

**'The Horse Stealers' by Anton Chekhov  
adapted for the stage by Mark Allen.**

THE NARRATOR BEGINS SITTING CROSS-LEGGED ON THE FLOOR AND ONCE THE AUDIENCE ARE SEATED, HE LAUNCHES INTO THE TALE. HE IS DRESSED IN A NINETEENTH CENTURY PEASANT'S COSTUME AND IS EXCITING AND ENERGETIC IN HIS PORTRAYAL OF THE STORY, DRAWING THE AUDIENCE INTO CHEKHOV'S WORLD FOR THE DURATION OF THE PERFORMANCE AND PLAYING EACH OF THE CHARACTERS DIFFERENTLY. THE VARIOUS CHARACTERS ARE INDICATED IN BRACKETS NEXT TO ANY SPOKEN TEXT, OTHERWISE IT SHOULD BE TOLD IN THE NARRATOR'S NATURAL VOICE.

**Narrator:** Allow me to sit here and tell you a tale  
Of a foolish young doctor I know,  
Who got himself into some terrible grief  
About one and a half years ago.  
Yergunov was the young fellow's name  
And he had quite a strong reputation  
For being a drunkard and telling tall tales  
That were obviously pure fabrication.  
Now his boss sent him out on an errand one day  
To fetch back some quite urgent supplies  
And he lent him his horse to go faster it seems,  
Which in hindsight was clearly not wise.  
Well the doctor was galloping back from his trip  
On this terribly cold winters night,  
When a blizzard descended upon the poor man  
And snow covered all things in sight.  
Our hero continued to trudge on regardless  
And he headed for home unabated,  
But he only succeeded in getting more lost  
And becoming somewhat agitated.  
Just when the doctor was feeling the cold  
And he needed a place to get warm,  
A wonderful sight in the distance appeared  
That would mean he'd be safe from the storm.

A tavern emerged from the snowy horizon  
And though it was known to be seedy,  
The doctor could not be too picky right now  
Because he and the horse were so needy.  
So Yergunov trotted right up to the inn  
And he tapped on the window with fear

**(Yergunov):** *"Let me come in and get warm will you granny?"*

**(Lyubka):** *"There's no need to shout, I can hear!"*

The reply that he got was unwelcoming,  
But this was clearly no time to make friends,  
He just had to get in and away from the storm  
Before he and his horse met their ends.

**(Yergunov):** *"Granny I was off to the hospital  
And it appears that I'm lost in the snow.  
Could you please let me in and away from the cold  
I am of your own people you know."*

**(Lyubka):** *"All my own people are home fast asleep "  
And we don't invite strangers", she said  
"And there's no point in knocking,  
The gate is unlocked, you can tie your horse up in the shed."*

**(Yergunov):** *"Thank you old gran.",* said the doctor with glee  
Though it was the old dear's moral duty.

**(Lyubka):** *"I am not an old granny!",* the woman replied  
She was right in fact she was a beauty.

It transpired that the pretty girl's name was Lyubka  
And she lived at the inn with her mum.  
With one look at her face in the soft lantern light  
Yergunov was quite glad that he'd come.  
So he went off to tie up his horse in the shed  
Making sure that he'd made it secure,  
'Cause this inn had a bad reputation for trouble  
As I think I have mentioned before.

When he'd fastened his beast in the dark of the stable  
He heard such a terrible sound,  
And he saw to his horror, the face of a horse  
When he plucked up the guts to turn round.  
There was somebody else staying there at the inn  
With the girl and her mother as well,  
And Yergunov wielded his gun for protection;  
This wasn't a top class hotel.  
The doctor then quickly unsaddled his horse  
As an added protection from theft,  
And with all his belongings tucked under his arm  
He looked back at his horse and then left.  
As he entered the tavern he welcomed the heat  
And the smell of washed floors was quite pleasant,  
And as Yergunov stood and surveyed this new scene  
He noticed an unshaven peasant.  
Kalashnikov was this character's name  
And his face was well known in society,  
Not for the work that he did for good causes,  
But for his horse thief notoriety.

As Yergunov studied the room with more caution  
He saw someone else on the floor,  
He was next to the stove and slept under a coat  
By the looks of him he was quite poor.  
But the doctor decided to chat with the men  
After all he was stuck in this muddle,  
So he pulled up a chair and sat down at the table  
And tried to keep warm in a huddle.  
He attempted to strike up polite conversation -  
Kalashnikov just sat and read,  
And as for the man lying under the coat  
Well for all they knew he could be dead.

So Yergunov sat there in silence a while  
Until Lyubka came into the room,  
And much to the doctors apparent relief  
The girl's presence dispelled the gloom.  
All of a sudden the atmosphere lightened,  
Kalashnikov jerked into life  
And as he and Lyubka were sharing a joke  
Yergunov hoped she wasn't his wife.  
But as he was watching the couple sat talking  
They heard such a terrible sound,  
Which growled and then squeaked and then faded away  
And it made Lyubka look around.

**(Lyubka):** *"It's the satanic spirits"*, the startled girl whispered  
Kalashnikov just blamed the wind

**(Kalash'kov):** *"An' What's your opinion of devils?"*, he said  
*"Do you believe that there is such a thing?"*

**(Yergunov):** *"What's to say brother?"*, Yergunov answered  
*"Some say that it's only a tale,  
But I tell you that I have seen many such things  
That to hear them would make you go pale.  
These devils you speak of do not have great horns  
But I met one such fiend just last year  
Such a terribly frightful encounter it was,  
And it happened not too far from here."*

Yergunov had an audience now  
And it seemed to go straight to his head,  
'Cause instead of relating his story in earnest  
He made up some nonsense instead.

**(Yergunov):** *"I was driving I remember to Golyshimo  
To vaccinate some of the peasants,  
When someone took hold of the reigns of my horse  
And I found myself there in his presence*

*He had eyes that were piercing and black as the night  
And his face was all covered in soot,  
He shouted an order right at me to stop  
So I thought that I'd better stay put.  
The devil demanded to know of my business,  
So what could I do but comply?"*  
Now so far the doctor was telling the truth  
But the rest is an absolute lie.

**(Yergunov):** *"When I told of my journey to vaccinate peasants  
He seemed to remain fairly calm,  
Then he challenged me right there to prove it to him  
And he thrust out his grubby, bared arm.  
So what could I do but inject this vile beast,  
But imagine how I was disgusted  
When I pulled out my lancet and he had run off  
And I found that my needle had rusted."*

Now at this point, the man who once slept on the floor  
Leapt up quickly like he were on fire,  
And the doctor could soon recognise this strange man  
As he stood there and called him a liar.

**(Merik):** *"I was the man that you met on that night  
An' it's true I took 'old of your reigns,  
But as for the stuff about needles an' rust,  
Well the cold weather's gone to your brains!"*

Yergunov instantly saw his mistake  
And he thought quickly for an evasion

**(Yergunov):** *"I recognise you but I'm sorry to say  
That it must be some other occasion."*

The man merely smiled and he joined his two friends  
As the doctor just sat being quiet,  
He was glad that he'd managed to fool these three peasants  
'Cause it may well have started a riot.

The man that had woken it seems was called Merik  
Who looked like the doctor described,  
With a soot covered face and a mop of black hair  
And those terribly cold, piercing eyes.  
But as Lyubka came in with a tray full of food  
And a bottle of Vodka to drink,  
Yergunov started to eat sausages  
And forgot any fear in a blink.  
After eating his food, the doctor decided  
To wash it all down with some liquor,  
But as he was draining his third glass of vodka  
He moaned that the others weren't quicker.  
He had already drunk three times more than these people  
And pretty soon it would be more,  
If he carried on drinking at this rate however  
He'd be on his back on the floor.  
So having discovered his taste for the vodka  
And having drained half the decanter,  
Yergunov wanted to join his companions  
In friendly and light-hearted banter.

**(Yergunov):** *"So I hear that you lot are great horse thieves," he said  
"And you seem like fine fellows indeed."*

**(Merik):** *"Fine fellows you'd call 'em but I don't agree  
They're all nothin' but drunkards an' thieves."*

**(Kalash'kov):** *"Yes they've 'ad their day an' it's over I'd say  
An' there aint much more left of their kind."*

*"I reckon there's only Filya left now  
An' he aint much good 'cause he's blind."*

For a while the companions were chatty and close  
Telling stories of courage and fear,  
But when Yergunov started to tell them his tales  
It just didn't seem that they could hear.

Perhaps it was 'cause he was somewhat too drunk  
And his speech seemed to be a bit slurred,  
Or perhaps it was 'cause he was caught telling lies  
And they no longer believed a word.  
So the doctor just sat there and sulked on his own  
Until much to his great satisfaction,  
Kalashnikov played tunes on his balalaika  
And the other two burst into action.  
Lyubka and Merik danced gaily about  
Flinging arms and legs up in the air,  
And they both laughed and whooped as they whizzed round and round  
While the doctor could not help but stare.  
Lyubka was somehow hypnotic to him  
And he wished at that moment in time,  
That he too could be poor and have danced with this girl  
Who now looked so mesmerically fine.

The music then stopped and the dancers slowed down  
'Til they came to collapse on a chair  
And then Merik looked deep into Lyubka's eyes  
Whilst caressing her long, plaited hair.

**(Merik):** *"I'll find where your old mother's money is hidden  
And cut both of your throats one by one,  
Then I'll burn down this tavern and run off to Kuban  
And no-one will know where I've gone."*

Lyubka's reaction confused Yergunov  
As she treated his statement with silence,  
And he thought what an odd way it was to behave  
When this man had just threatened such violence.  
The quiet was broken when Kalashnikov left  
And the doctor, to foil any theft  
Thought he'd follow him outside to say his goodbyes  
And to check just on which horse he left.

So they both braved the cold and they said their farewells  
And the peasant prepared for the ride,  
And once Yergunov had double-checked on his horse  
He decided to go back inside.

So the doctor returned and sat back in the warmth  
Waiting there for the morning to break,  
He intended to go back as soon as he could  
So he tried his best to stay awake.

When the candles burnt out they were left in the dark  
And when Merik decided to smoke,  
The stench filled the air and he soon left the room  
When Yergunov began to choke.

Half an hour passed and the doctor could see  
A faint light from just outside the door,  
He could make out the figures of Lyubka and Merik  
Though the light from their candle was poor

**(Lyubka):** *"Now listen my dear,"* said Lyubka in whispers  
*"I know you'll kill me and my mother,*  
*And I know that you'll steal all our money from here,*  
*Run to Kuban and then love another,*  
*But I beg of you stay Merik, what will you go on?*  
*I know that you came here on foot."*  
And the doctor could see a most hideous grin  
From the villain who was covered in soot.

Now the scoundrel ran out of the door to escape  
On the horse that was Yergunov's bosses,  
But the doctor gave chase with revolver in hand;  
He was desperate to cut down his losses.  
As he ran in pursuit he was stopped by Lyubka  
Who bolted the door in a hurry,  
And she further delayed him by blocking his way  
Causing Yergunov serious worry.



The thief was escaping and here was this girl  
Who was really more strong than she seemed,  
And they struggled for minutes 'til he threw her aside  
And he carried on chasing the fiend.  
When he ran from the tavern and into the stable  
He looked round for sources of light,  
As he peered through the dark he could see that his horse  
Had now gone with the thief in the night.  
So he ran back inside and he searched for Lyubka  
Who'd gone to her bedroom to hide,  
And as he burst in to confront the poor girl  
She was obviously quite petrified.  
This didn't deter him and Yergunov shouted:

**(Yergunov):** *"Where is my horse, tell me now!"*,

But the girl didn't answer, just looked innocent  
And she furrowed her childlike brow.  
Now the doctor through reasons of passion and pity  
Rushed forward to embrace the girl,  
And she spotted her chance to escape right away  
And attacked with her fists in a whirl.  
The doctor was sent reeling backwards in pain  
As he fell with a thud on the floor,  
And Lyubka continued to lay into him  
As the doctor ran out of the door.

Yergunov lay on a bench in the tavern  
And nursed his fresh bruises 'til dawn,  
Then he found that his knapsack and saddle were stolen  
And wished that he'd never been born.  
But he finally set off on his journey back home  
And all manner of thoughts filled his head,  
Like his boss who had just lost his favourite horse  
And who probably thought he was dead.

It was an unhappy man trudging home on that day  
And he cursed his contemptible life,  
How he longed to be free like those three lawless peasants  
Who weren't burdened with hassle and strife.  
So your probably thinking "Well what's happened since"  
To this man now that time has departed,  
Well he was given the sack from his job as a doctor  
And wandered the streets broken hearted.  
Then one day on his travels he walked past an inn  
That had burnt to the ground just that morning,  
And he knew then that Merik had slit Lyubka's throat  
And has fulfilled the rest of his warning.  
So now here he is being lawless and free  
Using peasants as his inspiration,  
And I know all of this because Yergunov's me  
And horse stealing's my new occupation.

LIGHTS FADE TO BLACK ON THE SMILING NARRATOR.

**The End**