can say him nay.

Peter. That is about all they are good for; and there he stays, and has not written a line to us for four months now — a good son that, eh?

Mich. Come, come, Father Peter, Dmitri's letters must have gone astray — perhaps the new postman can't read; he looks stupid enough, and Dmitri, why, he was the best fellow in the village. Do you remember how he shot the bear at the barn in the great winter?

Peter. Ay, it was a good shot; I never did a better myself.

Mich. And as for dancing, he tired out three fiddlers Christmas come two years.

Peter. Ay, ay, he was a merry lad. It is the girl that has the

seriousness – she goes about as solemn as a priest for days at a time.

Mich. Vera is always thinking of others.

Peter. There is her mistake, boy. Let God and our Little Father look to the world. It is none of my work to mend my neighbour's thatch. Why, last winter old Michael was frozen to death in his sleigh in the snowstorm, and his wife and children starved afterwards when the hard times came; but what business was it of mine? I didn't make the world. Let God and the Czar look to it. And then the blight came, and the black plague with it, and the priests couldn't bury the people fast enough, and they lay dead on the roads – men and women both. But what business was it of mine? I didn't make the world. Let God and the Czar look to it. Or two autumns ago, when the river overflowed on a sudden, and the children's school was carried away and drowned every girl and boy in it. I didn't make the world – let God and the Czar look to it.

Mich. But, Father Peter —

Peter. No, no, boy; no man could live if he took his neighbour's pack on his shoulders. (*Enter Vera in peasant's dress.*) Well, my girl, you've been long enough away – where is the letter?

Vera. There is none to-day, Father.

Peter. I knew it.

Vera. But there will be one to-morrow, Father.

Peter. Curse him, for an ungrateful son.

Vera. Oh, Father, don't say that; he must be sick.

Peter. Ay! sick of profligacy, perhaps.

Vera. How dare you say that of him, Father? You know that is not true.

Peter. Where does the money go, then? Michael, listen. I gave Dmitri half his mother's fortune to bring with him to pay the lawyer folk of Moscow. He has only written three times, and every time for more money. He got it, not at my wish, but at hers (*pointing to Vera*), and now for five months, close on six almost, we have heard nothing from him.

Vera. Father, he will come back.

Peter. Ay! the prodigals always return; but let him never darken my doors again.

Vera (*sitting down pensive*). Some evil has come on him; he must be dead! Oh! Michael, I am so wretched about Dmitri.

Mich. Will you never love any one but him, Vera?

Vera (*smiling*). I don't know; there is so much else to do in the world but love.

Mich. Nothing else worth doing, Vera.

Peter. What noise is that, Vera? (*A metallic clink is heard.*)

Vera (*rising and going to the door*). I don't know, Father; it is not like the cattle bells, or I would think Nicholas had come from the fair. Oh! Father! it is soldiers! – coming down the hill – there is one of them on horseback. How pretty they look! But there are some men with them with chains on! They must be robbers. Oh! don't let them in, Father; I couldn't look at them.

Peter. Men in chains! Why, we are in luck, my child! I heard

this was to be the new road to Siberia, to bring the prisoners to the mines; but I didn't believe it. My fortune is made! Bustle, Vera, bustle! I'll die a rich man after all. There will be no lack of good customers now. An honest man should have the chance of making his living out of rascals now and then.

Vera. Are these men rascals, Father? What have they done?

Peter. I reckon they're some of those Nihilists the priest warns us against. Don't stand there idle, my girl.

Vera. I suppose, then, they are all wicked men.

(Sound of soldiers outside; cry of "Halt!" enter Russian officer with a body of soldiers and eight men in chains, raggedly dressed; one of them on entering hurriedly puts his coat above his ears and hides his face; some soldiers guard the door, others sit down; the prisoners stand.)

Colonel. Innkeeper!

Peter. Yes, Colonel.

Colonel *(pointing to Nihilists)*. Give these men some bread and water.

Peter *(to himself)*. I shan't make much out of that order.

Colonel. As for myself, what have you got fit to eat?

Peter. Some good dried venison, your Excellency – and some rye whisky.

Colonel. Nothing else?

Peter. Why, more whisky, your Excellency.

Colonel. What clods these peasants are! You have a better room than this?

Peter. Yes, sir.

Colonel. Bring me there. Sergeant, post your picket outside, and see that these scoundrels do not communicate with any one. No letter writing, you dogs, or you'll be flogged for it. Now for the venison. (*To Peter bowing before him.*) Get out of the way, you fool! Who is that girl? (*sees Vera*).

Peter. My daughter, your Highness.

Colonel. Can she read and write?

Peter. Ay, that she can, sir.

Colonel. Then she is a dangerous woman. No peasant should be allowed to do anything of the kind. Till your fields, store your harvests, pay your taxes, and obey your masters – that is your duty.

Vera. Who are our masters?

Colonel. Young woman, these men are going to the mines for life for asking the same foolish question.

Vera. Then they have been unjustly condemned.

Peter. Vera, keep your tongue quiet. She is a foolish girl, sir, who talks too much.

Colonel. Every woman does talk too much. Come, where is this venison? Count, I am waiting for you. How can you see anything in a girl with coarse hands? (*He passes with Peter and his aide-de-camp into an inner room.*)

Vera (*to one of the Nihilists*). Won't you sit down? you must be tired.

Sergeant. Come now, young woman, no talking to my

prisoners.

Vera. I shall speak to them. How much do you want?

Sergeant. How much have you?

Vera. Will you let these men sit down if I give you this? (*Takes off her peasant's necklace.*) It is all I have; it was my mother's.

Sergeant. Well, it looks pretty enough, and is heavy too. What do you want with these men?

Vera. They are hungry and tired. Let me go to them?

One of the Soldiers. Let the wench be, if she pays us.

Sergeant. Well, have your way. If the Colonel sees you, you may have to come with us, my pretty one.

Vera (*advances to the Nihilists*). Sit down; you must be tired. (*Serves them food.*) What are you?

A Prisoner. Nihilists.

Vera. Who put you in chains?

Prisoner. Our Father the Czar.

Vera. Why?

Prisoner. For loving liberty too well.

Vera (*to prisoner who hides his face*). What did you want to do?

Dmitri. To give liberty to thirty millions of people enslaved to one man.

Vera (*startled at the voice*). What is your name?

Dmitri. I have no name.

Vera. Where are your friends?

Dmitri. I have no friends.

Vera. Let me see your face!

Dmitri. You will see nothing but suffering in it. They have tortured me.

Vera (*tears the cloak from his face*). Oh, God! Dmitri! my brother!

Dmitri. Hush! Vera; be calm. You must not let my father know; it would kill him. I thought I could free Russia. I heard men talk of Liberty one night in a café. I had never heard the word before. It seemed to be a new god they spoke of. I joined them. It was there all the money went. Five months ago they seized us. They found me printing the paper. I am going to the mines for life. I could not write. I thought it would be better to let you think I was dead; for they are bringing me to a living tomb.

Vera (*looking round*). You must escape, Dmitri. I will take your place.

Dmitri. Impossible! You can only revenge us.

Vera. I shall revenge you.

Dmitri. Listen! there is a house in Moscow —

Sergeant. Prisoners, attention! — the Colonel is coming — young woman, your time is up.

(Enter Colonel, Aide-de-Camp and Peter.)

Peter. I hope your Highness is pleased with the venison. I shot it myself.

Colonel. It had been better had you talked less about it.

Sergeant, get ready. (*Gives purse to Peter.*) Here, you cheating rascal!

Peter. My fortune is made! long live your Highness. I hope your Highness will come often this way.

Colonel. By Saint Nicholas, I hope not. It is too cold here for me. (*To Vera.*) Young girl, don't ask questions again about what does not concern you. I will not forget your face.

Vera. Nor I yours, or what you are doing.

Colonel. You peasants are getting too saucy since you ceased to be serfs, and the knout is the best school for you to learn politics in. Sergeant, proceed.

(*The Colonel turns and goes to top of stage. The prisoners pass out double file; as Dmitri passes Vera he lets a piece of paper fall on the ground; she puts her foot on it and remains immobile.*)

Peter (*who has been counting the money the Colonel gave him*). Long life to your Highness. I will hope to see another batch soon. (*Suddenly catches sight of Dmitri as he is going out of the door, and screams and rushes up.*) Dmitri! Dmitri! my God! what brings you here? he is innocent, I tell you. I'll pay for him. Take your money (*flings money on the ground*), take all I have, give me my son. Villains! Villains! where are you bringing him?

Colonel. To Siberia, old man.

Peter. No, no; take me instead.

Colonel. He is a Nihilist.

Peter. You lie! you lie! He is innocent. (*The soldiers force him back with their guns and shut the door against him. He beats with*

his fists against it.) Dmitri! Dmitri! a Nihilist! (Falls down on floor.)

Vera (*who has remained motionless, picks up paper now from under her feet and reads*). "99 Rue Tchernavaya, Moscow. To strangle whatever nature is in me; neither to love nor to be loved, neither to pity nor to be pitied; neither to marry nor to be given in marriage, till the end is come." My brother, I shall keep the oath. (*Kisses the paper.*) You shall be revenged!

(*Vera stands immobile, holding paper in her lifted hand. Peter is lying on the floor. Michael, who has just come in, is bending over him.*)

End of Prologue

ACT I

Scene. —99 Rue Tchernavaya, Moscow. A large garret lit by oil lamps hung from ceiling. Some masked men standing silent and apart from one another. A man in a scarlet mask is writing at a table. Door at back. Man in yellow with drawn sword at it. Knocks heard. Figures in cloaks and masks enter.

Password. Per crucem ad lucem

Answer. Per sanguinem ad libertatem

(Clock strikes. Conspirators form a semicircle in the middle of the stage.)

President. What is the word?

First Consp. Nabat.

Pres. The answer?

Second Consp. Kalit.

Pres. What hour is it?

Third Consp. The hour to suffer.

Pres. What day?

Fourth Consp. The day of oppression.

Pres. What year?

Fifth Consp. Since the Revolution of France, the ninth year.

Pres. How many are we in number?

Sixth Consp. Ten, nine, and three.

Pres. The Galilæan had less to conquer the world; but what is our mission?

Seventh Consp. To give freedom.

Pres. Our creed?

Eighth Consp. To annihilate.

Pres. Our duty?

Ninth Consp. To obey.

Pres. Brothers, the questions have been answered well. There are none but Nihilists present. Let us see each other's faces. (*The Conspirators unmask.*) Michael, recite the oath.

Michael. To strangle whatever nature is in us; neither to love nor to be loved, neither to pity nor to be pitied, neither to marry nor to be given in marriage, till the end is come; to stab secretly by night; to drop poison in the glass; to set father against son, and husband against wife; without fear, without hope, without future, to suffer, to annihilate, to revenge.

Pres. Are we all agreed?

Conspirators. We are all agreed. (*They disperse in various directions about the stage.*)

Pres. 'Tis after the hour, Michael, and she is not yet here.

Mich. Would that she were! We can do little without her.

Alexis. She cannot have been seized, President? but the police are on her track, I know.

Mich. You always seem to know a good deal about the movements of the police in Moscow – too much for an honest conspirator.

Pres. If those dogs have caught her, the red flag of the people will float on a barricade in every street till we find her! It was foolish of her to go to the Grand Duke's ball. I told her so, but she said she wanted to see the Czar and all his cursed brood face to face once.

Alexis. Gone to the State ball?

Mich. I have no fear. She is as hard to capture as a she-wolf is, and twice as dangerous; besides, she is well disguised. But is there any news from the Palace to-night, President? What is that bloody despot doing now besides torturing his only son? Have any of you seen him? One hears strange stories about him. They say he loves the people; but a king's son never does that. You cannot breed them like that.

Pres. Since he came back from abroad a year ago his father has kept him in close prison in his palace.

Mich. An excellent training to make him a tyrant in his turn; but is there any news, I say?

Pres. A council is to be held to-morrow, at four o'clock, on some secret business the spies cannot find out.

Mich. A council in a king's palace is sure to be about some bloody work or other. But in what room is this council to be held?

Pres. (*reading from letter*). In the yellow tapestry room called after the Empress Catherine.

Mich. I care not for such long-sounding names. I would know where it is.

Pres. I cannot tell, Michael. I know more about the insides of prisons than of palaces.

Mich. (*speaking suddenly to Alexis*). Where is this room, Alexis?

Alexis. It is on the first floor, looking out on to the inner courtyard. But why do you ask, Michael?

Mich. Nothing, nothing, boy! I merely take a great interest in the Czar's life and movements, and I knew you could tell me all about the palace. Every poor student of medicine in Moscow knows all about king's houses. It is their duty, is it not?

Alexis (*aside*). Can Michael suspect me? There is something strange in his manner to-night. Why doesn't she come? The whole fire of revolution seems fallen into dull ashes when she is not here.

Mich. Have you cured many patients lately, at your hospital, boy?

Alex. There is one who lies sick to death I would fain cure, but cannot.

Mich. Ay, and who is that?

Alex. Russia, our mother.

Mich. The curing of Russia is surgeon's business, and must be done by the knife. I like not your method of medicine.

Pres. Professor, we have read the proofs of your last article; it is very good indeed.

Mich. What is it about, Professor?

Professor. The subject, my good brother, is assassination considered as a method of political reform.

Mich. I think little of pen and ink in revolutions. One dagger will do more than a hundred epigrams. Still, let us read this scholar's last production. Give it to me. I will read it myself.

Prof. Brother, you never mind your stops; let Alexis read it.

Mich. Ay! he is as tripping of speech as if he were some young aristocrat; but for my own part I care not for the stops so that the sense be plain.

Alex. (*reading*). "The past has belonged to the tyrant, and he has defiled it; ours is the future, and we shall make it holy." Ay! let us make the future holy; let there be one revolution at least which is not bred in crime, nurtured in murder!

Mich. They have spoken to us by the sword, and by the sword we shall answer! You are too delicate for us, Alexis. There should be none here but men whose hands are rough with labour or red with blood.

Pres. Peace, Michael, peace! He is the bravest heart among us.

Mich. (*aside*). He will need to be brave to-night.

(The sound of sleigh bells is heard outside.)

Voice (*outside*). Per crucem ad lucem.

Answer of man on guard. Per sanguinem ad libertatem.

Mich. Who is that?

Vera. God save the people!

Pres. Welcome, Vera, welcome! We have been sick at heart till we saw you; but now methinks the star of freedom has come to wake us from the night.

Vera. It is night, indeed, brother! Night without moon or star! Russia is smitten to the heart! The man Ivan whom men call the Czar strikes now at our mother with a dagger deadlier than ever forged by tyranny against a people's life!

Mich. What has the tyrant done now?

Vera. To-morrow martial law is to be proclaimed in Russia.

Omnes. Martial law! We are lost! We are lost!

Alex. Martial law! Impossible!

Mich. Fool, nothing is impossible in Russia but reform.

Vera. Ay, martial law. The last right to which the people clung has been taken from them. Without trial, without appeal, without accuser even, our brothers will be taken from their houses, shot in the streets like dogs, sent away to die in the snow, to starve in the dungeon, to rot in the mine. Do you know what martial law means? It means the strangling of a whole nation. The streets will be filled with soldiers night and day; there will be sentinels at every door. No man dare walk abroad now but the spy or the traitor. Cooped up in the dens we hide in, meeting by stealth, speaking with bated breath; what good can we do now for Russia?

Pres. We can suffer at least.

Vera. We have done that too much already. The hour is now come to annihilate and to revenge.

Pres. Up to this the people have borne everything.

Vera. Because they have understood nothing. But now we, the Nihilists, have given them the tree of knowledge to eat of and the day of silent suffering is over for Russia.

Mich. Martial law, Vera! This is fearful tidings you bring.

Pres. It is the death warrant of liberty in Russia.

Vera. Or the tocsin of revolution.

Mich. Are you sure it is true?

Vera. Here is the proclamation. I stole it myself at the ball to-night from a young fool, one of Prince Paul's secretaries, who had been given it to copy. It was that which made me so late.

(Vera hands proclamation to Michael, who reads it.)

Mich. "To ensure the public safety – martial law. By order of the Czar, father of his people." The father of his people!

Vera. Ay! a father whose name shall not be hallowed, whose kingdom shall change to a republic, whose trespasses shall not be forgiven him, because he has robbed us of our daily bread; with whom is neither might, nor right, nor glory, now or for ever.

Pres. It must be about this that the council meet to-morrow. It has not yet been signed.

Alex. It shall not be while I have a tongue to plead with.

Mich. Or while I have hands to smite with.

Vera. Martial law! O God, how easy it is for a king to kill his people by thousands, but we cannot rid ourselves of one crowned man in Europe! What is there of awful majesty in these men which makes the hand unsteady, the dagger treacherous, the pistol-shot harmless? Are they not men of like passions with ourselves, vulnerable to the same diseases, of flesh and blood not different from our own? What made Olgiati tremble at the supreme crisis of that Roman life, and Guido's nerve fail him when he should have been of iron and of steel? A plague, I say, on these fools of Naples, Berlin, and Spain! Methinks that if I stood face to face with one of the crowned men my eye would see more clearly, my aim be more sure, my whole body gain a strength and power that was not my own! Oh, to think what stands between us and freedom in Europe! a few old men, wrinkled, feeble, tottering dotards whom a boy could strangle for a ducat, or a woman stab in a night-time. And these are the things that keep us from democracy, that keep us from liberty. But now methinks the brood of men is dead and the dull earth grown sick of child-bearing, else would no crowned dog pollute God's air by living.

Omnes. Try us! Try us! Try us!

Mich. We shall try thee, too, some day, Vera.

Vera. I pray God thou mayest! Have I not strangled whatever nature is in me, and shall I not keep my oath?

Mich. (*to President*). Martial law, President! Come, there is no time to be lost. We have twelve hours yet before us till the council meet. Twelve hours! One can overthrow a dynasty in less

time than that.

Pres. Ay! or lose one's own head.

(Michael and the President retire to one corner of the stage and sit whispering. Vera takes up the proclamation, and reads it to herself; Alexis watches and suddenly rushes up to her.)

Alex. Vera!

Vera. Alexis, you here! Foolish boy, have I not prayed you to stay away? All of us here are doomed to die before our time, fated to expiate by suffering whatever good we do; but you, with your bright boyish face, you are too young to die yet.

Alex. One is never too young to die for one's country!

Vera. Why do you come here night after night?

Alex. Because I love the people.

Vera. But your fellow-students must miss you. Are there no traitors among them? You know what spies there are in the University here. O Alexis, you must go! You see how desperate suffering has made us. There is no room here for a nature like yours. You must not come again.

Alex. Why do you think so poorly of me? Why should I live while my brothers suffer?

Vera. You spake to me of your mother once. You said you loved her. Oh, think of her!

Alex. I have no mother now but Russia, my life is hers to take or give away; but to-night I am here to see you. They tell me you are leaving for Novgorod to-morrow.

Vera. I must. They are getting faint-hearted there, and I would

fan the flame of this revolution into such a blaze that the eyes of all kings in Europe shall be blinded. If martial law is passed they will need me all the more there. There is no limit, it seems, to the tyranny of one man; but there shall be a limit to the suffering of a whole people.

Alex. God knows it, I am with you. But you must not go. The police are watching every train for you. When you are seized they have orders to place you without trial in the lowest dungeon of the palace. I know it – no matter how. Oh, think how without you the sun goes from our life, how the people will lose their leader and liberty her priestess. Vera, you must not go!

Vera. If you wish it, I will stay. I would live a little longer for freedom, a little longer for Russia.

Alex. When you die then Russia is smitten indeed; when you die then I shall lose all hope – all... Vera, this is fearful news you bring – martial law – it is too terrible. I knew it not, by my soul, I knew it not!

Vera. How could you have known it? It is too well laid a plot for that. This great White Czar, whose hands are red with the blood of the people he has murdered, whose soul is black with his iniquity, is the cleverest conspirator of us all. Oh, how could Russia bear two hearts like yours and his!

Alex. Vera, the Emperor was not always like this. There was a time when he loved the people. It is that devil, whom God curse, Prince Paul Maraloffski who has brought him to this. To-morrow, I swear it, I shall plead for the people to the Emperor.

Vera. Plead to the Czar! Foolish boy, it is only those who are sentenced to death that ever see our Czar. Besides, what should he care for a voice that pleads for mercy? The cry of a strong nation in its agony has not moved that heart of stone.

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