

Carlisle Floyd (b. 1926)
Susannah

Opera in Two Acts
Music and libretto by Carlisle Floyd

Premiered 24 February 1955 in Ruby Diamond Auditorium at Florida State University

Susannah Susan Hellman Spatafora, Soprano
Olin Blitch Todd Donovan, Baritone
Little Bat Scott Michael, Tenor
Sam Anthony Wright Webb, Tenor
Elder McLean Brian Wehrle, Bass
Elder Ott Benjamin Bloomfield, Bass-baritone
Elder Hayes Stanley Wilson, Tenor
Elder Gleaton Fred Frabotta, Tenor
Mrs. McLean Melissa Misener, Mezzo-soprano
Mrs. Ott Robyn Rocklein, Mezzo-soprano
Mrs. Hayes Stefanie Izzo, Soprano
Mrs. Gleaton Aleksandra Ritums, Soprano

ACT ONE

CHAPTER 1 – OVERTURE

SCENE 1

Scene: New Hope Valley in the mountains of Tennessee. It is a Monday night in mid-July, and a square dance is in progress in the yard of New Hope Church. A fiddler and caller are in the background, and downstage are the participants in the dance, the people of the community as on-lookers, the Elders and their wives. At the curtain's rise, the dance is underway. Susannah, a young girl of uncommon beauty, is conspicuous in the group by virtue of a brightly-colored dress and the gravitation of men to her square. Her face is flushed with high spirits and excitement, and she is unaware of the eyes upon her. It is early evening, and oil lanterns, hanging from trees, have been lit.

CHAPTER 2 – MRS. GLEATON: It's a hot night for dancin',
Ain't no breeze a-stirrin'. Them trees ain't moved all day.
MRS. HAYES, MRS. MCLEAN, MRS. OTT: It shore be still. It shore be still.

MRS. OTT: It's just like before a cloud-burst,
When it smells like rain an' the air be's heavy,
But it ain't like that tonight.
It's just dry and hot and still.

MRS. HAYES, MRS. GLEATON, MRS. OTT: It shore is, it shore is.

MRS. HAYES: Seems like it's always this way at meetin' time.

MRS. GLEATON AND MRS. OTT: Don't it now.

MRS. MCLEAN: Seems like the Lord is bendin'

Sinners to his will,
Like smokin' a fox out'n his hole.

The Lord sends the rain
On the just an' unjust,
Jes' like the Good Book says.

MRS. HAYES, MRS. GLEATON, MRS. OTT

And us as is saved has got to suffer.

MRS. MCLEAN

Hear tell the preacher what's comin'
Is one what can do just that:

Can bring sinners to repentance
Like none we ever had.

MRS. HAYES, MRS. GLEATON, MRS. OTT

They say he shore hates sin.

They say he shore hates sin.

MRS. MCLEAN

They's plenty in this valley

And I'm prayin' fer a rich harvest.

They's many a lost and wand'rin' soul

That's gotta be brought to the light.

I hope Olin Blitch can smoke 'em out.

I aim to do my part.

MRS. HAYES, MRS. GLEATON, MRS. OTT

Let's pray fer a real good meetin'

Where lots of lost souls shall be found.

(A moment's pause while the women watch the dance. By this time, Gleaton, Hayes and Ott have attempted unsuccessfully to get into Susannah's square. Seeing the efforts of the others, McLean can resist no longer.)

ELDER MCLEAN

I think I'll step a few.

MRS. MCLEAN

(Looking up sharply)

Y' got a puny heart, Bat.

ELDER MCLEAN

I won't be gone but a minute.

MRS. HAYES

(After a moment)

Susannah looks mighty pretty tonight.

It's a shame her ma cain't see her.

MRS. MCLEAN

It's a blessin', you mean.

(The three wives look at Mrs. McLean in sudden surprise. Then slowly they turn to observe Susannah. By the end of Mrs. McLean's outburst, they are nodding their heads in assent.)

She's a shameless girl, she is.

Showin' herself to all the men.

Look at her throwin' her head back

And look at the cut of her dress,

But what could you expect but a wench of a girl

Who was raised by a drunken brother?

That pretty a face must hide some evil.

They's evil in that one, you'll see.

She's a shameless wench, Susannah is,

And it's a blessin' her ma cain't see her.

MRS. HAYES, MRS. GLEATON, MRS. OTT

It's a blessin' her ma cain't see her.

(There enters upstage, at first unobserved by the dancers, a tall, powerfully built man in a plaid shirt and ten-gallon hat. The people become aware of his presence gradually, the music dies out, and the dancers cease dancing. The Elders group together and move to the stranger stiffly.)

MCLEAN

How are y' called, stranger?

BLITCH

I am the Reverend Olin Blitch.

(At Blitch's announcement of his identity, there is a general stir of voices "Olin Blitch, the meetin' preacher. Well, I do know," etc.)

And I've come to New Hope Valley

To cast out devils and conquer sin
And bring sinners to repentance.
To bring the Word of the Lord
And the power of His judgments.
O, I am the Reverend Olin Blitch
And I've come to New Hope Valley.

MCLEAN

(Speaking)

But we expected y'here tomorrow.

BLITCH

(Speaking)

I always come a day early
Fer thinkin', an' prayin', an' fastin'.
McLEAN We're glad to have y', brother,
An' you've come in the name of the Lord.
This here's Brother Hayes, Brother Gleaton an' Brother Ott.
We're the Elders of this church.

(Blitch shakes hands with each in turn.)

HAYES You're welcome among us.

BLITCH Amen.

OTT Let's pray yer visit's gonna bless us.

BLITCH Amen.

GLEATON We're prayin' fer a rich harvest of souls.

BLITCH

Amen. And I'm proud to be in your midst, my friends,
And let's pray that the lost shall be found,
To be washed in the blood, that cleansin' stream,
O, let's pray that the lost shall be found.

WOMEN

(Overlapping)

He is the Reverend Olin Blitch
And he's come to New Hope Valley
To cast out devils and conquer sin
And bring sinners to repentance.
To bring the Word of the Lord
And the power of His judgments.
O, he is the Reverend Olin Blitch
And he's come to New Hope Valley.

MEN

Olin Blitch has come to New Hope Valley,
Lord be praised!
Oh yes, Olin Blitch has come to New Hope Valley,
Lord be praised!

BLITCH

I am the Reverend Olin Blitch
And I've come to New Hope Valley
To cast out devils and conquer sin
And bring sinners to repentance,
To bring the Word of the Lord
And the power of His judgments.
O, I am the Reverend Olin Blitch
And I've come to New Hope Valley.

(To dancers, immediately assuming role of moral arbiter for the community)

Now resume your steppin'
Under the eye of the Lord
And let nothin' pass between y',
What y' wouldn't want Him to see,
For the Lord seeth all.

(The music and the dancing begin again. The Elders bring Blitch down stage to the wives, and there are pantomimed introductions and handshakings after which they all turn to watch the dancing. Susannah is once more the center of attention.)

BLITCH

(After a moment in which he has watched Susannah intently)

Who's the pretty one there in the middle
That's gittin' all the boys?

McLEAN

Susannah Polk, who was raised by her brother
What don't draw a sober breath.
He's a triflin' one, that Sam is.

(Sam Polk, that's the name he was give.)

He just hunts an' traps an' fishes all day
An' is allers drunk at night.

BLITCH

Let's pray for his soul an' his sister's.

I'll pray for 'em both tonight.

GLEATON

They're pore as chitlins, them two,
Bare able to live, that's all.

MRS. McLEAN

(Sharply, to counteract any sympathy)

Susannah an' Sam is evil, I say.

They's bad blood in that family.

It's too pretty a face an' wicked them eyes,

She'll come to no good, mark my words.

She'll come to no good, mark my words.

BLITCH

I'll pray fer her soul tonight,

(After watching a while longer)

Think I'll join the young folks.

Ain't danced in quite a spell.

OTT

They'd be pleased to have y', I'm sure.

(Blitch goes into the group and eventually makes his way to Susannah's square. The dancers in her square stop, stare, and Susannah's partner eagerly gives his place to Blitch. Susannah is shy, then as Blitch extends his hand, she smiles, and the square begins dancing again.)

MRS. McLEAN

(Ruefully)

She'll come to no good; mark my words.

SCENE TWO

Scene: Later the same evening.

(The scene is the front of the Polk farm house which possesses a rickety porch and steps. There are unpainted porch boxes of geraniums and petunias and tattered curtains in the windows. There are also an old rocker and a rusty plow point on the porch. The stage is dimly lit and quietness should pervade the scene.)

(Susannah and Little Bat enter. Susannah is still radiant with excitement. Little Bat is a shifty-eyed youth, not too strong mentally. He possesses instead a liteness and feline quality of movement which, coupled with his eyes, gives him a constantly expectant and alert air. He looks about him furtively upon entering. It should be apparent from the beginning of the scene that he worships Susannah.)

SUSANNAH

CHAPTER 3 – Was y' ever at such a nice square dance, Little Bat?

I ain't never had such fun, have you?

I danced an' danced 'til I was plum' wore out.

I couldn'a' danced another step.

LITTLE BAT

(Suddenly, after silently agreeing with Susannah's enthusiasm)

Where's Sam?

SUSANNAH

He ain't home yet, or he's gone to bed.

LITTLE BAT

I'm scared o' Sam.

SUSANNAH

(Puzzled but kindly)

Why? Why you scared o' him?

LITTLE BAT

He gits drunk. That's what my folks say.

SUSANNAH

He don't never hurt nobody,

An' he's awful good to me.

LITTLE BAT

I'm scared o' him all the same.

My folks don't like me comin' here.

They scared o' what Sam might do.

My ma says they's bad blood in yo' family

But I like to look at you.

SUSANNAH

No need to be afraid, Little Bat.
No harm's gonna come to y' here.

LITTLE BAT

(Brightening)

You're awful pretty tonight, Susannah.
You was pretty at the square dance tonight.
All them men was shore a-courtin' you;
I seed 'em, ev'ry one.

SUSANNAH

(Pleased)

Pshaw! Won't nothin' of the kind.
You're storyin' agin, that's what.

LITTLE BAT

The preacher he come to yer square, I seed,
An' you's a mite pleased; I'd say;

SUSANNAH

He seems like a real nice feller,
'Though he ain't much at dancin' fer true
He stepped on my feet so much o' the time,
They're bound to turn black an' blue.
(They both laugh, and then there is a pause while Susannah looks up into the night.)
Ain't it a pretty night!

The sky's so dark and velvet-like
And it's all lit up with stars.
It's like a great big mirror
Reflectin' fireflies over a pond.
Look at all them stars, Little Bat.

The longer y' look the more y' see.
The sky seems so heavy with stars
That it might fall right down out of heaven
And cover us all up in one big blanket
Of velvet stitched with diamon's.

Ain't it a pretty night.
Just think, those stars can all peep down
An' see way beyond where we can
They can see way beyond them mountains
To Nashville and Asheville an' Knoxville.

I wonder what it's like out there,
Out there beyond them mountains
Where the folks talk nice, an' the folks dress nice
Like y' see in the mail-order catalogs.

I aim to leave this valley some day
An' find out fer myself
To see all the tall buildin's
And all the street lights
An' to be one o' them folks myself.

I wonder if I'd get lonesome fer the valley though,
Fer the sound of crickets
An' the smell of pine straw
Fer soft little rabbits an' bloomin' things
An' the mountains turnin' gold in the fall.

But I could always come back
If I got homesick fer the valley.
So I'll leave it someday an' see fer myself.
Someday I'll leave an' then I'll come back
When I've seen what's beyond them mountains.

Ain't it a pretty night.
The sky's so heavy with stars tonight
That it could fall right down out of heaven
An' cover us up, and cover us up,

In one big blanket of velvet and diamon's.

(Sam has come on unobserved during Susannah's aria. At the end of it, he says in echo to announce himself, "Ain't it a pretty night?" At the sound of his voice Susannah looks up, surprised, while Little Bat leaps to his feet, ready for instant departure. It should be immediately apparent that the bond between the brother and sister is one of loyalty, warmth and tenderness. Sam, the uncomprehended poet and recluse, is gentle by nature and tragically passive, until the one thing of beauty left in his life is attacked. He has the same dark good looks as his sister and is in his thirties.)

SAM

Ain't it a pretty night.

SUSANNAH

Sam! When did y' come?

(To Little Bat who is edging off-stage)

See y' tomorrow night at the picnic supper.

Thanks fer walkin' me home, Little Bat!

(Little Bat nods quickly and runs off.)

SAM

How was the square dance, little robin?

SUSANNAH

(In a rush of excitement)

I had a real good time, Sam, a real good time.

I danced an' danced 'til I was plum' wore out.

I couldn'a' danced another step.

An' the meetin' preacher was there

An' he come an' danced with me

An' so did the Elders.

An' the Elders' wives all give me hard looks,

But I had a good time all the same.

SAM

(Teasing)

Any of 'em court y'?

SUSANNAH

Course not, Sam, I ain't old enough fer that yet.

SAM

Sure you are, little robin,

You're goin' on nineteen.

Pretty soon you'll be an old maid.

SUSANNAH

I ain't a-gone git married fer a long time yet.

I'm gonna stay here an' cook fer you.

SAM

You're a pretty wench

An' I'm proud to have y' here,

An' I'm right proud to eat your cookin'.

(Sam rises and stretches.)

SUSANNAH

Don't go to bed right yet, Sam.

Sing me the "Jaybird" song first.

Remember how Pa used to always sing me "Jaybird"

Afore I'd go to bed.

You ain't sung it fer me in a long time now,

An' it always makes me feel real happy.

(Sam sits down and puts his arm around her shoulders.)

SAM

All right, I'll sing y' "Jaybird",

An' then we gotta git to bed.

"Oh, jaybird sittin' on a hick'ry limb,
He winked at me and I winked at him.

I picked up a brickbat

An' hit him on the chin.

'Looka here, little boy, don't you do that agin! "

SUSANNAH AND SAM

"Oh, jaybird sittin' on a hick'ry limb,

He winked at me -and I winked at him.

I picked up a brickbat

An' hit him on the chin.

'Looka here, little boy, don't you do that agin! "

(Susannah and Sam leap to their feet and, holding each other by the hands, dance around the yard together, laughing and shrieking happily as they do so. Then laughing and breathing heavily from their exertion, they stagger to the steps and sit down. Their breathing is easier, and there is silence while they look up at the sky.)

SUSANNAH AND SAM

(Sighing deeply)

Ain't it a pretty night.

SCENE THREE

Scene: A woods close to the Polk place. It is the following morning. (As the curtain rises, Susannah's voice is heard off-stage, humming the "Jaybird" song. There is also the less pronounced sound of water rushing over rocks. After some time, the Elders appear. They walk hesitantly, peering about them, obviously in search of something.)

HAYES

CHAPTER 4 – That crick oughta' be right about here.

OTT

I ain't see'd it fer some years now.

GLEATON

I recollect it was on the old Polk place. It may be dried up by now. Like the

one we used fer baptisms last summer.

OTT

We got to find it. Brother Blitch'll be needin' a baptism crick by sundown

come tomorrow. I mark him as a man what can bring in sinners. An' there's got

to be a crick all ready.

McLEAN

It'll be sum'mers around here.

(The Elders continue their search until Hayes suddenly looking up, shouts, "There it is!" His voice breaks off abruptly, and the other Elders look up and follow the direction of his raised arm. They all stand footed in their tracks for some time, expressions of shock on their faces being gradually supplanted by those of lust. Eventually McLean shutters the moment when he realizes what he is feeling and doing, and draws himself up indignantly. At the sound of his voice, the other Elders, horrified and deeply disturbed, too, at what they have felt, quickly adopt his outraged tone and stance. They continue to look, however.)

McLEAN

It's an outrage! It's a blasphemous outrage!

OTT

Naked as from her dead ma's womb!

GLEATON

It's a shameful sight to behold!

McLEAN

She's a shameless wench, this Susannah is. My wife allers said she was evil.

An' she was right, my brethren, She was mighty right. This girl, she belongs

to the devil!

HAYES

Exposin' herself in plain view of all who care to see.

OTT

The church won't stand fer a thing like this.

Our people, they must be told.

GLEATON

She must be brought to punishment.

Brother Blitch, he must be told.

McLEAN

This woman is of the devil.

She is without the saving grace.

She must be brought to repentance

Afore she meets God face to face.

HAYES, GLEATON, McLEAN, OTT

This woman is of the devil.

'Tis a shameful sight to behold.

She must be brought to repentance.

All the valley must be told.

(The Elders begin retreating slowly, casting furtive glances in the direction of the pond. They chant as they leave the stage, their voices gradually fading into the distance until they are gone. When the stage is silent, we hear again the unsuspecting Susannah singing merrily to herself.)

SUSANNAH

(offstage)

"Look a-here, little boy, don't you do that again!"

(She laughs.)

SCENE FOUR

Scene: The time is the same evening: The scene the same as in Scene 1. Now, however, there is a long crude table upstage laden with food. (Several women are at the table languidly keeping the flies away with fans made of paper streamers tacked to broom handles. There are people in knots of twos and threes pantomiming intense gossiping at the curtain's rise. There is a frail attempt at conviviality on the part of the young people who are oppressed by the hushed and foreboding atmosphere of the church ground.)

MRS. McLEAN

(Smug and gloating)

CHAPTER 5 – I ain't surprised.

I ain't a bit surprised.

It's jest as I was sayin' last night.

'Cept she was caught afore I'd a-thought.

It jes' goes to prove I was right.

MRS. HAYES

You was righter than right, that's certain.

'Twas a scandalous thing to do.

She's a wicked girl an' a threat to the valley.

I'll bound she's evil through and through.

MRS. OTT

She shore cain't tend to my young-uns no more.

She ain't fittin' fer the job

Any girl what'll do what she done,

Well, it's a sad thing to think upon.

MRS. GLEATON

She always seemed such a sweet girl

An' pleasin' to have around.

It's a hard, hard thing to realize how naked she was found.

MRS. McLEAN

(Sharply)

That's the cloak of the devil, that is, that sweetness and pretty face.

Don't let that fool you, sistern.

It's just the devil's way.

(The scene shifts to the Elders while the wives continue to pantomime their

talking. Several men from the crowd have gathered around them.)

FIRST MAN

Ain't the preacher comin' tonight?

McLEAN

He's a-prayin' an' a-fastin'. Preachin' starts tonight

SECOND MAN

What's he say 'bout the Polk gal?

HAYES

The same as what we said.

She's gotta make a public confession or out o' the church she goes.

OTT

An' outn the valley, too, maybe.

She's a schemin' one, she is.

Young men ain't safe with her around.

She's an instrument of the devil.

GLEATON

The preacher's at Brother McLean's house now

a-prayin' that her soul might be saved,

That she'll turn aside from her evil ways

An' be washed in the cleansin' stream.

(During McLean's lines, Susannah comes in quietly upstage carrying a covered dish. She is unobserved at first, and then as she starts downstage, the conversation dies out as the various groups become aware of her presence.)

McLEAN

She's a pow'rful one, this Susannah Polk,
My son she's lured away.

From all the things that he's been teached.

Fer that she's gonna have to pay.

(By this time, Susannah has come downstage abreast of the Elders' wives, nodding "good evening" on her way. The people have returned her greetings in some cases with fear and distrust and in others with lofty disdain. Susannah's expression has changed from one of easy cordiality to alert questioning. Superficially, however, she remains warm and friendly.)

SUSANNAH

Howdy. I'm sorry to be late

But Sam came home from huntin' awful late

An' I jes' couldn't git away no sooner.

(The women nod stiffly without looking up. There is total silence on the stage with all eyes on Susannah. Susannah, embarrassed, attempts more conversation, constantly growing more uneasy under the steady scrutiny of the circle of eyes.)

I brought a dish o' field peas.

I picked an' shelled em this evenin'

An' cooked 'em jest a bit ago.

(Still no response. She smiles only with her mouth now, faint flickers of smiles that hardly move her lips. Her eyes show only bewilderment and intense discomfort.)

I'll jes' sit 'em down over here if that's all right. I hope y' enjoy 'em.

(She sets the dish down on the table, and as she turns around she is caught in her motion by the stern voice of McLean.)

MCLEAN

Susannah, you ain't welcome here.

(Susannah turns around slowly, looking hopefully from face to face, and in seeing no warmth in any of them, she brings her hand lightly up to her throat, and smiling weakly begins backing upstage. She says "excuse me" several times as she backs away, and then at the edge of the stage she clamps her fist over her mouth and runs. When she is gone, there is a long moment of strained silence, finally shattered by the clipped, strident voice of Mrs. McLean.)

MRS. McLEAN

I wouldn't tech them peas o' her'n.

SCENE FIVE

Scene: A half hour later.

(Susannah is seated on the front steps of the Polk house as in Scene Two, her face in her hands. After a moment, Little Bat stealthily creeps in from stage right, craning his neck to see if Susannah is alone. She becomes aware of him suddenly and when she does, she leaps to her feet.)

SUSANNAH

CHAPTER 6 – Little Bat, what you doin' here?

LITTLE BAT

Is Sam here?

SUSANNAH

He's inside asleep.

LITTLE BAT

(Trembling with excitement)

I had to come tell y', Susannah.

SUSANNAH

Tell me what?

LITTLE BAT

I jes' had to come tell y'.

SUSANNAH

Tell me what?

Oh, you was there tonight.

(He nods. She goes to him quickly and takes him by the shoulders.)

What is it, Little Bat?

What have I done?

LITTLE BAT

(With a certain mysterious relish.)

My pa an' the other Elders,

They seen you bathin' this mornin',

A-bathin' without a stitch on

An' exposin' y'-self without no shame.

They gonna git y' fer doin' that.

An' they're gone run you out'n the church

An' maybe the valley, too.

They say the--

SUSANNAH

What do you mean "they seen me bathin'?"

LITTLE BAT

They was lookin' fer a baptism crick

An' they found it, only you was in it,

A-bathin', naked as a jay-bird.

They say it were a shameful sight.

SUSANNAH

But I been bathin' there all spring.

They ain't had a right to come aspyin'.

'Twon't no harm in what I done.

I been bathin' there all spring, Little Bat.

LITTLE BAT

(Unheeding)

They told the meetin' preacher

An' he's prayed fer yer soul all day.

They told all the church folks, I reckon,

An' the whole valley know, so they say.

SUSANNAH

Why, Little Bat? Why?

I ain't done nothin', I ain't.

LITTLE BAT

They say they ain't a feller in these parts

What's safe with you around.

They say y' let 'em love you up all they want,

An' then send their souls to hell.

They say you've got the devil in ya'

They say they've known it fer a long time now.

They say that you're an evil gal, you are,

An' that you're boun' to get yer due.

SUSANNAH

"They say. They say." Who's "they"?

LITTLE BAT

Everybody!

(Susannah turns her back to Little Bat, and putting her hands over her face, she shudders visibly. Little Bat who has been wildly gesticulating and boring in, suddenly slinks away, watching Susannah carefully.)

They's more what you don't know.

(Susannah has raised her head at the ominous sound of his words, and turning, she looks at him squarely. He cowers, and his entire attitude suggests duplicity and guilt. He moves away from her, and she stalks him.)

SUSANNAH

What is it, Little Bat?

What don't I know?

(Terror covers his face. Susannah continues to move toward him, and then Little Bat breaks, screaming and wringing his hands.)

LITTLE BAT

They made me say it! I swear they did!

My ma she scairt me an' pa did, too,

An' it was right in front o' the preacher

An' I was scairt, plum' scairt to death!

SUSANNAH

(Shouting and still moving toward him)

What did they make you say, Little Bat?

Tell me, what did you say?

LITTLE BAT

They made me say it, I swear they did!

I was plum' scairt to death!

SUSANNAH

(She lunges at him and shakes him fiercely by the shoulders.)

Tell me what did you say? Tell me! Tell me!

LITTLE BAT

(With an almost luxurious abandon)

I said you'd let me love you up. That's what they made me say.

I said you'd let me love you up an' in the worse sort o' way.

SUSANNAH

(Incredulously)

You didn't! You didn't! You couldn't have!

It's a lie! It's a lie! You know it is!

LITTLE BAT

(Completely beside himself)

I did! I did an' I know it's a lie.

You was allers good to me.

But they made me say it, I swear they did,

An' I was scairt,

Oh, Lord, I was scairt!

SUSANNAH

Git away from here

An' don't never come back.

Don't never come back to this house!

Git away, you lyin' varmint,

An' don't y' never come back!

Git out. Git out. Git out. Git out.

(Little Bat runs off wailing and blubbering loudly. Susannah stands midstage with clenched fists and eyes tightly shut against tears. She continues to mutter to herself, as if in some way the continued sound of her voice would postpone the acceptance of all that has been told her. Sam, who has been standing in the door, is suddenly seen.)

SAM

Feeble minded idjet!

(Susannah turns sharply at the sound of his voice, and running to him, she throws her arms around him. Her tone is altered now. She is spent temporarily, and her voice has a sound of quiet desperation about it.)

SUSANNAH

Oh, Sam, somethin' awful has happened.

SAM

I know. I heard it all.

SUSANNAH

(Looking intently into his face)

What's it all about Sam? What's it all about?

SAM

(Very gently)

It's about the way people is made,

I reckon, an' how they like to believe what's bad.

How short they are on lovin' kindness.

It must make the good Lord sad.

They don't know it ain't what you feel that counts

But what you do about it.

So instead they take it out on you.

It must make the good Lord sad.

'Way out yonder somewheres,

The Lord's great heart must break

At seein' how men treat one another

An' say they're doin' it all fer His sake.

It's a hard, hard thing for you to realize,

I know, that people want to believe what's bad

An' how short they are on lovin' kindness.

It must make the good. Lord sad.

SUSANNAH

(Searching his face hopefully)

But what am I gonna do Sam? What am I gonna do?

SAM

You cain't do nothin', little sparrow.

It's time alone what'll tell.

In the meantime, there'll be a lotta bad things.

They'll turn this valley into hell.

*(Susannah continues to look deeply into Sam's eyes and gradually the realization comes to her that he has ceased talking and that there is nothing more he can say to mitigate her plight. She begins to cry, at first noiselessly, only her shoulders revealing her inner effort to control her tears. Eventually her face begins to break up, and finally, throwing**her arms around Sam's neck, sobbing, she cries with desperate intensity.)*

SUSANNAH

Sing me the "Jay-bird" song, agin.

Please sing me "Jay-bird", Sam.

(CURTAIN)

ACT TWO

SCENE ONE

*SCENE: It is Friday morning.**(At the rise of the curtain, Sam is discovered leaning in the doorway of the Polk house with Susannah seated on the steps. She is sitting abstractedly as if she might have been in the same position for days. Sam watches her sadly while he smokes his pipe. There is a long silence in which an atmosphere of static helplessness must be established.)*

SUSANNAH

*(Without turning to him)***CHAPTER 7** – How long's it gonna' last, Sam?

SAM

You know that good as I do, hon.

SUSANNAH

How long y' reckon it'll take, Sam?

SAM

Whatcha mean "take", Little Sparrow?

SUSANNAH

Afore somethin' happens, one way or 'nother.

I don't much care which way.

SAM

You know what they's waitin' fer.

They's waitin' fer public confession.

SUSANNAH

(Turning to him)

But they ain't nothin' fer me to confess, Sam.

There ain't nothin' fer me to confess.

I've prayed an' prayed to see the light.

If somethin' I've done's been wrong,

But I still don't feel no sin in me

An' I cain't lie jes' fer them.

SAM

(patiently)

I know that, Little Robin.

We been through all that before.

The Lord, he knows what's in yer heart,

So jes' don't fret no more.

SUSANNAH

Mebbe I'm all they say I am.

Mebbe the devil is in me.

Mebbe he's hidin' the sin I should feel.

I jes' don't know no more.

SAM

(Sharply)

Shut up talkin' like that, Susannah,

An' don't y' think that way.

That's jes' what they're hopin' you'll feel, y' know.

Your mind sounds addled, I'd say.

SUSANNAH

(Bitterly)

I ain't gonna leave this place no more.

That's one thing I know fer sure.

I ain't a-gone let them men at the store talk to me the way they do.

I ain't never taken as much in my life as I've taken since last Tuesday

Men pawin' at me an' jokin' 'bout me

An' boys makin' dirty' signs.

SAM

I'd kill 'em all, if it'd do any good.

I'd kill 'em all, I would.

SUSANNAH

(With sudden intensity)

What have I done to deserve it, Sam?

Why's the good Lord punishin' me so?

I never been in no meanness before.

I never even killed a bird.

SAM

We gotta have faith, Little Robin.

We jest gonna have to have faith.

(After a long, helpless pause)

That meetin' preacher must be pow'rful one.

I never seed so many people gittin' baptized.

SUSANNAH

(Musing sadly)

I hear 'em singin' ev'ry evenin'.

The crick must be plum' spoilt now

With all them people bein' baptized.

It was sich a pretty place, too.

I never thought it'd bring me no shame.

I seed the preacher at the store yesterday

An' he spoke to me real nice.

He said I'd oughta come to the meetin' tonight

To find rest fer my sin-sick soul.

That's what he said.

SAM

(Decisively)

I think you oughta go to the meetin' tonight

To show 'em you ain't afraid.

SUSANNAH

(Protesting immediately)

Oh no, Sam, I couldn't do that.

Please don't ask me to.

I'd do 'bout anything you say, y' know,

But I couldn't do that, I couldn't!

SAM

You gotta show 'em you ain't afraid.

An' no harm would come to you there.

Besides, I gotta go 'way tonight

An' I don't wanta leave y' alone.

SUSANNAH

(Alarmed)

You ain't gonna leave me, are y', Sam?

Please don't leave me. Please don't!

I'd be terrible lonesome an' scared without you.

So please, don't leave me. Please don't!

SAM

I gotta go 'cross the mountain

To get us some meat from my traps

But I'll be back tomorrow 'fore sun-down.

An' I'll leave you a gun to boot.

SUSANNAH

You ain't gonna go git drunk, are y', Sam?

SAM

'Course not, little robin. 'Course not.

SUSANNAH

Will y' come back as soon as y' can?

As soon as you've emptied the traps?

SAM

Sure I will, an' don't you fret.

I'll be back afore y've missed me.

I'll be back with a sack full o' critters

An' we'll have food fer all next week.

(After a moment)

An' will ya go to the meetin' tonight?

SUSANNAH

Please don't ask me to do that, Sam.

I cain't. I plum' jes' cain't!

SAM

You gotta show 'em you ain't afraid

An' no harm would come to y' there.

An' I'd feel a whole lot better

To know you was there 'stead o' here.

(Susannah turns away, and there is a long, anguished moment in which she struggles with herself. Finally, without turning around, she says in a low tired voice)

SUSANNAH

All right, Sam, I'll try.

But if things gits bad, I'm gonna leave

Cain't nobody make me stay.

SAM

All right, Little Robin,

An' I'll be much obliged

If y'll jes' go fer a little while this evenin'.

An' I'll be back tomorrow by sun-down.

(Susannah looks around the yard sadly.)

SUSANNAH

I cain't wait 'til pretty things

Looks pretty agin.

(They return to the attitudes in which they were found at the beginning of the scene.)

SCENE TWO

Scene: The same evening.

The scene is the interior of New Hope church. There are rough-hewn benches and oil lamps suspended from the ceiling. There is also a crude pulpit which is slightly elevated, and an altar rail. There is a bench behind the pulpit

which seats the choir. In the congregation are the Elders and their wives, seated conspicuously Little Bat with his parents. Also present are mothers, straddle-legged, rocking babies on their knees, young children moving about,

and generally an air of some confusion. In evidence everywhere are the paste-board fans, slowly in motion against the hot, still, July night air. Men are constantly removing bandanas and soggy handkerchiefs from hip-pockets to mop sweat from their faces. All this activity should be present, more or less, during the entire scene, increasing in speed and agitation as the scene builds into its climaxes.

(As the curtain rises, the action has already begun. The choir is singing lustily, and the preacher's voice is heard shouting over them. Two of the Elders are moving about the congregation with white, scarred dishpans, taking up the collection. Susannah, a small, huddled figure, sits alone on the last bench. The scene in no way should be a parody but, instead, at all times should aim at projecting the tension, effrontery and above all the terror implicit in the revival meeting of this nature.)

CONGREGATION

CHAPTER 8 – Are you saved from sin,

Ready to meet your Lord?

Has His blood made you free

From the avenging sword?

(overlapping with Blitch)

Get down upon your knees,

Accept the saving grace.

Are you ready to meet

Your Savior face to face?

Free from sin, yes Lord!

Free from sin, am I

And I'm going to meet Him

With the saints on high.

Are you saved from sin,

Ready to meet your Lord? Has

His blood made you free

From the avenging sword?

Get down upon your knees,

Accept the saving grace.

Are you ready to meet
Your Savior face to face?

Free from sin, yes Lord!
Free from sin am I.
And I'm going to meet Him
With the saints on high.
(The Congregation hums)

BLITCH

(Spoken)

I don't want to hear no sound of pocket change in them dishpans. Let's praise the Lord with what we give to His servants. Remember the widder's mite, brethren! Remember the widder's mite. She give all she had. 'Twarn't much but it was all she had. The Lord knows what you made on last year's cotton crops. So don't try to short change the Lord. Bless Him now with your benefits.

(Joining the singing)

Free from sin, yes Lord!
Free from sin am I.
And I'm going to meet Him
With the saints on high.

(The Elders have come down to the front and put the dishpans on the table in front of the pulpit. Blitch raises his hand as soon as the Elders have returned to their seats, and, lifting his head, he closes his eyes tightly to pray. The choir hums in the background.)

BLITCH

We thank Thee, O Lord,
For these good people
An' their off'rin'
To Thy servant.
Bless them an' let this meetin' tonight
Bring all the lost an' wand'rin'
Home to the fold.

Send down the tongue of fire
Upon the heads of the damned
'Til they won't find no peace
'Cept in Thy cleansin' blood.
HAYES, GLEATON, MCLEAN, OTT
Amen. Amen..

(The choir becomes silent, and Blitch faces the congregation with a stern look for a moment before he begins his sermon. When he starts speaking, his voice is low and ominous.)

BLITCH

(Speaking)

I ain't gonna take no text tonight, an' I ain't gonna preach no reg'lar sermon. The Lord, He spoke to me this afternoon, an' He said "Blitch, there's gonna be lost souls at that meetin' tonight. Don't take no text I'll put the words in yer mouth. This week's drawin' to a close, and there's still some to be brought to salvation. So close yer Bible an' speak through me." So the Lord spoke to me this afternoon, an' that's what I aim to do. I wanna see the biggest baptism yet tomorrow evenin' when we gather at the usual place at sundown.

HAYES, GLEATON, MCLEAN, OTT
Amen. Grant it, Lord, Grant it, Lord.

(The following narrative should be begun half-spoken, half-sung, gradually using more vibrato, working into full singing voice.)

BLITCH

I'm fixin' to tell y' 'bout a feller I knowed
What was young an' smart an' rich.
'Cept he never put much thought
On his poor, lost soul
Or where he'd spend eternity.

One time when I was preachin' in Texas
I was called to his home one night.
An' there he lay all sweatin'
With his eyes all starin' with fright.
He grabbed me by the hand and said
"They tell me I'm a dyin' man
An' I might not git through the night.

Seems like my pore heart's done run down too soon
An' I wanta make ev'rything right.
I ain't lived sich a bad life.
I ain't drank, nor smoked, nor swore,
But I'm all a-feared o' dyin'.
I'm sure they's somethin' more."

Well, they was, brethren and sister'n, they was.
He won't saved.

That was it.

An' he died that night plum' scared to death
An' his soul went to eternal fire.

An' there's many o' you this very night
What's in the same fix as this poor man.
Where would your soul be tonight
If you was suddenly took away?
Where will you spend eternity?

With the saved of the Lord what surround his throne
Or down below where they's screamin'
An' wailin' an' gnashin' of teeth.

Down in the bottomless pit
Where they holler fer water
To ease parched tongues
An' they ain't none to be had.

(Screaming)

Is that where y'd be? Is that where y'd be?

(Blitch pauses a moment, breathing heavily, and mops his forehead. His eyes gleam with excitement. The congregation is hushed. When he begins again, his voice is husky and low but still menacing.)

Yes, my brethren, y'd better think on it.
They ain't a one of us
What couldn't be took at any time.
Not one of us an' I'm includin' myself.
Are you prepared?

When they open them judgment books up there
Which side of the page will you be on?
Tonight ain't too soon
An' tomorrow might be too late.
Tomorrow might be too late.

(Spoken)

So while the congregation sings a hymn, I wanta see all those whose souls wants savin' an' what wants to become free of the heavy burden of sin come down and meet the Lord an' I here at the altar.
(Blitch nods to the choir, and they begin the hymn. Once again Blitch intermittently shouts over them. Where before there was a strong element of the showman about him, now the showman has been tempered somewhat by an unexpected earnestness. Immediately after the "call", one or two boys and girls in their early teens shyly, with terrified eyes, leave their seats and trance-like walk down the aisle and kneel at the altar. Blitch lays his hands on their heads, throws his own back, and with closed eyes, speaks with the Almighty.)

CONGREGATION

Come, sinner, tonight's the night
To take a stand for God and the right.
Cast Satan out, regain your sight.
Come, sinner, tonight's the night.
(Overlapping with Blitch)
Come, sinner, salvation is free,
A gift from God on Calvary.
That cross it sheds redeeming light
Don't tarry, sinner, tonight's the night.

Come, yes, come and meet Him here.
Be washed in the blood that was bought so dear.
Don't wait till darkness turns into light.
Come, sinner, tonight's the night.
BLITCH
(Speaking over the congregation)

Come an' fall on yer knees and ask the Lord fer forgiveness. It's a humblin' thing to do but you won't never be sorry fer humblin' yerself this way. I plead with y', friends. Put aside yer swearin', yer drunken ways, yer fornication, an' meet God here. Hallelujah. Praise the Lord...
(The choir drones its plea again and again. The more intense their voices become, the more impassioned is the sound of Blitch's. Several more people come down to the altar with varying degrees of eagerness and hesitation. After a while the exodus to the altar ceases in spite of the continued protestations and urging of Blitch.)
(Overlapping with Blitch)

CONGREGATION

Come, sinner, tonight's the night
To take a stand for God and the right.
Cast Satan out, regain your sight.
Come, sinner, tonight's the night.

Come, yes, come and meet Him here.
Be washed in the blood that was bought so dear.
Don't wait till darkness turns into light.

Come, sinner. Come sinner. Come sinner. Come!

BLITCH

(Spoken)

I plead with you, friends, accept the savin' grace of the Lord Almighty an' right now.

Tomorrow may be too late! Tomorrow may be too late! Are there others?

Don't pass this opportunity by! Are there others? This may be yer last chance.

Tomorrow might be too late! Tomorrow might be too late!
(Blitch suddenly turns to the choir and holding out his hand orders them to stop. He turns back around slowly to the congregation, breathing hard from his emotion.)

There's one in, our midst tonight who pays no mind to the wooin' o' God in her heart.

(The congregation, as a body, slowly turns around and stares at Susannah while Blitch continues to speak. There is no pity or concern in their looks; only the hard, cold stare of silent coercion. Susannah is immediately in great discomfort and looks straight ahead of her at the figure of Blitch.)

I've wrestled with the devil
Fer her soul and prayed
That she'd accept the savin' grace O' the Lamb.
An' put aside her sinful an' shameful ways
An' still she don't heed my pleadin'.

(Speaking)

Give over, sister, while the choir sings one more verse. Publicly confess yer sins an' ask forgiveness o' the Lord an' these folks present tonight.

(The choir begins to sing its "invitation" hymn once again, and Blitch fixes his gaze upon Susannah. Slowly into his eyes and face comes an expression of intense desire bordering on lust. His voice also reflects what is happening inside him instead of its heretofore peremptory and commanding quality, it now possesses a distinctly cajoling, almost caressing sound. Susannah watches him, transfixed.)

(Overlapping with Blitch)

CONGREGATION

Come, sinner, salvation is free.
A gift from God on Calvary.
That cross it sheds redeeming light.
Don't tarry, sinner,
Tonight's the night.

Come, yes, come and meet Him here.
Be washed in the blood that was bought so dear.

Don't wait till darkness turns into light.

Come, sinner, tonight's the night.

BLITCH

Come, dear sister, it's a short piece to walk
To find rest fer yer weary soul.
The Lord will receive you with open arms
An' hold y' fast, fast in His grace.

It's only a short, short piece to walk
To find rest fer yer storm-tossed, sin-sick soul.
Come, dear sister, an' jes' let go.

Meet God and I right here.

(Susannah moves slowly into the aisle and trance-like walks toward Blitch, a confusion of fear, bewilderment and protest on her face. The only sign of life about her is the periodic shaking of her head from side to side in weak dissent. The congregation is hushed and tense. A smile of triumph comes over Blitch's face as Susannah comes abreast of him and the change of expression in an instant shatters the spell for Susannah. She immediately comes to life and looks around her as if trapped. Suddenly she screams "no" and runs down the aisle and out into the night.)

CONGREGATION

Come, yes, come and meet Him here.
Be washed in the blood that was bought so dear.
Don't wait till darkness turns into light.
(Overlapping with Susannah)

Come, sinner. Come sinner. Come sinner. Come!

SUSANNAH

No! No!

(Blitch's initial reaction is one of shock. He immediately regains control of himself, however, and the situation. Raising his hand and with a new note of anger, born of frustration, in his voice, he pronounces the benediction.)

BLITCH

(Shouting)

Receive the benediction. The Lord bless an' keep you. The Lord make his face to shine on you, etc.

SCENE THREE

Scene: About an hour later. The scene is once more the front porch of the Polk house.

(Susannah is singing to herself as the curtain rises.)

SUSANNAH

CHAPTER 9 – The trees on the mountains are cold and bare.

The summer just vanished an' left them there
Like a false-hearted lover jes' like my own
Who made me love him, then left me alone.

The coals of the hearth have turned gray and sere
The blue flame jes' vanished an' left them there,
Like a false-hearted lover jes' like my own
Who made me love him, then left me alone.

Come back, O summer, come back, blue flame.
My heart wants warmin', My baby a name.
Come back, O lover, if jes' fer a day.
Turn bleak December once more into May.

The road up ahead lies lonely an' far.
There's darkness around me an' not even a star
To show me the way or lighten my heart.
Come back, my lover, I fain would start.

The pore baby fox lies all cold in his lair.
His mama jes' vanished an' left him there,
Like a false-hearted lover, jes' like my own,
Who made me love him, then left me alone;

Come back, O summer, come back, blue flame!

My heart wants warmin', my baby a name.
Come back, O lover, if jes' fer a day.
Turn bleak December once more into May.

Come back, O summer! Come back, blue flame!
My heart wants warmin', my baby a name.
Come back, O lover, if jes' fer a day.
Turn bleak December once more into May.

Come back! Come back! Come back!

BLITCH

(Who has come onstage and stood listening)

That's mighty pretty singin', Susannah;

SUSANNAH

(Turning, startled)

Who is it?

BLITCH

(Agreeably)

It's yer frien', the preacher. Do you allers sing so pretty?

SUSANNAH

I sing to myself when I'm sad or lonesome.

It keeps me company.

BLITCH

That's a right sad song.

Don't look like it'd do y' much good.

SUSANNAH

My mama taught it to me a long time ago.

(Susannah takes a firm stance with her back against the post and eyes Blitch suspiciously.)

What do y' want here, Preacher Blitch?

BLITCH

This is what y' might call a social visit. I wanta talk to y' 'bout yer soul.

SUSANNAH

There ain't nothin' to say

So you're wastin' yer time.

BLITCH

(Beginning to exhort)

You're a hard-headed one, Susannah.

The devil's in you.

"Pride goeth before destruction," sister.

Let's kneel an' pray to God fer yer soul.

SUSANNAH

No need to pray.

I've done prayed enough fer us both.

The Lord would'a told me

If I'd done somethin' wrong.

BLITCH

You still say exposin' yerself

Won't no sin against the Lord?

SUSANNAH

(Belligerently)

I been bathin' in that crick all spring

An' won't no harm in it at all

'Til them Elders seen me there

An' started makin' up their tales.

BLITCH

They didn't make up no tales, Susannah.

SUSANNAH

(Protesting vehemently, near tears)

Little Bat come over here

The very night after it happened

An' tol' me that he lied about me.

Told me that he lied,

A-screamin' an' hollerin'

All over the yard.

He ain't never set a hand on me.

Sam would'a killed him if he had.

BLITCH

(Genuinely)

I wish I could believe y'.

SUSANNAH

Don't believe it! Don't believe it!

But it's the truth!

(Beginning to break and lashing out bitterly)

And I'll tell y' somethin' else.

I ain't never spent such a week as this.

Not never in all my life.

I don't know what it'd be like

To feel happy agin,

Or to wake up in the mornin'

Without this awful thing

Weighin' down on me

So's I don't even wanta git up

An' see what the day's like.

An' all the things people's said about me

An' the looks people's give me

An' the way they treated me

At the picnic supper,

An' the way you treated me tonight.

I don't know what it'd be like

To be happy agin.

And if I thought this was the way

The rest o' my life was gonna be,

I'd kill myself right now!

BLITCH

(Seeing her anguish as an opening)

It's the sin in yer heart,

That weight you speak of,

It's the sin in yer heart!

The sin in yer heart!

SUSANNAH

It ain't! It ain't! It ain't!

(She breaks and sobs, fully released now for the first time, her face turned away from Blitch. He watches her and is momentarily defeated. Something akin to pity comes over his face, and when he speaks finally, his voice is heavy with weariness.)

BLITCH

I've wrestled fer yer soul night after night.

Maybe tomorrow you'll come to the light

(Susannah has covered her face with her hands, and although her body is still shaken with sobbing, she is quieter, a pathetic figure silhouetted against the post, crumpled, helpless and alone. Blitch looks at her sadly a long time. Finally with weary hesitance and obviously fighting himself, he walks up the steps to her and puts his hands cautiously on her shoulders. Susannah stands inert and spent and in no way reacts to his closeness. The remainder of the scene should be weighted with exhaustion and defeat.)

I'm a lonely man, Susannah,

An' ever now an' then it seems

I gotta have somebody,

Somebody I can love

Like other folks do,

'Cause it's a lonesome work I do.

My reward it be's in heaven

An' there's little reward here below.

But ever now and then I near go mad,

I need a woman so.

I'm a lonely man, Susannah,

An' made out o' flesh an' blood an' bone

An' I need somebody I can love

Like other folks

'Cause it's a lonesome work I do.

(He brings her hand to rest on his shoulder and puts an arm around her. Susannah's arms hang slackly at her side. There is little sign of life about her, only the slow, weary shaking of her head while her eyes remain closed.)

Will yer brother be home tonight?

SUSANNAH

No.

BLITCH

(Almost a whisper)

Let's go inside.

SUSANNAH

(To herself)

I'm so tired.

I jes' cain't fight no more.

(Blitch with his arm around her and her head on his shoulder moves her slowly to the door and into the shadows of the house.)

SCENE FOUR

Scene: Saturday morning. It is once again the interior of New Hope church.

(As the curtain rises, Blitch is found kneeling. He is praying, and there is a terrible earnestness and anguish in the sound of his voice as well as an element of fear. His hands are clasped tightly together and they from time to time emphasize his desperate sincerity. It should be immediately apparent that here is Blitch for the first time stripped of his bravado and evangelical trappings, a man terrified by his own image of a vengeful God.)

BLITCH

CHAPTER 10 – Hear me, O Lord, I beseech Thee.

I have called upon Thee all night in vain.

Thou hast gone from me

And my spirit has wilted

Like a mornin' glory when the sun comes.

Return, O Lord, and harken to my plea fer forgiveness.

Receive my confession, O Lord, an' hear the words o' my repentance.

It's a horrible thing I have done.

Fergive the weakness o' my flesh,

O Lord, An' condemn me not to the eternal fire

Fer my sin against Thee an' the woman.

She was untouched, O Lord!

She was untouched before her young body

Was defiled by my hands, defiled by my lust.

Fergive me, O Lord, an' grant her Thy peace.

O, fergive me; dear Lord, an' return unto me.

Thou hast gone far away

Beyond the sound of my callin'.

Return and grant my tortured soul

The balm of Thy forgiveness.

What shall I do if Thou desert me?

Leave me not with this weight

Of sin oppressin' me an' condemn me not

To the fires of hell.

Return, O Lord, I pray Thee, O return!

And let this cup, if it be Thy will,

Pass from me.

(Blitch continues to kneel, his hands clasped, when the Elders and their wives come in the back door of the church, and watching Blitch, with a puzzled look, they slowly walk down the aisle. Susannah comes in quietly behind them, unobserved, seating herself as before on the back bench. She sits stiffly, her face expressionless, and there is nothing about her to suggest the youthfulness and softness that has been apparent previously. As the Elders and their wives seat themselves, Blitch looks up, startled and immediately gets to his feet. He sees Susannah, and she returns his look evenly, without disdain or embarrassment. Blitch comes around in front of the altar and stands in front of the group.)

Brethren an' sister'n,

I asked you to come here

This morning fer the purpose

Of rightin' a terrible wrong.

It's a blessed privilege fer the Lord

To let us make restitution fer our errors

While we are alive.

(The group looks at him curiously, some immediately bridling.)

An' we have all been in error,

Brethren an' sister'n, bad error.

The young woman what sits in the rear

Has been the victim of our error.

(All heads turn in shock toward Susannah. She returns their look unflinchingly. The heads return to Blitch and regard him with disbelief and some antagonism.)

She is innocent of the charges against her

An' grievous are the things she's endured

I ask y' to beseech her fergiveness

An' humbly ask her pardon fer your misjudgment.

(There is genuine shock at this and murmurs of severe disapproval.)

McLEAN

How you know she's innocent, preacher?

BLITCH

(Without hesitation)

The Lord spoke to me in the night

While I was a-prayin' fer her soul.

(The group stares at him, completely unconvinced and shake their heads in pity for his credulity.)

MRS. McLEAN

The devil works in queer ways.

(As a body they rise and begin walking out of the church.)

BLITCH

(Calling after them)

But I swear to you she's innocent!

She's innocent of the charges you've made.

Make restitution now, brethren!

McLEAN

(Turning at the door)

We'll see you at the baptism, preacher.

(They leave haughtily ignoring Susannah who stares straight ahead. Blitch watches them go, his body taut and his face bewildered; unable to believe that he has failed to convince them. After a moment, Susannah begins laughing to herself, short laughs that hardly rise out of her throat and do nothing to alter the immobility of her face. Blitch, hearing the strange laughter, looks at her and brokenly walks down the aisle, gesturing helplessly. Susannah looks straight ahead.)

BLITCH

I tried, Susannah; y' heard me.

SUSANNAH

(Flatly, without looking at him)

Yeah. I heard y'.

BLITCH

I'll make it up to y'.

I swear I will.

SUSANNAH

(Speaking)

How?

(Blitch starts to answer, then realizes that there is nothing to say.

Susannah stands up and moves into the aisle. Blitch puts his hand on her shoulder as if to detain her, and she jerks away from him with a shudder.)

(Venomously)

Don't tech me.

(She starts out, and Blitch calls after her in a broken voice)

BLITCH

Fergive me, Susannah.

Please try an' fergive me.

SUSANNAH

(Turning to Blitch, speaking)

Fergive? I've forgot what that word means.

(Susannah exits, and Blitch watches her go. Falling on his knees, sobbing, he grasps the arm of the pew for support and cries out in an anguished voice)

BLITCH O Lord, if it be Thy will, Let this cup pass from me.

SCENE FIVE

Scene: The front porch of the Polk house. It is sundown of the same day.

(Susannah is discovered standing stiffly against one of the porch posts, staring vacantly ahead of her. There is a time of silence in contrast to her singing in Scene Three and this, coupled with the rather rigid, in-grown stance, suggests something of the change which has taken place in her since the previous scene. After a moment, Sam comes on-stage with a bulging croker sack slung over one shoulder and a shotgun carried under the other arm. He is slightly drunk, and his spirits are high.)

SAM

CHAPTER 11 – Hey there, little robin, I'm back agin,

With a bag full o' hides and food;

How y' been while I was gone?

Did y' miss me?

Did y' miss me a lot?

(He goes up the steps clumsily and leaning towards her, kisses her on the cheek. Susannah stares ahead.)

SUSANNAH

(Flatly, without turning to him)

You're drunk, Sam.

(Sam looks at her curiously, immediately aware that something is the matter but continues speaking in his jovial fashion. He goes into the house and leaves his sack, then reappears on the porch.)

SAM

Jest a mite, hon, just a mite,

But not enough fer you

To fret your pretty head about.

(Lightly, walking over and putting gun in rack on porch)

Anything happen while I was gone?

(Susannah doesn't answer and Sam turns slowly and looks at her, puzzled. He crosses and puts his hand on her shoulder.)

What's wrong, little robin?

(Susannah shudders, drawing away. Sam, stunned, shouts)

What's wrong, Susannah? What's happened?

SUSANNAH

(Turning to him, vehemently)

Ev'rything! That's what!

SAM

(Abruptly sobered, his voice low)

What do y' mean, Susannah? What do y' mean?

SUSANNAH

(Her voice charged with accusation, fury and hurt)

I went to preachin' like you asked me to,

An' he called me down to the altar

With all them eyes starin' at me,

An' then he followed me here

Soon after I come back.

SAM

Who?

SUSANNAH

The preacher.

SAM

Why?

SUSANNAH

To make me repent.

SAM

Oh.

SUSANNAH

Only he stayed on.

He stayed near all night,

An' where was you?

You was out gittin' drunk!

SAM

(Fiercely)

What did he do?

What did he do?

Did he lay a hand on y'?

SUSANNAH

Sure he did!

He stayed near all night

An' the worst you're thinkin' is true!

SAM

(Shaking her and shouting)

Why, Susannah? Why, Susannah?

Why did you let him do it?

SUSANNAH

Why? Why?

'Cause I was tired!

That's why!

Tired o' fightin' an tired o' livin'

In a world where the truth has to fight

So hard to git itself believed -

An' on top o' that, I plum' didn't care.

If people were gonna believe

The worst anyway, then I didn't see

What diff'rence it made.

But most of all, I was tired.

SAM

(Turning away)

The bastard! The filthy bastard!

SUSANNAH

An' where was you, Sam?

Where was you?

A gun ain't much protection some time.

(Susannah starts towards the door)

SAM

The sneakin' hypocrite.

Down there baptizin' people right now

After what he's done to you.

(Wildly)

I'll kill him! That's what I'll do!

I'll kill him afore the day's through.

SUSANNAH

(Sarcastically over her shoulder as she goes into the house)

That'd do a lot o' good.

(Sam is left standing tensely on the porch, his face a study of cold fury and hate, his mind obviously working with machine-like precision.

Suddenly and decisively he turns, walks over to the rack and takes the shotgun down. He

then walks steadily down the steps and increasing his pace to a run, he disappears offstage. The stage is left empty for some time, and the distant sound of "Come, sinner" is heard. Susannah calls from inside.)

SUSANNAH

Come on in, Sam, an' wash up.

Supper's ready.

(Again from the inside)

Sam, supper's ready.

(More insistently)

Sam! Sam!

(With no response, she walks to the front of the house and appears in the door. It should be apparent that she senses something. Tentatively, as if not expecting to be answered)

Sam... Sam...

(Susannah walks slowly onto the porch, trance-like, her whole attitude revealing growing terror. She pauses at the steps and screams.)

Sam!

(Her body stiffens, and her face becomes mask-like. She stands immobilized and rooted, awaiting with a terrible certainty the inevitable.)

(A shot blasts the night air in the distance and Susannah stands transfixed for a moment. Then slowly moving only her head, she turns toward the rack where the gun had lain. Seeing it gone, she arrests her

motion and once again stands rigid. Slowly her hands rise and cover her face. Suddenly, she breaks, falling to her knees and crying out)

O Lord, I never meant him to do it!
O Lord, I never meant him to do it!
If I'd a-thought he'd a-done it,
I'd a-killed him first.

Fergive me, O Lord, fergive me
For whatever I've done to bring
This misery on us all.
O Lord, I never meant to harm nobody.
(Little Bat is heard shrieking "Susannah" offstage. He runs on stage wildly, talking and gesticulating as he does so. There is an ominous hush in the distance. Susannah rises immediately and stands facing Little Bat. Her former hardness returns.)

LITTLE BAT
Susannah! Susannah! Susannah!
Susannah, Sam killed him!
Sam shot the preacher
While he was in the crick baptizin'.

He snuck up behind some bushes
And nobody seed him
But we all seed him when he run away.

An' the preacher sank right down in the crick
With a pool of blood around him.
An' before they could drag him out,
He was dead.

An' he was prayin' real hard afore he died,
Askin' fergiveness fer his sins,
An' askin' the Lord to bless you.
It was a terrible thing to hear.
(CONGREGATION hums off stage)
LITTLE BAT
An' the folks is comin' here to git y'.
They say you put Sam up to it,
An' they say they're gonna run you
Out'n the valley, an' hang Sam, too, If they catch him.

They're a-comin', Susannah.
Don't you hear 'em?
What y' gonna do, Susannah,
What y' gonna do?
(The sound of voices is heard in the distance. Susannah stands rigidly against the porch post, her face becoming stern and set.)

Y' better run, Susannah.
They're gittin' close!
They're gittin' close!
Y' better run, Susannah!
Y' better run!
(Little Bat runs off stage, and Susannah stands immobile against the post. The voices are close and are heard chanting as they enter.)
CONGREGATION
Git out'n the valley, Susannah.
Git out! Git out tonight!
Y've caused us too much bloodshed.
Y've caused us too much strife.

Git out'n the valley, Susannah!
Git out! Git out tonight!
Y'd better be a-leavin'
A-fore they's daylight.
MCLEAN
Of all the sins which lay on yer soul
This was the worst of all to behold.
OTT
The preacher was yer friend he was, fer true.

Yer name he called with the last breath he drew.
(Susannah begins to laugh mockingly and the laughter continues through the succeeding lines.)

HAYES
Y'd might as well o' killed him yerself
As had him killed,
Jes' so his voice against you'd be
Forever stilled.
GLEATON
You're mockin' us with yer laughter.
Y'll regret it, y'll see,
When yer brother's caught
An' strung on a tree.
(The mob begins to move toward Susannah who is shrieking with laughter. Their mood becomes angrier. As they close in on her, she abruptly stops laughing and shouts.)
SUSANNAH
Git out! Git out!
You cain't run me off my place
Till I'm ready to leave,
An' that'll be some time to come.
So git out! Git out!
(The mob stops suddenly, surprised at her vehemence, and then begins coming towards her again. She whirls, runs into the house and is immediately out again with the gun Sam left her. She points it menacingly at the mob.)

Git away from here afore I blast you all
To kingdom come!
An' don't come 'round here agin
Less y' don't care nothin' 'bout livin'.
McLEAN
You cain't settle ev'rything with a gun, wench.
There's a higher court o' justice!
(The mob takes up McLean's threat, and with raised fists, they slowly begin retreating, backing offstage. When Susannah sees them leaving, she once more begins her derisive laughter and continues it, rocking back and forth, until they have disappeared.)
CONGREGATION
There'll come a reckonin' time.
There's a higher court of justice.
There'll come a reckonin' time,
There's a higher court of justice .
(As the crowd disappears, Susannah walks over and puts the gun on the rack. As she does so, she notices Little Bat who has sneaked upstage, and her laughing stops. Little Bat looks at her wide-eyed and frightened. Slowly Susannah walks to the post and leans against it, seductively. Her tone of voice now completely changes, and her manner is spuriously soft and helpless, obscuring only for Little Bat, her fierce contempt for him.)
SUSANNAH
Come on over, Little Bat.
Don't be scared.
I won't hurt y'.
I'm lonesome.
Come an' love me up some.
(He comes over to her tentatively.)
Come on, Don't be afraid.
I'm all by myself now
An' y' know I was allers good to y'.
(Little Bat walks hesitantly up the steps and stops momentarily. As he comes nearer to her, Susannah fights a loathing and revulsion to his closeness.)
Y' said so yerself,
So come on. Come on.
(He goes to her and puts his arms around her, and as he does so, Susannah slaps him viciously across the face. Little Bat, holding his cheek, runs yelping down the steps and across the yard. Susannah once again reels with laughter and holding her sides moves to the door, watching Little Bat as she does so. When he is gone, her strident laughter vanishes as quickly as it began. She turns around, straightens

her body in the doorway and remains standing there, an inviolably strong and inexorably lonely prisoner of a self-imposed exile.)

CHAPTER 12 – CURTAIN

CHAPTER 13 – Credits