

ACT I

Scene One

Setting:

The interior of a southern Plantation Master's home decorated in the décor of a fine southern home; candelabras, vases, wall hangings and Holiday decorations of Holly and Evergreen boughs. The parlor table has three chairs around it at center stage. A small bar with bottles and drinking glasses is by the wall center left. The main entrance is at upstage left. The kitchen entrance is upstage right. A fireplace with mantel is upstage center. Over the mantel hangs a portrait of a middle-aged woman wearing the fashion of a southern belle.

The kitchen interior has two doors, one from the parlor at upstage left, another to outside at upstage right. Landscape backdrop or foilage behind this door when opened. Center stage is a table with two chairs, a sink against the wall at center left and a oven/stove at center right.

At Rise:

(It is Christmas Eve shortly after the American Civil War inside a plantation Master's home. The fireplace mantel, main entrance and kitchen entrance are lined with festive boughs and garland of Holly and Evergreen. LEE is restocking the bar. AUNTIE polishes silverware. MICAH MONROE enters from the kitchen followed by GLEASON.)

MICAH

Well, sir, I hope the tour proved satisfactory?

GLEASON

A healthy crop, well cared for livestock... and your home! Very impressive, Mister Monroe!

MICAH

My humble abode these past sixty-five years. Passed down from my daddy and his to him. Cotton has been in our family a long time, but war and current circumstances suggest it may be prudent to consider offers.

GLEASON

And your son, Aaron? Am I to assume he is in agreement with your desires?

MICAH

My son continues under a physicians care for a wound received in the conflict, Mister Gleason. His recovery is a slow process which has curtailed any decision he might come to concerning the future of our beloved homestead we refer to as Paradise.

GLEASON

None-the-less, I feel my offer reasonable, and I might add, if you delay such action may cancel any interest toward your... Paradise. The market is currently swollen with such properties since the conflict ended bringing prices into decline.

(Micah leads him to the front door, opens it and stands aside.)

MICAH

Seems as though our soil has suddenly become desirable, as if a richness has sprung from the earth of immense value only to gentlemen such as yourself. I shall have a decision by the New Year.

GLEASON

I am at the Bixby Hotel. Thank you for your hospitality, Mister Monroe, and a festive Christmas to you, sir.

MICAH

Good day, sir.

(Micah closes the door and steps to the woman's portrait over the mantel, gazing at it.)

MICAH (Contd)

I fear that rascal speak a good amount of reasoning, my dear. They may yet alter my resolve to never leave our Paradise.

AUNTIE

Some tea, Massa Micah, suh?

MICAH

No, Auntie. I was just... No, no thank you.

(Auntie watches Micah leave then turns to woman's portrait.)

AUNTIE

Your memory is all that poor man got since the Lord took you. It tugs his heart heavily.

(Auntie notices LEE place glasses on the bar. Auntie places her hands on hips, shaking her head frustrated.)

AUNTIE (Contd)

Now how many times you done set up those sipping glasses, Lee?

LEE

More times than I can recollect, Auntie. Whatcha asking for?

AUNTIE

(Placing a cloth on the bar.)

Seems you can't recollect much you old fool. I knows how many times, it every time you set up this bar you put just washed sipping glasses on the wood.

LEE

But---

AUNTIE

The only but is your skinny ass I'm gonna put my tired foot against unless you wipe them glasses dry 'fore you set 'em on this 'ere wood. I ain't gonna be around forever to save you if Massa Aaron finds stains.

LEE

Yes, ma'am. I try to 'member.

AUNTIE

You all know once a week we charged with making this room proper for Massa Aaron's card game, no matter it Yuletide or Judgment day it gonna happen. So I don't want to hear no lame excuse for not doing it properly.

LEE

If the Lord be merciful Massa Aaron won't be 'round much longer no how. Be merciful to us anyways.

AUNTIE

Maybe the Lord gonna make him healthy as the day he went off to that damn war or maybe He gonna put him outta his misery. Whatever He do, we still gonna do our chores unless Massa Micah say different. Now get on back making everything ready.

(SARAH and HIGH BID enter from front door.)

AUNTIE

Sarah! Come 'ere child, hug old Auntie.

(Sarah runs to Auntie, hugs her then admires the decorations.)

SARAH

Last Yule, Massa give me a blanket. Wonder what I get this time?

HIGH BID

Girl you know Massa not very festive since he lost Miss Martha. Now there was a good woman.

LEE *(Eyes Auntie.)*

Yes, suh... that woman weren't no nasty, angry one, like some be.

AUNTIE *(To Sarah.)*

Child, there's always a hurt when you loose someone. Massa Micah done lost pleasure in Yuletide when Miss Martha passed to Glory. Just not in his heart much more.

SARAH

If'n he not happy why does he let us celebrate?

AUNTIE

He grateful for us who keep his house clean, cook vittles and work the fields, so he let us celebrate and put our feet up for a spell.

HIGH BID

His son coming back wounded ain't help Massa's disposition none neither.

AUNTIE

If'n we can lift Massa's spirit at Yuletide then we gonna make it a happy day.

SARAH (*Excitedly.*)

I been making Massa a walking stick! Polished and polished till its bright and shiny, like you does with the house. But, gonna be kinda sadly if I get nothing.

AUNTIE

Giving and getting ain't what Yuletide about, child. It about family, happiness... If'n you don't get a gift don't mean someone don't care. Lots of ways to show someone you care, like a smile or hug. That be a special too. Oh, but I'm sure Massa gonna be mighty proud of his new walking stick, no matter.

HIGH BID

I be back after the guest leave, Auntie. Basil gonna ring the bell soon. Workers be coming on back from the fields. Me and 'Becca 'preciate you taking Sarah for a spell.

AUNTIE

She just fine and Lord knows we can use the help, especially tonight. You go on now, finish whatcha gotta do.

(High Bid steps out front door.)

SARAH (*Sniffs.*)

Vittles smell mighty fine.

AUNTIE

Your momma cooking Turkey and your sister stewing vegetables with----

(A sudden BANG causes all to look at a spilled bottle on the floor by Lee.)

AUNTIE (Contd)

(Steps to the spill and calls to Sarah.)

Go on in the kitchen, honey and get a rag from your sister. Hurry now.

(Sarah runs to kitchen.)

LEE

I... I'm sorry, Auntie. It were like soap slipping outta my fingers.

AUNTIE

Oh hush, you old fool. When was the last time you had your slippery fingers on soap?

LEE

But...

AUNTIE

There ya go again with your butts. *(Shouts.)* Hurry, honey.

Scene Two

(Inside the kitchen SKILLET wearily stirs a ladle in a pot. REBECCA sits at the table prepping food. WILOMINA stands by the sink washing pots. Sarah enters from the door.)

REBECCA

There my baby now.

SARAH
(Hugs Rebecca.)

Hi, Momma.

WILOMINA

Well 'lil sister, come to help Skillet turn that ladle?

SARAH

No, Wilomina. Auntie needs a rag to clean up a spill.

WILOMINA
(Hands Sarah a towel.)

Let me guess, ole Lee drop something?

SKILLET

That man so long on the tooth he don't 'member what time of day it be.

REBECCA

Or what day it be neither.

(All laugh.)

AUNTIE *(Off stage)*

Hurry now child.

REBECCA

Go on. If'n Auntie need 'nother come a running.

(Sarah steps back to door.)

REBECCA

Lordy, I am so tired I could fall off to sleep right here and now.

WILOMINA

I know we baking and cooking all day 'cause it Yuletide, but why, oh why 'cause Massa Aaron have guest does we have to keep at it late into night?

SKILLET

It because---

REBECCA *(Interrupts.)*

Save your nasty breath, Skillet. We already know what you gonna say.

REBECCA & WILOMINA
(In unison.)

In case they get hungry.

SKILLET

If'n y'all know why ya gotta ask? Don't make no never mind, the Lord gonna reward y'all in Glory.

REBECCA

Glory? Reward? Skillet you getting as nimble minded as ole Lee. How is we gonna be rewarded cooking our black flesh to the bone everyday?

SKILLET

Y'all gotta think this kitchen a station where the train of Jesus gonna come right through 'ere bringing salvation to y'all.

REBECCA

Well when the Lord gets here He can explain why all Massa Aaron and his friends do is drink and carry on all hours. Well, I reckon we can thank the Lord for after t'night things be better for a few days.

WILOMINA

You forgetting we not only make vittles, we gotta serve, then clean up 'fore we get to rest.

REBECCA

Hush now, girl. Careful what you saying. Basil like a bad dream, show up when you never expect.

WILOMINA

And with his puny shadow, Teak. That boy got more yes suhs and I gets that for you, suh, than anyone I ever heard 'fore, and does it all with a mighty big smile too.

REBECCA

Yes, ma'am. That be him. Amen.

SKILLET

Basil be Overseer and that young'un Teak only doing what he told to do or he get took to the whipping post.

REBECCA

They both should be working them fields like all the other Africans.

SKILLET

Basil an African just like---

WILOMINA
(*Interrupting.*)

He be Ghana, not Yoruba like us.

SKILLET

Girl look 'round. Y'all not in Africa. Ain't no tribes here. Just us Negros. Basil boss 'cause he put fear into anyone thinking of running. Nobody wants them slave catchers totting a runner back all cut up from the whip, maybe even got their neck stretched. That big Ghana make sure we all does our work and shuts our mouths, like y'all should be doing. Now *hush*, ya hear?

WILOMINA

He still mean.

SKILLET

He still be the man with the baton and that makes him Overseer no matter who y'all like or leastwise.

(The SOUND of a bell.)

REBECCA

There be the bell. Field workers finally come on home.

(The cadence of heavy foot steps grows louder and louder, closer and closer as tired men, women and children begin to file wearily past the open door. A young black BOY stops at the door.)

BOY

That mighty fine vittles I smell. Ain't had nothing but grits this morning, Skillet. Spare something?

SKILLET

(Tosses a biscuit to the boy.)

This be Massa's Yule meal. Now go on, boy. Scat.

(The boy steps back in line. Everyone returns grudgingly to their chores.)

Scene Three

(In the parlor Auntie and Sarah work on the spill. Lee is by the bar. The front door opens allowing AARON MONROE and DOCTOR TULLY to enter.)

LEE

Evening, Massa Aaron, Doctor Tully, suh.

(Aaron ignores Lee.)

DOCTOR TULLY

Evening, Lee, Auntie... Merry Christmas to y'all.

AUNTIE

And to you, suh.

AARON:

(Noticing a stain on the bar.)

Auntie!

AUNTIE

Yes, suh?

AARON

Are you aware of what fine craftsmanship cost?

DOCTOR TULLY

Now, Aaron... its Christmas. Try not to raise your temperament. Not good for your condition.

AARON

(Begins to cough.)

This piece of furniture is worth more than y'all put together!

(Auntie glares at Lee. Lee looks down at his shoes.)

DOCTOR TULLY

I told you to calm yourself.

AARON

(Pours a glass of Bourbon.)

Yes, you tell me over and over but the only satisfaction my aching body receives is of the liquid medicinal form, to wit, Bourbon. I prefer to drown my pain than manage its cause.

(High Bid enters from front door.)

HIGH BID

Guests here, suh.

AARON

Finally we can proceed with the evenings activities! High Bid, make sure their horses are groomed properly, ya hear?

HIGH BID

Yes, suh.

(High Bid steps out the front door.)

DOCTOR TULLY

I will wager that Bourbon stand you so cherish was not half the cost of that boy.

AARON

A wager you'd easily win. High Bid earned his moniker after a vigorous bidding session at the auction house. A costly nigga but has proven his worth.

(BERTRUM and HENRY enter from the front door.)

BERTRUM

Permit me to introduce my Cousin Henry, a distant relative. Doctor Tully and our host, Aaron Morgan.

(They all shake hands.)

AARON

Well, sir, I am honored our esteem neighbor's distant relative will join us this evening.

HENRY

On the contrary, it is I who is honored.

(Bertrum, Henry and Aaron sit at the table. Doctor Tully steps toward the door.)

BERTRUM

Are you not participating this evening, Doctor?

DOCTOR TULLY

Perhaps another time. My dinner and wife await. If y'all excuse me, gentlemen. *(nods to Henry.)* A pleasure, sir.

(Aaron begins to cough as he shuffles the cards.)

DOCTOR TULLY (Contd)

For heaven sake, Aaron, do not neglect your medicine.

(Aaron raises a hand in wave as the Doctor steps out the door shaking his head. Aaron drinks and catches his breath.)

HENRY

You appear to have a rather nasty affliction.

BERTRUM

(Takes the cards from Aaron.)

The result of a Union bayonet through the right lung. The good Doctor continues to monitor Aaron's health.

AARON

That old fool couldn't heal a scraped shin. He fills me with potions and powders which merely antagonizes my wound. Luckily I hold an abundant supply of my own comfort. *(Holds up glass.)*

HENRY

I understand since I also underwent the tedious ramblings of a modern day medicine man when a bullet fired by an enraged husband passed through my thigh as I fled his wife's boudoir. Needless to say, the pain was excruciating, the leg left limp.

AARON

Yet you step without notice of this wound?

BERTRUM

I never knew you were shot? When did---

HENRY *(Interrupting.)*

Modesty prevents inspection of the area in question yet I assure you another inch I would not have my manly portions.

AARON

How is it you are not in pain or are gimp?

HENRY

I consume an elixir obtained from a Cajun adept in the ways of Voodoo. The concoction removes not only pain but nearly all damage!

BERTRUM *(Skeptical.)*

Sounds like medicinal hogwash which does more harm than healing.

HENRY

I was skeptical as well, Cousin, until I shrugged off my indifference and realized the pain greater than the proposed cure, so I drank. The next day I drank again. By the third day throbbing had ceased and my gait strong and true.

AARON

The hell you say! In merely three days?

(Henry stands and steps happily around the room then resumes his seat.)

HENRY

The results speak for themselves.

AARON

Tell me, sir... have you any of this elixir I might sample?

HENRY

(Produces a small bottle and hands to Aaron.)

With my compliments, sir.

AARON

(Examines the bottle, opens it and sniffs.)

An unfamiliar scent, non medicinal nor overwhelming. *(drinks and smacks his lips.)* Warms like Bourbon, fancies the pallet, calms the ache, and with a single sampling! Tell me a price to obtain a quantity of this potion?

HENRY *(Considers.)*

I could arrange shipment for say... two hundred dollars.

BERTRUM

Rather steep for an unknown potion.

AARON

(Retrieves paper currency from a pocket.)

Accepted!

HENRY

As much as I respect the bravado of the Confederacy I must point out it's treasury is now defunct, therefore I insist on northern notes, sir.

AARON

(Angrily tosses the money at the fireplace.)

Damn it all!

BERTRUM

Perhaps as well, maybe an omen of a false fountain of youth?

AARON

False...? Look at your cousin, there is your proof! Shot yet now able to prance about without pain! It may not be a fountain of youth but seems to be a source of relief. *(To Henry.)* Sir, I surely have an item worth your asking price, something you'd accept as payment? A horse? Silverware? Name it and we shall consider our agreement sealed.

HENRY *(Considers.)*

Well, yes there is an item I do find most acceptable. I'd find our business concluded with ownership of one of your Negresses.

(Auntie and Lee look worried at each other.)