

TRIFLES
a play in one-act

by Susan Glaspell

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CHARACTERS

GEORGE HENDERSON, County Attorney
HENRY PETERS, Sheriff
LEWIS HALE, A neighboring farmer
MRS. PETERS
MRS. HALE

[The kitchen in the now abandoned farmhouse of JOHN WRIGHT, a gloomy kitchen, and left without having been put in order—unwashed pans under the sink, a loaf of bread outside the bread-box, a dish-towel on the table—other signs of incompleting work. At the rear the outer door opens and the SHERIFF comes in followed by the COUNTY ATTORNEY and HALE. The SHERIFF and HALE are men in middle life, the COUNTY ATTORNEY is a young man; all are much bundled up and go at once to the stove. They are followed by the two women—the SHERIFF's wife first; she is a slight wiry woman, a thin nervous face. MRS HALE is larger and would ordinarily be called more comfortable looking, but she is disturbed now and looks fearfully about as she enters. The women have come in slowly, and stand close together near the door.]

COUNTY ATTORNEY: *(rubbing his hands)* This feels good. Come up to the fire, ladies.

MRS PETERS: *(after taking a step forward)* I'm not—cold.

SHERIFF: *(unbuttoning his overcoat and stepping away from the stove as if to mark the beginning of official business)* Now, Mr Hale, before we move things

about, you explain to Mr Henderson just what you saw when you came here yesterday morning.

COUNTY ATTORNEY: By the way, has anything been moved? Are things just as you left them yesterday?

SHERIFF: (*looking about*) It's just the same. When it dropped below zero last night I thought I'd better send Frank out this morning to make a fire for us—no use getting pneumonia with a big case on, but I told him not to touch anything except the stove—and you know Frank.

COUNTY ATTORNEY: Somebody should have been left here yesterday.

SHERIFF: Oh—yesterday. When I had to send Frank to Morris Center for that man who went crazy—I want you to know I had my hands full yesterday. I knew you could get back from Omaha by today and as long as I went over everything here myself—

COUNTY ATTORNEY: Well, Mr Hale, tell just what happened when you came here yesterday morning.

HALE: Harry and I had started to town with a load of potatoes. We came along the road from my place and as I got here I said, 'I'm going to see if I can't get John Wright to go in with me on a party telephone.' I spoke to Wright about it once before and he put me off, saying folks talked too much anyway, and all he asked was peace and quiet—I guess you know about how much he talked himself; but I thought maybe if I went to the house and talked about it before his wife, though I said to Harry that I didn't know as what his wife wanted made much difference to John—

COUNTY ATTORNEY: Let's talk about that later, Mr Hale. I do want to talk about that, but tell now just what happened when you got to the house.

HALE: I didn't hear or see anything; I knocked at the door, and still it was all quiet inside. I knew they must be up, it was past eight o'clock. So I knocked again, and I thought I heard somebody say, 'Come in.' I wasn't sure, I'm not sure yet, but I opened the door—this door (*indicating the door by which the two women are still standing*) and there in that rocker—(*pointing to it*) sat Mrs Wright.

[*They all look at the rocker.*]

COUNTY ATTORNEY: What—was she doing?

HALE: She was rockin' back and forth. She had her apron in her hand and was kind of—pleating it.

COUNTY ATTORNEY: And how did she—look?

HALE: Well, she looked queer.

COUNTY ATTORNEY: How do you mean—queer?

HALE: Well, as if she didn't know what she was going to do next. And kind of done up.

COUNTY ATTORNEY: How did she seem to feel about your coming?

HALE: Why, I don't think she minded—one way or other. She didn't pay much attention. I said, 'How do, Mrs Wright it's cold, ain't it?' And she said, 'Is it?'—and went on kind of pleating at her apron. Well, I was surprised; she didn't ask me to come up to the stove, or to set down, but just sat there, not even looking at me, so I said, 'I want to see John.' And then she—laughed. I guess you would call it a laugh. I thought of Harry and the team outside, so I said a little sharp: 'Can't I see John?' 'No', she says, kind o' dull like. 'Ain't he home?' says I. 'Yes', says she, 'he's home'. 'Then why can't I see him?' I asked her, out of patience. 'Cause he's dead', says she. 'Dead?' says I. She just nodded her head, not getting a bit excited, but rockin' back and forth. 'Why—where is he?' says I, not knowing what to say. She just pointed upstairs—like that (*himself pointing to the room above*) I got up, with the idea of going up there. I walked from there to here—then I says, 'Why, what did he die of?' 'He died of a rope round his neck', says she, and just went on pleatin' at her apron. Well, I went out and called Harry. I thought I might—need help. We went upstairs and there he was lyin'—

COUNTY ATTORNEY: I think I'd rather have you go into that upstairs, where you can point it all out. Just go on now with the rest of the story.

HALE: Well, my first thought was to get that rope off. It looked ... (*stops, his face twitches*) ... but Harry, he went up to him, and he said, 'No, he's dead all right, and we'd better not touch anything.' So we went back down stairs. She was still sitting that same way. 'Has anybody been notified?' I asked. 'No', says she unconcerned. 'Who did this, Mrs Wright?' said Harry. He said it business-like—and she stopped pleatin' of her apron. 'I don't know', she says. 'You don't know?' says Harry. 'No',

says she. 'Weren't you sleepin' in the bed with him?' says Harry. 'Yes', says she, 'but I was on the inside'. 'Somebody slipped a rope round his neck and strangled him and you didn't wake up?' says Harry. 'I didn't wake up', she said after him. We must 'a looked as if we didn't see how that could be, for after a minute she said, 'I sleep sound'. Harry was going to ask her more questions but I said maybe we ought to let her tell her story first to the coroner, or the sheriff, so Harry went fast as he could to Rivers' place, where there's a telephone.

COUNTY ATTORNEY: And what did Mrs Wright do when she knew that you had gone for the coroner?

HALE: She moved from that chair to this one over here (*pointing to a small chair in the corner*) and just sat there with her hands held together and looking down. I got a feeling that I ought to make some conversation, so I said I had come in to see if John wanted to put in a telephone, and at that she started to laugh, and then she stopped and looked at me—scared, (*the COUNTY ATTORNEY, who has had his notebook out, makes a note*) I dunno, maybe it wasn't scared. I wouldn't like to say it was. Soon Harry got back, and then Dr Lloyd came, and you, Mr Peters, and so I guess that's all I know that you don't.

COUNTY ATTORNEY: (*looking around*) I guess we'll go upstairs first—and then out to the barn and around there, (*to the SHERIFF*) You're convinced that there was nothing important here—nothing that would point to any motive.

SHERIFF: Nothing here but kitchen things.

[*The COUNTY ATTORNEY, after again looking around the kitchen, opens the door of a cupboard closet. He gets up on a chair and looks on a shelf. Pulls his hand away, sticky.*]

COUNTY ATTORNEY: Here's a nice mess.

[*The women draw nearer.*]

MRS PETERS: (*to the other woman*) Oh, her fruit; it did freeze, (*to the LAWYER*) She worried about that when it turned so cold. She said the fire'd go out and her jars would break.

SHERIFF: Well, can you beat the women! Held for murder and worryin' about her preserves.

COUNTY ATTORNEY: I guess before we're through she may have something more serious than preserves to worry about.

HALE: Well, women are used to worrying over trifles.

[The two women move a little closer together.]

COUNTY ATTORNEY: *(with the gallantry of a young politician)* And yet, for all their worries, what would we do without the ladies? *(the women do not unbend. He goes to the sink, takes a dipperful of water from the pail and pouring it into a basin, washes his hands. Starts to wipe them on the roller-towel, turns it for a cleaner place)* Dirty towels! *(kicks his foot against the pans under the sink)* Not much of a housekeeper, would you say, ladies?

MRS HALE: *(stiffly)* There's a great deal of work to be done on a farm.

COUNTY ATTORNEY: To be sure. And yet *(with a little bow to her)* I know there are some Dickson county farmhouses which do not have such roller towels. *(He gives it a pull to expose its length again.)*

MRS HALE: Those towels get dirty awful quick. Men's hands aren't always as clean as they might be.

COUNTY ATTORNEY: Ah, loyal to your sex, I see. But you and Mrs Wright were neighbors. I suppose you were friends, too.

MRS HALE: *(shaking her head)* I've not seen much of her of late years. I've not been in this house—it's more than a year.

COUNTY ATTORNEY: And why was that? You didn't like her?

MRS HALE: I liked her all well enough. Farmers' wives have their hands full, Mr Henderson. And then—

COUNTY ATTORNEY: Yes—?

MRS HALE: *(looking about)* It never seemed a very cheerful place.

COUNTY ATTORNEY: No—it's not cheerful. I shouldn't say she had the homemaking instinct.

MRS HALE: Well, I don't know as Wright had, either.

COUNTY ATTORNEY: You mean that they didn't get on very well?

MRS HALE: No, I don't mean anything. But I don't think a place'd be any cheerfuller for John Wright's being in it.

COUNTY ATTORNEY: I'd like to talk more of that a little later. I want to get the lay of things upstairs now. *(He goes to the left, where three steps lead to a stair door.)*

SHERIFF: I suppose anything Mrs Peters does'll be all right. She was to take in some clothes for her, you know, and a few little things. We left in such a hurry yesterday.

COUNTY ATTORNEY: Yes, but I would like to see what you take, Mrs Peters, and keep an eye out for anything that might be of use to us.

MRS PETERS: Yes, Mr Henderson.

[The women listen to the men's steps on the stairs, then look about the kitchen.]

MRS HALE: I'd hate to have men coming into my kitchen, snooping around and criticising.

[She arranges the pans under sink which the LAWYER had shoved out of place.]

MRS PETERS: Of course it's no more than their duty.

MRS HALE: Duty's all right, but I guess that deputy sheriff that came out to make the fire might have got a little of this on. *(gives the roller towel a pull)* Wish I'd thought of that sooner. Seems mean to talk about her for not having things slicked up when she had to come away in such a hurry.

MRS PETERS: *(who has gone to a small table in the left rear corner of the room, and lifted one end of a towel that covers a pan)* She had bread set. *(Stands still.)*

MRS HALE: *(eyes fixed on a loaf of bread beside the bread-box, which is on a low shelf at the other side of the room. Moves slowly toward it)* She was going to put this in there, *(picks up loaf, then abruptly drops it. In a manner of returning to familiar things)* It's a shame about her fruit. I wonder if it's all gone. *(gets up on*

the chair and looks) I think there's some here that's all right, Mrs Peters. Yes— here; *(holding it toward the window)* this is cherries, too. *(looking again)* I declare I believe that's the only one. *(gets down, bottle in her hand. Goes to the sink and wipes it off on the outside)* She'll feel awful bad after all her hard work in the hot weather. I remember the afternoon I put up my cherries last summer.

[She puts the bottle on the big kitchen table, center of the room. With a sigh, is about to sit down in the rocking-chair. Before she is seated realizes what chair it is; with a slow look at it, steps back. The chair which she has touched rocks back and forth.]

MRS PETERS: Well, I must get those things from the front room closet, *(she goes to the door at the right, but after looking into the other room, steps back)* You coming with me, Mrs Hale? You could help me carry them.

[They go in the other room; reappear, MRS PETERS carrying a dress and skirt, MRS HALE following with a pair of shoes.]

MRS PETERS: My, it's cold in there.

[She puts the clothes on the big table, and hurries to the stove.]

MRS HALE: *(examining the skirt)* Wright was close. I think maybe that's why she kept so much to herself. She didn't even belong to the Ladies Aid. I suppose she felt she couldn't do her part, and then you don't enjoy things when you feel shabby. She used to wear pretty clothes and be lively, when she was Minnie Foster, one of the town girls singing in the choir. But that—oh, that was thirty years ago. This all you was to take in?

MRS PETERS: She said she wanted an apron. Funny thing to want, for there isn't much to get you dirty in jail, goodness knows. But I suppose just to make her feel more natural. She said they was in the top drawer in this cupboard. Yes, here. And then her little shawl that always hung behind the door. *(opens stair door and looks)* Yes, here it is.

[Quickly shuts door leading upstairs.]

MRS HALE: *(abruptly moving toward her)* Mrs Peters?

MRS PETERS: Yes, Mrs Hale?

MRS HALE: Do you think she did it?

MRS PETERS: (*in a frightened voice*) Oh, I don't know.

MRS HALE: Well, I don't think she did. Asking for an apron and her little shawl. Worrying about her fruit.

MRS PETERS: (*starts to speak, glances up, where footsteps are heard in the room above. In a low voice*) Mr Peters says it looks bad for her. Mr Henderson is awful sarcastic in a speech and he'll make fun of her sayin' she didn't wake up.

MRS HALE: Well, I guess John Wright didn't wake when they was slipping that rope under his neck.

MRS PETERS: No, it's strange. It must have been done awful crafty and still. They say it was such a—funny way to kill a man, rigging it all up like that.

MRS HALE: That's just what Mr Hale said. There was a gun in the house. He says that's what he can't understand.

MRS PETERS: Mr Henderson said coming out that what was needed for the case was a motive; something to show anger, or—sudden feeling.

MRS HALE: (*who is standing by the table*) Well, I don't see any signs of anger around here, (*she puts her hand on the dish towel which lies on the table, stands looking down at table, one half of which is clean, the other half messy*) It's wiped to here, (*makes a move as if to finish work, then turns and looks at loaf of bread outside the breadbox. Drops towel. In that voice of coming back to familiar things.*) Wonder how they are finding things upstairs. I hope she had it a little more red-up up there. You know, it seems kind of sneaking. Locking her up in town and then coming out here and trying to get her own house to turn against her!

MRS PETERS: But Mrs Hale, the law is the law.

MRS HALE: I s'pose 'tis, (*unbuttoning her coat*) Better loosen up your things, Mrs Peters. You won't feel them when you go out.

[*MRS PETERS takes off her fur tippet, goes to hang it on hook at back of room, stands looking at the under part of the small corner table.*]

MRS PETERS: She was piecing a quilt.

[She brings the large sewing basket and they look at the bright pieces.]

MRS HALE: It's log cabin pattern. Pretty, isn't it? I wonder if she was goin' to quilt it or just knot it?

[Footsteps have been heard coming down the stairs. The SHERIFF enters followed by HALE and the COUNTY ATTORNEY.]

SHERIFF: They wonder if she was going to quilt it or just knot it!

[The men laugh, the women look abashed.]

COUNTY ATTORNEY: *(rubbing his hands over the stove)* Frank's fire didn't do much up there, did it? Well, let's go out to the barn and get that cleared up. *(The men go outside.)*

MRS HALE: *(resentfully)* I don't know as there's anything so strange, our takin' up our time with little things while we're waiting for them to get the evidence. *(she sits down at the big table smoothing out a block with decision)* I don't see as it's anything to laugh about.

MRS PETERS: *(apologetically)* Of course they've got awful important things on their minds.

[Pulls up a chair and joins MRS HALE at the table.]

MRS HALE: *(examining another block)* Mrs Peters, look at this one. Here, this is the one she was working on, and look at the sewing! All the rest of it has been so nice and even. And look at this! It's all over the place! Why, it looks as if she didn't know what she was about!

[After she has said this they look at each other, then start to glance back at the door. After an instant MRS HALE has pulled at a knot and ripped the sewing.]

MRS PETERS: Oh, what are you doing, Mrs Hale?

MRS HALE: *(mildly)* Just pulling out a stitch or two that's not sewed very good. *(threading a needle)* Bad sewing always made me fidgety.

MRS PETERS: (*nervously*) I don't think we ought to touch things.

MRS HALE: I'll just finish up this end. (*suddenly stopping and leaning forward*) Mrs Peters?

MRS PETERS: Yes, Mrs Hale?

MRS HALE: What do you suppose she was so nervous about?

MRS PETERS: Oh—I don't know. I don't know as she was nervous. I sometimes sew awful queer when I'm just tired. (*MRS HALE starts to say something, looks at MRS PETERS, then goes on sewing*) Well I must get these things wrapped up. They may be through sooner than we think, (*putting apron and other things together*) I wonder where I can find a piece of paper, and string.

MRS HALE: In that cupboard, maybe.

MRS PETERS: (*looking in cupboard*) Why, here's a bird-cage, (*holds it up*) Did she have a bird, Mrs Hale?

MRS HALE: Why, I don't know whether she did or not—I've not been here for so long. There was a man around last year selling canaries cheap, but I don't know as she took one; maybe she did. She used to sing real pretty herself.

MRS PETERS: (*glancing around*) Seems funny to think of a bird here. But she must have had one, or why would she have a cage? I wonder what happened to it.

MRS HALE: I s'pose maybe the cat got it.

MRS PETERS: No, she didn't have a cat. She's got that feeling some people have about cats—being afraid of them. My cat got in her room and she was real upset and asked me to take it out.

MRS HALE: My sister Bessie was like that. Queer, ain't it?

MRS PETERS: (*examining the cage*) Why, look at this door. It's broke. One hinge is pulled apart.

MRS HALE: (*looking too*) Looks as if someone must have been rough with it.

MRS PETERS: Why, yes.

[She brings the cage forward and puts it on the table.]

MRS HALE: I wish if they're going to find any evidence they'd be about it. I don't like this place.

MRS PETERS: But I'm awful glad you came with me, Mrs Hale. It would be lonesome for me sitting here alone.

MRS HALE: It would, wouldn't it? *(dropping her sewing)* But I tell you what I do wish, Mrs Peters. I wish I had come over sometimes when she was here. I—*(looking around the room)*—wish I had.

MRS PETERS: But of course you were awful busy, Mrs Hale—your house and your children.

MRS HALE: I could've come. I stayed away because it weren't cheerful—and that's why I ought to have come. I—I've never liked this place. Maybe because it's down in a hollow and you don't see the road. I dunno what it is, but it's a lonesome place and always was. I wish I had come over to see Minnie Foster sometimes. I can see now—*(shakes her head)*

MRS PETERS: Well, you mustn't reproach yourself, Mrs Hale. Somehow we just don't see how it is with other folks until—something comes up.

MRS HALE: Not having children makes less work—but it makes a quiet house, and Wright out to work all day, and no company when he did come in. Did you know John Wright, Mrs Peters?

MRS PETERS: Not to know him; I've seen him in town. They say he was a good man.

MRS HALE: Yes—good; he didn't drink, and kept his word as well as most, I guess, and paid his debts. But he was a hard man, Mrs Peters. Just to pass the time of day with him—*(shivers)* Like a raw wind that gets to the bone, *(pauses, her eye falling on the cage)* I should think she would 'a wanted a bird. But what do you suppose went with it?

MRS PETERS: I don't know, unless it got sick and died.

[She reaches over and swings the broken door, swings it again, both women watch it.]

MRS HALE: You weren't raised round here, were you? (*MRS PETERS shakes her head*) You didn't know—her?

MRS PETERS: Not till they brought her yesterday.

MRS HALE: She—come to think of it, she was kind of like a bird herself—real sweet and pretty, but kind of timid and—fluttery. How—she—did—change. (*silence; then as if struck by a happy thought and relieved to get back to everyday things*) Tell you what, Mrs Peters, why don't you take the quilt in with you? It might take up her mind.

MRS PETERS: Why, I think that's a real nice idea, Mrs Hale. There couldn't possibly be any objection to it, could there? Now, just what would I take? I wonder if her patches are in here—and her things.

[They look in the sewing basket.]

MRS HALE: Here's some red. I expect this has got sewing things in it. (*brings out a fancy box*) What a pretty box. Looks like something somebody would give you. Maybe her scissors are in here. (*Opens box. Suddenly puts her hand to her nose*) Why—(*MRS PETERS bends nearer, then turns her face away*) There's something wrapped up in this piece of silk.

MRS PETERS: Why, this isn't her scissors.

MRS HALE: (*lifting the silk*) Oh, Mrs Peters—it's—

[MRS PETERS bends closer.]

MRS PETERS: It's the bird.

MRS HALE: (*jumping up*) But, Mrs Peters—look at it! It's neck! Look at its neck! It's all—other side to.

MRS PETERS: Somebody—wrung—its—neck.

[Their eyes meet. A look of growing comprehension, of horror. Steps are heard outside. MRS HALE slips box under quilt pieces, and sinks into her chair. Enter SHERIFF and COUNTY ATTORNEY. MRS PETERS rises.]

COUNTY ATTORNEY: *(as one turning from serious things to little pleasantries)* Well ladies, have you decided whether she was going to quilt it or knot it?

MRS PETERS: We think she was going to—knot it.

COUNTY ATTORNEY: Well, that's interesting, I'm sure. *(seeing the birdcage)* Has the bird flown?

MRS HALE: *(putting more quilt pieces over the box)* We think the—cat got it.

COUNTY ATTORNEY: *(preoccupied)* Is there a cat?

[MRS HALE glances in a quick covert way at MRS PETERS.]

MRS PETERS: Well, not now. They're superstitious, you know. They leave.

COUNTY ATTORNEY: *(to SHERIFF PETERS, continuing an interrupted conversation)* No sign at all of anyone having come from the outside. Their own rope. Now let's go up again and go over it piece by piece. *(they start upstairs)* It would have to have been someone who knew just the—

[MRS PETERS sits down. The two women sit there not looking at one another, but as if peering into something and at the same time holding back. When they talk now it is in the manner of feeling their way over strange ground, as if afraid of what they are saying, but as if they can not help saying it.]

MRS HALE: She liked the bird. She was going to bury it in that pretty box.

MRS PETERS: *(in a whisper)* When I was a girl—my kitten—there was a boy took a hatchet, and before my eyes—and before I could get there—*(covers her face an instant)* If they hadn't held me back I would have—*(catches herself, looks upstairs where steps are heard, falters weakly)*—hurt him.

MRS HALE: *(with a slow look around her)* I wonder how it would seem never to have had any children around, *(pause)* No, Wright wouldn't like the bird—a thing that sang. She used to sing. He killed that, too.

MRS PETERS: (*moving uneasily*) We don't know who killed the bird.

MRS HALE: I knew John Wright.

MRS PETERS: It was an awful thing was done in this house that night, Mrs Hale. Killing a man while he slept, slipping a rope around his neck that choked the life out of him.

MRS HALE: His neck. Choked the life out of him.

[*Her hand goes out and rests on the bird-cage.*]

MRS PETERS: (*with rising voice*) We don't know who killed him. We don't know.

MRS HALE: (*her own feeling not interrupted*) If there'd been years and years of nothing, then a bird to sing to you, it would be awful—still, after the bird was still.

MRS PETERS: (*something within her speaking*) I know what stillness is. When we homesteaded in Dakota, and my first baby died—after he was two years old, and me with no other then—

MRS HALE: (*moving*) How soon do you suppose they'll be through, looking for the evidence?

MRS PETERS: I know what stillness is. (*pulling herself back*) The law has got to punish crime, Mrs Hale.

MRS HALE: (*not as if answering that*) I wish you'd seen Minnie Foster when she wore a white dress with blue ribbons and stood up there in the choir and sang. (*a look around the room*) Oh, I wish I'd come over here once in a while! That was a crime! That was a crime! Who's going to punish that?

MRS PETERS: (*looking upstairs*) We mustn't—take on.

MRS HALE: I might have known she needed help! I know how things can be—for women. I tell you, it's queer, Mrs Peters. We live close together and we live far apart. We all go through the same things—it's all just a different kind of the same thing, (*brushes her eyes, noticing the bottle of fruit, reaches out for it*) If I was you, I wouldn't tell her her fruit was gone. Tell her it ain't. Tell her it's all right.

Take this in to prove it to her. She—she may never know whether it was broke or not.

MRS PETERS: *(takes the bottle, looks about for something to wrap it in; takes petticoat from the clothes brought from the other room, very nervously begins winding this around the bottle. In a false voice)* My, it's a good thing the men couldn't hear us. Wouldn't they just laugh! Getting all stirred up over a little thing like a—dead canary. As if that could have anything to do with—with—wouldn't they laugh!

[The men are heard coming down stairs.]

MRS HALE: *(under her breath)* Maybe they would—maybe they wouldn't.

COUNTY ATTORNEY: No, Peters, it's all perfectly clear except a reason for doing it. But you know juries when it comes to women. If there was some definite thing. Something to show—something to make a story about—a thing that would connect up with this strange way of doing it—

[The women's eyes meet for an instant. Enter HALE from outer door.]

HALE: Well, I've got the team around. Pretty cold out there.

COUNTY ATTORNEY: I'm going to stay here a while by myself, *(to the SHERIFF)* You can send Frank out for me, can't you? I want to go over everything. I'm not satisfied that we can't do better.

SHERIFF: Do you want to see what Mrs Peters is going to take in?

[The LAWYER goes to the table, picks up the apron, laughs.]

COUNTY ATTORNEY: Oh, I guess they're not very dangerous things the ladies have picked out. *(Moves a few things about, disturbing the quilt pieces which cover the box. Steps back)* No, Mrs Peters doesn't need supervising. For that matter, a sheriff's wife is married to the law. Ever think of it that way, Mrs Peters?

MRS PETERS: Not—just that way.

SHERIFF: (*chuckling*) Married to the law. (*moves toward the other room*) I just want you to come in here a minute, George. We ought to take a look at these windows.

COUNTY ATTORNEY: (*scoffingly*) Oh, windows!

SHERIFF: We'll be right out, Mr Hale.

[HALE goes outside. The SHERIFF follows the COUNTY ATTORNEY into the other room. Then MRS HALE rises, hands tight together, looking intensely at MRS PETERS, whose eyes make a slow turn, finally meeting MRS HALE's. A moment MRS HALE holds her, then her own eyes point the way to where the box is concealed. Suddenly MRS PETERS throws back quilt pieces and tries to put the box in the bag she is wearing. It is too big. She opens box, starts to take bird out, cannot touch it, goes to pieces, stands there helpless. Sound of a knob turning in the other room. MRS HALE snatches the box and puts it in the pocket of her big coat. Enter COUNTY ATTORNEY and SHERIFF.]

COUNTY ATTORNEY: (*facetiously*) Well, Henry, at least we found out that she was not going to quilt it. She was going to—what is it you call it, ladies?

MRS HALE: (*her hand against her pocket*) We call it—knot it, Mr Henderson.

CURTAIN

A DOLLAR
a play in one-act

by David Pinski

The following one-act play is reprinted from *Ten Plays*. Trans. Isaac Goldberg. New York: B.W. Heusch, 1920. It is now believed to be in the public domain and may therefore be performed without royalties.

CHARACTERS

THE COMEDIAN
THE VILLAIN
THE TRAGEDIAN
THE OLD MAN
THE HEROINE
THE INGENU
THE OLD WOMAN
THE STRANGER

[A cross-roads at the edge of a forest. One road extends from left to right; the other crosses the first diagonally, disappearing into the forest. The roadside is bordered with grass. On the right, at the crossing, stands a signpost, to which are nailed two boards giving directions and distances.]

[The afternoon of a summer day. A troupe of stranded strolling players enters from the left. They are ragged and weary. THE COMEDIAN walks first, holding a valise in each hand, followed by the VILLAIN carrying over his arms two huge bundles wrapped in bed sheets. Immediately behind these the TRAGEDIAN and the actor who plays the OLD MAN are carrying together a large heavy trunk.]

COMEDIAN: *(stepping toward the signpost, reading the directions on the boards, and explaining to the approaching fellow actors)* That way *(pointing to right and swinging the valise--to indicate the direction)* is thirty miles. This way *(pointing to left)* is forty-five -- and that way is thirty-six. Now choose for yourself the town that you'll never reach today. The nearest way for us is back to where we came from, whence we were escorted with the most splendid catcalls that ever crowned our histrionic successes.

VILLAIN: (*exhausted*) Who will lend me a hand to wipe off my perspiration? It has a nasty way of streaming into my mouth.

COMEDIAN: Stand on your head, then, and let your perspiration water a more fruitful soil.

VILLAIN: Oh!

[He drops his arms, the bundles fall down. He then sinks down onto one of them and wipes off the perspiration, moving his hand wearily over his face. The TRAGEDIAN and the OLD MAN approach the post and read the signs.]

TRAGEDIAN: (*in a dramatic voice*) It's hopeless! It's hopeless!

[He lets go his end of the trunk.]

OLD MAN: (*lets go his end of the trunk*) Mmmm. Another stop.

[TRAGEDIAN sits himself down on the trunk in a tragico-heroic pose, knees wide apart, right elbow on right knee, left hand on left leg, head slightly bent toward the right. COMEDIAN puts down the valises and rolls a cigarette. The OLD MAN also sits down upon the trunk, head sunk upon his breast.]

VILLAIN: Thirty miles to the nearest town! Thirty miles!

COMEDIAN: It's an outrage how far people move their towns away from us.

VILLAIN: We won't strike a town until the day after tomorrow.

COMEDIAN: Hurrah! That's luck for you! There's yet a day-after-tomorrow for us.

VILLAIN: And the old women are still far behind us. Crawling!

OLD MAN: They want the vote and they can't even walk.

COMEDIAN: We won't give them votes, that's settled. Down with votes for women!

VILLAIN: It seems the Devil himself can't take you! Neither your tongue nor your feet ever get tired. You get on my nerves. Sit down and shut up for a moment.

COMEDIAN: Me? Ha--ha! I'm going back there to the lady of my heart. I'll meet her and fetch her hither in my arms.

[He spits on his hands, turns up his sleeves, and strides rapidly off towards the left.]

VILLAIN: Clown!

OLD MAN: How can he laugh and play his pranks even now? We haven't a cent to our souls, our supply of food is running low and our shoes are dilapidated.

TRAGEDIAN: *(with an outburst)* Stop it! No reckoning! The number of our sins is great and the tale of our misfortunes is even greater. Holy Father! Our flasks are empty; I'd give what is left of our soles *(displaying his ragged shoes)* for just a smell of whiskey.

[From the left is heard the laughter of a woman. Enter the COMEDIAN carrying in his arms the HEROINE, who has her hands around his neck and holds a satchel in both hands behind his back.]

COMEDIAN: *(letting his burden down upon the grass)* Sit down, my love, and rest up. We go no further today. Your feet, your tender little feet must ache you. How unhappy that makes me! At the first opportunity I shall buy you an automobile.

HEROINE: And in the meantime you may carry me oftener.

COMEDIAN: The beast of burden hears and obeys.

[Enter the INGENUE and the actress who plays the OLD WOMAN each carrying a small satchel.]

INGENUE: *(weary and pouting)* Ah! No one carried *me*.

[She sits on the grass to the right of the HEROINE.]

VILLAIN: We have only one ass with us.

[The COMEDIAN stretches himself out at the feet of the HEROINE and emits the bray of a donkey. The OLD WOMAN sits down on the grass to the left of the HEROINE.]

OLD WOMAN: And are we to pass the night here?

OLD MAN: No, we shall stop at "Hotel Neverwas."

COMEDIAN: Don't you like our night's lodgings? *(Turning over toward the OLD WOMAN)* See, the bed is broad and wide, and certainly without vermin. Just feel the high grass. Such a soft bed you never slept in. And you shall have a cover embroidered with the moon and stars, a cover such as no royal bride ever possessed.

OLD WOMAN: You're laughing, and I feel like crying.

COMEDIAN: Crying? You should be ashamed of the sun which favors you with its setting splendor. Look, and be inspired!

VILLAN: Yes, look and expire.

COMEDIAN: Look, and shout with ecstasy!

OLD MAN: Look, and burst!

[The INGENUE starts sobbing. The TRAGEDIAN laughs heavily.]

COMEDIAN: *(turning over to the INGENUE)* What. You are crying? Aren't you ashamed of yourself?

INGENUE: I'm sad.

OLD WOMAN: *(sniffing)* I can't stand it any longer.

HEROINE: Stop it! Or I'll start bawling, too.

[COMEDIAN springs to his knees and looks quickly from one woman to the other.]

VILLAIN: Ha--ha! Cheer them up, Clown!

COMEDIAN: (*jumps up abruptly without the aid of his hands*) Ladies and Gentlemen, I have it! (*in a measured singing voice*) Ladies and Gentlemen, I have it!

HEROINE: What have you?

COMEDIAN: Cheerfulness.

VILLAIN: Go bury yourself, Clown.

TRAGEDIAN: (*as before*) Ho-ho-ho.

OLD MAN: P-o-o-h!

[The women weep all the louder.]

COMEDIAN: I have----a bottle of whiskey!

[General commotion. The women stop crying and look up to the COMEDIAN in amazement; the TRAGEDIAN straightens himself out and casts a surprised look at the COMEDIAN; the OLD MAN, rubbing his hands, jumps to his feet; the VILLAIN looks suspiciously at the COMEDIAN.]

TRAGEDIAN: A bottle of whiskey?

OLD MAN: He--He--He--A bottle of whiskey.

VILLAIN: Hum--whiskey.

COMEDIAN: You bet! A bottle of whiskey, hidden and preserved for such moments as this, a moment of masculine depression and feminine tears. (*Taking the flask from his hip pocket. The expression on the faces of all changes from hope to disappointment.*)

VILLAIN: You call that a bottle. I call it a flask.

TRAGEDIAN: (*explosively*) A thimble!

OLD MAN: A dropper!

OLD WOMAN: For seven of us! Oh!

COMEDIAN: *(letting the flask sparkle in the sun)* But it's whiskey, my children. *(opening the flask and smelling it)* U-u-u-m! That's whiskey for you. The saloonkeeper from whom I hooked it will become a teetotaler from sheer despair.

[TRAGEDIAN rises heavily and slowly proceeds towards the flask. The VILLAIN, still skeptical, rises as if unwilling. The OLD MAN chuckles and rubs his hands. The OLD WOMAN gets up indifferently and moves apathetically toward the flask. The HEROINE and INGENUE hold each other by the hand and take ballet steps in waltz time. All approach the COMEDIAN with necks eagerly stretched out and smell the flask, which the COMEDIAN holds firmly in both hands.]

TRAGEDIAN: Ho-ho-ho--Fine!

OLD MAN: He--He--Small quantity, but excellent quality!

VILLAIN: Seems to be good whiskey.

HEROINE: *(dancing and singing)* My Comedian, My Comedian. His head is in the right place. But why didn't you nab a larger bottle?

COMEDIAN: Oh Beloved One, I had to take in consideration both the quality of the whiskey and the size of my pocket.

OLD WOMAN: If only there's enough of it to go round.

INGENUE: Oh, I'm feeling sad again.

COMEDIAN: Cheer up, there will be enough for us all. Cheer up. Here, smell it again.

[They smell again and cheerfulness reappears. They join hands and dance and sing, forming a circle, the COMEDIAN applauding.]

COMEDIAN: Good! If you are so cheered after a mere smell of it, what won't you feel like after a drink. Wait, I'll join you. *(He hides the whiskey flask in his pocket.)* I'll show you a new roundel which we will perform in our next presentation of Hamlet, to the great edification of our esteemed audience. *(Kicking the VILLAIN'S bundles out of the way.)* The place is clear, now for dance and play. Join hands and form a circle, but you, Villain, stay on the outside of it. You are to

try to get in and we dance and are not to let you in, without getting out of step.
Understand? Now then!

[The circle is formed in the following order, COMEDIAN, HEROINE, TRAGEDIAN, OLD WOMAN, OLD MAN, INGENUE.]

COMEDIAN: *(singing)* To be or not to be, that is the question,
That is the question, that is the question.
He who would enter in,
Climb he must over us,
If over he cannot,
He must get under us.

ALL: Tra-la-la, tra-la-la,
Over us, under us.
Tra-la-la, tra-la-la,
Under us, over us.
Now we are jolly, jolly are we.

COMEDIAN: To be or not to be, that is the question,
That is the question, that is the question.
In life to win success,
Elbow your way through,
Jostle the next one,
Else *you* will be jostled.

ALL: Tra-la-la, tra-la-la,
Over us, under us.
Tra-la-la, tra-la-la,
Under us, over us.
Now we are jolly, jolly are we.

[On the last word of the refrain they stop as if dumbfounded, and stand transfixed, with eyes directed on one spot inside of the ring. The VILLAIN leans over the arms of the COMEDIAN and the HEROINE; gradually the circle draws closer till their heads almost touch. They attempt to free their hands but each holds on to the other and all seven whisper in great astonishment.]

ALL: A dollar!

[The circle opens up again, they look each at the other and shout in wonder.]

ALL: A dollar!

[Once more they close in and the struggle to free their hands grows wilder; the VILLAIN tries to climb over and then under the hands into the circle and stretches out his hand toward the dollar, but instinctively he is stopped by the couple he tries to pass between, even when he is not seen but only felt. Again all lean their heads over the dollar, quite lost in the contemplation of it, and whispering, enraptured.]

All: A dollar!

[Separating once again they look at each other with exultation and at the same time try to free their hands, once more exclaiming in ecstasy.]

ALL: A dollar!

[Then the struggle to get free grows wilder and wilder. The hand that is perchance freed is quickly grasped again by the one who held it.]

INGENUUE: *(in pain)* Oh, my hands, my hands! You'll break them. Let go of my hands!

OLD WOMAN: If you don't let go of my hands I'll bite. *(Attempting to bite the hands of the TRAGEDIAN and the OLD MAN, while they try to prevent it.)*

OLD MAN: *(trying to free his hands from the hold of the HEROINE and the OLD WOMAN)* Let go of me. *(Pulling at both his hands)* These women's hands that-- seem so frail, just look at them now.

HEROINE: *(To COMEDIAN)* But you let go my hands.

COMEDIAN: I think it's you who are holding fast to mine.

HEROINE: Why should I be holding you? If you pick up the dollar, what is yours is mine, you know.

COMEDIAN: Then let go of my hand and I'll pick it up.

HEROINE: No, I'd rather pick it up myself.

COMEDIAN: I expected something like that from you.

HEROINE: (*angrily*) Let go of my hands, that's all.

COMEDIAN: Ha-Ha-Ha--It's a huge joke. (*In a tone of command.*) Be quiet. (*They become still.*) We must contemplate the dollar with religious reverence. (*Commotion.*) Keep quiet, I say! --A dollar is spread out before us. A real dollar in the midst of our circle, and everything within us draws us towards it, draws us on irresistibly. Be quiet! Remember you are before the Ruler, before the Almighty. On your knees before Him and pray. On your knees. (*Sinks down on his knees and drags with him the HEROINE and INGENUE.*)

OLD MAN: (*Dropping on his knees and dragging the OLD WOMAN with him.*) He-He-He.

TRAGEDIAN: Ho-Ho-Ho, Clown!

COMEDIAN: (*to TRAGEDIAN*) You are not worthy of the serious mask you wear. You don't appreciate true Divine Majesty. On your knees, or you'll get no whiskey. (*TRAGEDIAN sinks heavily on his knees.*) Oh holy dollar, oh almighty ruler of the universe, before thee we kneel in the dust and send toward thee our most tearful and heartfelt prayers. Our hands are bound, but our hearts strive toward thee and our souls yearn for thee. Oh great king of kings, thou who bringest together those who are separated, and separatest those who are near, thou who--

[The VILLAIN, who is standing aside, takes a full jump, clears the INGENUE and grasps the dollar. All let go of one another and fall upon him, shouting, screaming, pushing and fighting. Finally the VILLAIN manages to free himself, holding the dollar in his right fist. The others follow him with clenched fists, glaring eyes and foaming mouths, wildly shouting.]

ALL: The dollar! The dollar! The dollar! Return the dollar!

VILLAIN: (*retreating*) You can't take it away from me, it's mine. It was lying under my bundle.

ALL: Give up the dollar! Give up the dollar!

VILLAIN: *(in great rage)* No, no. *(A moment during which the opposing sides look at each other in hatred. Quietly but with malice.)* Moreover, whom should I give it to? To you--you--you--you?

COMEDIAN: Ha-ha-ha-ha. He is right, the dollar is his. He has it, therefore it is his. Ha-ha-ha-ha, and I wanted to crawl on my knees toward the dollar and pick it up with my teeth. Ha-ha-ha-ha, but he got ahead of me, Ha-ha-ha-ha.

HEROINE: *(whispering in rage)* That's because you would not let go of me.

COMEDIAN: Ha-ha-ha-ha.

TRAGEDIAN: *(shaking his fist in the face of the VILLAIN)* Heaven and hell, I feel like crushing you!

[He steps aside toward the trunk and sits down in his former pose. INGENUE, lying down on the grass, starts to cry.]

COMEDIAN: Ha-ha-ha. Now we will drink, and the first drink is the Villain's.

[His proposition is accepted in gloom; the INGENUE, however, stops crying; the OLD MAN and the OLD WOMAN have been standing by the VILLAIN looking at the dollar in his hand as if waiting for the proper moment to snatch it from him. Finally the OLD WOMAN makes a contemptuous gesture and both turn aside from the VILLAIN. The latter, left in peace, smooths out the dollar, with a serious expression on his face. The COMEDIAN hands him a small glass of whiskey.]

COMEDIAN: Drink, lucky one.

[The VILLAIN, shutting the dollar in his fist, takes the whiskey glass gravely and quickly drinks the contents, returning the glass. He then starts to smooth and caress the dollar again. The COMEDIAN, still laughing, passes the whiskey glass from one to the other of the company, who drink sullenly. The whiskey fails to cheer them. After drinking, the INGENUE begins to sob again. The HEROINE who is served last throws the empty whiskey glass towards the COMEDIAN.]

COMEDIAN: Good shot. Now I'll drink up all that's left in the bottle.

[He puts the flask to his lips and drinks. The HEROINE tries to knock it away from him but he skilfully evades her. The VILLAIN continues to smooth and caress the dollar.]

VILLAIN: HA-ha-ha ... (Singing and dancing)

He who would enter in,
Jum_ he must over us.

Ho-ho-ho. Oh Holy dollar! Oh almighty Ruler of the World!... Oh King of Kings! Ha-ha-ha.... Don't you all think if I have the dollar and you have it not that I partake a bit of its majesty? That means that I am now a part of its majesty. That means that I am the Almighty dollar's plenipotentiary and therefore I am the Almighty Ruler himself. On your knees before me!... He-he-he....

COMEDIAN: *(after throwing away the empty flask lies down on the grass)* Well roared, lion, but you forgot to hide your jackass's ears.

VILLAIN: It is one's consciousness of power. He-he-he. I know and you know that if I have the money, I have the say. Remember, none of you has a cent to his name. The whiskey is gone. *(Picking up the flask and examining it.)*

COMEDIAN: I did my job well, Drank it to the last drop.

VILLAIN: Yes, to the last drop. This evening you shall have bread and sausage. Very small portions too, for tomorrow is another day. *(INGENUE sobbing mor frequently.)* Not till the day after tomorrow shall we reach town and that doesn't mean that you get anything to eat there either, but I--I--I--he-he-he. Oh holy dollar, almighty dollar. *(Gravely)* He who does my bidding shall not be without food.

COMEDIAN: *(with wide open eyes)* What? Ha-ha-ha.

[INGENUE gets up and throws herself on the VILLAIN'S bosom.]

INGENUE: Oh my dear beloved one.

VILLAIN: Ha-ha, my power already makes itself felt.

HEROINE: *(pushing the INGENUE away)* Let go of him, you. He sought my love for a long time and now he shall have it.

COMEDIAN: What? You!

HEROINE: (*To COMEDIAN*) I hate you, traitor. (*To the VILLAIN*) I have always loved--genius. You are now the wisest of the wise. I adore you.

VILLAIN: (*holding INGENUE in one arm*) Come into my other arm. (*HEROINE throwing herself into his arms, kissing and embracing him.*)

COMEDIAN: (*half rising on his knees*) Stop, I protest. (*Throwing himself on the grass.*) "O frailty, thy name is woman."

OLD WOMAN: (*approaching the VILLAIN from behind and embracing him*) Find a little spot on your bosom for me. I play the "Old Woman," but you know I'm not really old.

VILLAIN: Now I have all of power and all of love.

COMEDIAN: Don't call it love. Call it servility.

VILLAIN: (*freeing himself from the women*) But now I have something more important to carry out. My vassals--I mean you all--I have decided we will not stay here over night. We will proceed further.

WOMEN: How so?

VILLAIN: We go forward tonight.

COMEDIAN: You have so decided?

VILLAIN: I have so decided, and that in itself should be enough for you; but due to an old habit I shall explain to you why I have so decided.

COMEDIAN: Keep your explanation to yourself and better not disturb my contemplation of the sunset.

VILLAIN: I'll put you down on the blacklist. It will go ill with you for your speeches against me. Now then, *without* an explanation, we will go--and at once. (*Nobody stirs.*) Very well then, I go alone.

WOMEN: No, no.

VILLAIN: What do you mean?

INGENUUE: I go with you.

HEROINE: And I.

OLD WOMAN: And I.

VILLAIN: Your loyalty gratifies me very much.

OLD MAN: (*who is sitting apathetically upon the trunk*) What the deuce is urging you to go?

VILLAIN: I wanted to explain it to you, but now no more. I owe you no explanations. I have decided--I wish to go, and that is sufficient.

COMEDIAN: He plays his comedy wonderfully. Would you ever have suspected that there was so much wit in his cabbage head?

WOMEN: (*making love to the VILLAIN*) Oh you darling.

TRAGEDIAN: (*majestically*) I wouldn't give him even a single glance.

VILLAIN: Still another on the blacklist. I'll tell you this much--I have decided--

COMEDIAN: Ha-ha-ha. How long will you keep this up?

VILLAIN: We start at once, but if I am to pay for your food I will not carry any baggage. You shall divide my bundles among you and of course those who are on the blacklist will get the heaviest share. You heard me. Now move on. I'm going now. We will proceed to the nearest town which is thirty miles away. Now then, I am off.

COMEDIAN: Bon voyage.

VILLAIN: And with me fares His Majesty the Dollar and your meals for tomorrow.

WOMEN: We are coming, we are coming.

OLD MAN: I'll go along.

TRAGEDIAN: *(to the VILLAIN)* You're a scoundrel and a mean fellow.

VILLAIN: I am no fellow of yours. I am master and breadgiver.

TRAGEDIAN: I'll crush you in a moment.

VILLAIN: What? You threaten me! Let's go.

[He turns to right. The women take their satchels and follow him.]

OLD MAN: *(to the TRAGEDIAN)* Get up and take the trunk. We will settle the score with him some other time. It is he who has the dollar now.

TRAGEDIAN: *(rising and shaking his fist)* I'll get him yet. *(He takes his side of the trunk.)*

VILLAIN: *(to TRAGEDIAN)* First put one of my bundles on your back.

TRAGEDIAN: *(in rage)* One of your bundles on my back?

VILLAIN: Oh, for all I care you can put it on your head, or between your teeth.

OLD MAN: We will put the bundle on the trunk.

COMEDIAN: *(sitting up)* Look here, are you joking or are you in earnest?

VILLAIN: *(contemptuously)* I never joke.

COMEDIAN: Then you are in earnest?

VILLAIN: I'll make no explanations.

COMEDIAN: Do you really think that because you have the dollar--

VILLAIN: The holy dollar, the almighty dollar, the king of kings.

COMEDIAN: *(continuing)* That therefore you are the master--

VILLAIN: Bread-giver and provider.

COMEDIAN: And that we must--

VILLAIN: Do what I bid you to.

COMEDIAN: So you are in earnest?

VILLAIN: You just get up, take the baggage and follow me.

COMEDIAN: *(rising)* Then, I declare a revolution.

VILLAIN: What? A revolution!

COMEDIAN: A bloody one, if need be.

TRAGEDIAN: *(dropping his end of the trunk and advancing with a bellicose attitude toward the VILLAIN)* And I shall be the first to let your blood, you scoundrel.

VILLAIN: If that's the case I have nothing to say to you. Those who wish, come along.

COMEDIAN: *(getting in his way)* No, you shall not go until you give up the dollar.

VILLAIN: Ha-ha. It is to laugh!

COMEDIAN: The dollar please, or--

VILLAIN: He-he-he.

COMEDIAN: Then let there be blood. *(Turns up his sleeves.)*

TRAGEDIAN: *(taking off his coat)* Ah! Blood, blood!

OLD MAN: *(dropping his end of the trunk)* I'm not going to keep out of a fight.

WOMEN: *(dropping their satchels)* Nor we. Nor we.

VILLAIN: *(shouting)* To whom shall I give up the dollar? You--you--you--you?

COMEDIAN: This argument will not work any more. You are to give the dollar up to all of us. At the first opportunity we'll get change and divide it into equal parts.

WOMEN: Hurrah, Hurrah! Divide it, Divide it.

COMEDIAN: *(to VILLAIN)* And I will even be so good as to give you a share.

TRAGEDIAN: I'd rather give him a sound thrashing.

COMEDIAN: It shall be as I say. Give up the dollar.

HEROINE: *(throwing herself on the COMEDIAN'S breast)* My comedian! My comedian!

INGENUUE: *(to the VILLAIN)* I'm sick of you. Give up the dollar.

COMEDIAN: *(pushing the HEROINE aside)* You better step aside or else you may get the punch I aim at the master and breadgiver. *(To the VILLAIN.)* Come up with the dollar!

TRAGEDIAN: Give up the dollar to him, do you hear?

ALL: The dollar, the dollar!

VILLAIN: I'll tear it to pieces.

COMEDIAN: Then we shall tear out what little hair you have left on your head. The dollar, quick!

[They surround the VILLAIN; the women pull his hair; the TRAGEDIAN grabs him by the collar and shakes him; the OLD MAN strikes him on his bald pate; the COMEDIAN struggles with him and finally grasps the dollar.]

COMEDIAN: *(holding up the dollar)* I have it!

[The women dance and sing.]

VILLAIN: Bandits! Thieves!

TRAGEDIAN: Silence, or I'll shut your mouth. *(Goes back to the trunk and assumes his heroic pose.)*

COMEDIAN: *(putting the dollar into his pocket)* That what I call a successful and a bloodless revolution, except for a little fright and heart palpitation on the part of

the late master and bread giver.-- Listen, someone is coming. Perhaps he'll be able to change the dollar and then we can divide it at once.

OLD MAN: I am puzzled how we can change it into equal parts. (*Starts to calculate with the INGENUE and the OLD WOMAN.*)

HEROINE: (*tenderly attentive to the COMEDIAN*) You are angry with me, but I was only playing with him so as to wheedle the dollar out of him.

COMEDIAN: And now you want to trick me out of my share of it.

OLD MAN: It is impossible to divide it into equal parts. It is absolutely impossible. If it were ninety-eight cents or one-hundred and five cents or--

[The STRANGER enters from the Right, perceives the company, greets it and continues his way to left. COMEDIAN stops him.]

COMEDIAN: I beg your pardon, sir; perhaps you have change of a dollar in dimes, nickles, and pennies. (*Showing the dollar. The OLD MAN and women step forward.*)

STRANGER: (*getting slightly nervous, starts somewhat, makes a quick movement for his pistol pocket, looks at the COMEDIAN and the others and says slowly*) Change of a dollar? (*Moving from the circle to left.*) I believe I have.

WOMEN: Hurrah!

STRANGER: (*turns so that no one is behind him and pulls his revolver*) Hands up!

COMEDIAN: (*in a gentle tone of voice*) My dear sir, we are altogether peaceful folk.

[The STRANGER takes the dollar from the Comedian's hand and walks backwards to left with the pistol pointed at the group.]

STRANGER: Good night, everybody.

[He disappears, the actors remain dumb with fear, with their hands up, mouths wide-open and staring into space.]

COMEDIAN: (*finally breaks out into thunderous laughter*) Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha.

CURTAIN

MINE EYES HAVE SEEN
a play in one-act

by Alice Dunbar-Nelson

The following one-act play is reprinted from *The Crisis*. April, 1918. It is now in the public domain and may therefore be performed without royalties.

CHARACTERS

DAN, the cripple
CHRIS, the younger brother
LUCY, the sister
MRS. O'NEILL, an Irish neighbor
JAKE, a Jewish boy
JULIA, Chris' sweetheart
BILL HARVEY, a muleteer
CORNELIA LEWIS, a settlement worker

TIME

1918

PLACE

A manufacturing city in the northern part of the
United States

[Kitchen of a tenement. All details of furnishing emphasize sordidness--laundry tubs, range, table covered with oil cloth, pine chairs. Curtain discloses DAN in a

rude imitation of a steamer chair, propped by faded pillows, his feet covered with a patch-work quilt.]

[LUCY is bustling about the range preparing a meal. During the conversation she moves from range to table, setting latter and making ready the noon-day meal.]

[DAN is about thirty years old; face thin, pinched, bearing traces of suffering. His hair is prematurely grey; nose finely chiselled; eyes wide, as if seeing BEYOND. Complexion brown.]

[LUCY is slight, frail, brown-skinned, about twenty, with a pathetic face. She walks with a slight limp.]

DAN: Isn't it most time for him to come home, Lucy?

LUCY: It's hard to tell, Danny, dear; Chris doesn't come home on time anymore. It's half-past twelve, and he ought to be here by the clock, but you can't tell any more--you can't tell.

DAN: Where does he go?

LUCY: I know where he doesn't go, Dan, but where he does, I can't say. He's not going to Julia's any more lately. I'm afraid, Dan, I'm afraid!

DAN: Of what, Little Sister?

LUCY: Of everything; oh, Dan, it's too big, too much for me--the world outside, the street--Chris going and coming home nights moody-eyed; I don't understand.

DAN: And so you're afraid? That's been the trouble from the beginning of time--we're afraid because we don't understand.

LUCY: *[coming down front, with a dish cloth in her hand]* Oh, Dan, wasn't it better in the old days when we were back home--in the little house with the garden, and you and father coming home nights and mother getting supper, and Chris and I studying lessons in the dining-room at the table--we didn't have to eat and live in the kitchen then, and--

DAN: *[grimly]* --And the notices posted on the fence for us to leave town because niggers had no business having such a decent home.

LUCY: *[unheeding the interruption]* --And Chris and I reading the wonderful books and laying our plans--

DAN: --To see them go up in the smoke of our burned home.

LUCY: *[continuing, her back to DAN, her eyes lifted, as if seeing a vision of retrospect]* --And everying petting me because I had hurt my foot when I was little, and father--

DAN: --Shot down like a dog for daring to defend his home--

LUCY: --Calling me "Little Brown Princess," and telling mother--

DAN: --Dead of pneumonia and heartbreak in this bleak climate.

LUCY: --That when you--

DAN: --Maimed for life in a factory of hell! Useless--useless--broken on the wheel. *[His voice breaks in a dry sob.]*

LUCY: *[Coming out of her trance, she throws aside the dish-cloth, and running to DAN, lays her cheek against his and strokes his hair.]* Poor Danny, poor Danny, forgive me, I'm selfish.

DAN: Not selfish, Little Sister, merely natural.

[Enter roughly and unceremoniously CHRIS. He glances at the two with their arms about each other, shrugs his shoulders, hangs up his rough cap and mackinaw on a nail, then seats himself at the table, his shoulders hunched up; his face dropping on his hand. LUCY approaches him timidly.]

LUCY: Tired, Chris?

CHRIS: No.

LUCY: Ready for dinner?

CHRIS: If it's ready for me.

LUCY: *[busies herself bringing dishes to the table]* You're late today.

CHRIS: I have bad news. My number was posted today.

LUCY: Number? Posted? *[Pauses with a plate in her hand.]*

CHRIS: I'm drafted.

LUCY: *[Drops plate with a crash. DAN leans forward tensely, his hands grasping the arms of his chair.]* Oh, it can't be! They won't take you from us! And shoot you down, too? What will Dan do?

DAN: Never mind about me, Sister. And you're drafted, boy?

CHRIS: Yes--yes--but-- *[He rises and strikes the table heavily with his hand.]* I'm not going.

DAN: Your duty--

CHRIS: --Is here with you. I owe none elsewhere, I'll pay none.

LUCY: Chris! Treason! I'm afraid!

CHRIS: Yes, of course, you're afraid, Little Sister, why shouldn't you be? Haven't you had your soul shrivelled with fear since we were driven like dogs from our home? And for what? Because we were living like Christians. Must I go and fight for the nation that let my father's murder go unpunished? That killed my mother-- that took away my chances for making a man out of myself? Look at us--you-- Dan, a shell of a man--

DAN: Useless--useless--

LUCY: Hush, Chris!

CHRIS: --And me, with a fragment of an education, and no chance--only half a man. And you, poor Little Sister, there's no chance for you; what is there in life for you? No, if others want to fight, let them. I'll claim exemption.

DAN: On what grounds?

CHRIS: You--and Sister. I am all you have; I support you.

DAN: *[half rising in his chair]* Hush! Have I come to this, that I should be the excuse, the woman's skirts for a slacker to hide behind?

CHRIS: *[clenching his fists]* You call me that? You, whom I'd lay down my life for? I'm no slacker when I hear the real call of duty. Shall I desert the cause that needs me--you--Sister--home? For a fancied glory? Am I to take up the cause of a lot of kings and politicians who play with men's souls, as if they are cards--dealing them out, a hand here, in the Somme--a hand there, in Palestine--a hand there, in the Alps--a hand there, in Russia--and because the cards don't match well, call it a misdeal, gather them up, throw them in the discard, and call for a new deal of a million human, suffering souls? And I must be the Deuce of Spades?

[During the speech, the door opens slowly and JAKE lounges in. He is a slight, pale youth, Hebraic, thin-lipped, eager-eyed. His hands are in his pockets, his narrow shoulders drawn forward. At the end of CHRIS' speech he applauds softly.]

JAKE: Bravo! You've learned the patter well. Talk like the fellows at the Socialist meetings.

DAN and LUCY: Socialist meetings!

CHRIS: *[defiantly]* Well?

DAN: Oh, nothing; it explains. All right, go on--any more?

JAKE: Guess he's said all he's got breath for. I'll go; it's too muggy in here. What's the row?

CHRIS: I'm drafted.

JAKE: Get exempt. Easy--if you don't want to go. As for me--

[Door opens, and MRS. O'NEILL bustles in. She is in deep mourning, plump, Irish, shrewd-looking, bright-eyed.]

MRS. O'NEILL: Lucy, they do be sayin' as how down by the chain stores they be a raid on the potatoes, an' ef ye'er wantin' some, ye'd better be after gittin' into yer things an' comin' wid me. I kin kape the crowd off yer game foot--an' what's the matter wid youse all?

LUCY: Oh, Mrs. O'Neill, Chris has got to go to war.

MRS. O'NEILL: An' ef he has, what of it? Ye'll starve, that's all.

DAN: Starve? Never! He'll go, we'll live.

[LUCY wrings her hands impotently. MRS. O'NEILL drops a protecting arm about the girl's shoulder.]

MRS. O'NEILL: An' it's hard it seems to yer? But they took me man from me year before last, an' he wint afore I came over here, an' it's a widder I am wid me five kiddies, an' I've niver a word to say but--

CHRIS: He went to fight for his own. What do they do for my people? They don't want us, except in extremity. They treat us like--like--like--

JAKE: Like Jews in Russia, eh? *[He slouches forward, then his frame straightens itself electrically.]* Like Jews in Russia, eh? Denied the right of honor in men, eh? Or the right of virtue in women, eh? There isn't a wrong you can name that your race has endured that mine has not suffered, too. But there's a future, Chris--a big one. We younger ones must be in that future--ready for it, ready for it-- *[His voice trails off, and he sinks despondently into a chair.]*

CHRIS: Future? Where? Not in this country? Where?

[The door opens and JULIA rushes in impulsively. She is small, slightly built, eager-eyed, light-brown skin, wealth of black hair; full of sudden shyness.]

JULIA: Oh, Chris, someone has just told me--I was passing by--one of the girls said your number was called. Oh, Chris, will you have to go?

[She puts her arms up to CHRIS' neck; he removes them gently, and makes a slight gesture toward DAN's chair.]

JULIA: Oh, I forgot. Dan, excuse me. Lucy, it's terrible, isn't it?

CHRIS: I'm not going, Julia.

MRS. O'NEILL: Not going!

DAN: Our men have always gone, Chris. They went in 1776.

CHRIS: Yes, as slaves. Promised a freedom they never got.

DAN: No, gladly, and saved the day, too, many a time. Ours was the first blood shed on the altar of National liberty. We went in 1812, on land and sea. Our men were through the struggles of 1861--

CHRIS: When the Nation was afraid not to call them. Didn't want 'em at first.

DAN: Never mind; they helped work out their own salvation. And they were there in 1898--

CHRIS: Only to have their valor disputed.

DAN: --And they were at Carrizal, my boy, and now--

MRS. O'NEILL: An' sure, wid a record like that--ah, 'tis me ould man who said at first 'twasn't his quarrel. His Oireland bled an' the work of thim divils to try to make him a traitor nearly broke his heart--but he said he'd go to do his bit--an' here I am.

[There is a sound of noise and bustle without, and with a loud laugh, BILL HARVEY enters. He is big, muscular, rough, his voice thunderous. He emits cries of joy at seeing the group, shakes hands and claps CHRIS and DAN on their backs.]

DAN: And so you weren't torpedoed?

HARVEY: No, I'm here for a while--to get more mules and carry them to the front to kick their bit.

MRS. O'NEILL: You've been--over there?

HARVEY: Yes, over the top, too. Mules, rough-necks, wires, mud, dead bodies, stench, terror!

JULIA: *[horror-stricken]* Ah--Chris!

CHRIS: Never, mind, not for mine.

HARVEY: It's a great life--not. But I'm off again, first chance.

MRS. O'NEILL: They're brutes, eh?

HARVEY: Don't remind me.

MRS. O'NEILL: [*whispering*] They maimed my man, before he died.

JULIE: [*clinging to CHRIS*] Not you, oh, not you!

HARVEY: They crucified children.

DAN: Little children? They crucified little children.

CHRIS: Well, what's that to us? They're little white children. But here our fellow countrymen throw our little black babies in the flames--as did the worshippers of Moloch, only they haven't the excuse of a religious rite.

JAKE: [*slouches out of his chair, in which he has been sitting brooding*] Say, don't you get tired sitting around grieving because you're colored? I'd be ashamed to be--

DAN: Stop! Who's ashamed of his race? Ours the glorious inheritance; ours the price of achievement. Ashamed! I'm *proud*. And you, too, Chris, smouldering in youthful wrath, you, too, are proud to be numbered with the darker ones, soon to come into their inheritance.

MRS. O'NEILL: Aye, but you've got to fight to keep yer inheritance. Ye can't lay down when someone else has done the work, and expect it to go on. Ye've got to fight.

JAKE: If you're proud, show it. All of your people--well, look at us! Is there a greater race than ours? Have any people had more horrible persecutions--and yet--we're loyal always to the country where we live and serve.

MRS. O'NEILL: And us! Look at us!

DAN: [*half tears himself from the chair, the upper part of his body writhing, while the lower part is inert, dead*] Oh, God! If I were but whole and strong! If I could only prove to a doubting world of what stuff my people are made!

JULIA: But why, Dan, it isn't our quarrel? What have we to do with their affairs? These white people, they hate us. Only today I was sneered at when I went to help

with some of their relief work. Why should you, my Chris, go to help those who hate you?

[CHRIS clasps her in his arms, and they stand, defying the others.]

HARVEY: If you could have seen the babies and girls--and old women--if you could have-- *[Covers his eyes with his hand.]*

CHRIS: Well, it's good for things to be evened up somewhere.

DAN: Hush, Chris! It is not for us to visit retribution. Nor to wish hatred on others. Let us rather remember the good that has come to us. Love of humanity is above the small considerations of time or place or race or sect. Can't you be big enough to feel pity for the little crucified French children--for the ravished Polish girls, even as their mothers must have felt sorrow, if they had known, for *our* burned and maimed little ones? Oh, Mothers of Europe, we be of one blood, you and I!

[There is a tense silence. JULIA turns from CHRIS, and drops her hand. He moves slowly to the window and looks out. The door opens quietly, and CORNELIA LEWIS comes in. She stands still a moment, as if sensing a difficult situation.]

CORNELIA: I've heard about it, Chris, your country calls you. *[CHRIS turns from the window and waves hopeless hands at DAN and LUCY.]* Yes, I understand; they do need you, *don't* they?

DAN: *[fiercely]* No!

LUCY: Yes, we do, Chris, we do need you, but your country needs you more. And, above that, your race is calling you to carry on its good name, and with that, the voice of humanity is calling to us all--we can manage without you, Chris.

CHRIS: You? Poor little crippled Sister. Poor Dan--

DAN: Don't pity me, pity your poor, weak self.

CHRIS: *[clenching his fist]* Brother, you've called me two names today that no man ought to have to take--a slacker and a weakling!

DAN: True. Aren't you both? *[Leans back and looks at CHRIS speculatively.]*

CHRIS: *[Makes an angry lunge towards the chair, then flings his hands above his head in an impatient gesture.]* Oh, God! *[Turns back to the window.]*

JULIA: Chris, it's wicked for them to taunt you so--but Chris--it is our country--our race--

[Outside the strains of music from a passing band are heard. The music comes faintly, gradually growing louder and louder until it reaches a crescendo. The tune is "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," played in stirring march time.]

DAN: *[singing softly]* "Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!"

CHRIS: *[turns from the window and straightens his shoulders]* And Mine!

CORNELIA: "As he died to make men holy, let us die to make them free!"

MRS. O'NEILL: An' ye'll make the sacrifice, me boy, an' ye'll be the happier.

JAKE: Sacrifice! No sacrifice for him, it's those who stay behind. Ah, if they would only call me, and call me soon!

LUCY: We'll get on, never fear. I'm proud! *Proud!* *[Her voice breaks a little, but her head is thrown back.]*

[As the music draws nearer, the group breaks up, and the whole roomful rushes to the window and looks out. CHRIS remains in the center of the floor, rigidly at attention, a rapt look on his face. DAN strains at his chair, as if he would rise, then sinks back, his hand feebly beating time to the music, which swells to a martial crash.]

CURTAIN