

Oh, Penelope!

A Play By Jeremy Adelman

Setting: *The front parlor of the house of Rev. Oliver Hall, a Congregationalist minister in a small town in southern New Hampshire. It is late March, in the year 1863. The room is gloomy and dark, and gives the impression of great age. Back of the stage, slightly to stage left, is a large stone fireplace, in which burns a small fire. The mantelpiece is filled with an assortment of knickknacks. Above the fireplace hangs a painting of a Congregationalist minister, dressed in the Puritan style. To stage right of the fireplace is a window, overlooking a street. Far to stage right, just past the window, is a spinet piano, oriented perpendicular to the audience and dusty from disuse. There are three Spartan wooden chairs: two to the stage right side of the fireplace, and one to stage left of the fireplace. A small wooden table covered in a dark overhanging tablecloth stands between the two chairs to stage right, upon which sits a wooden chess set, the pieces on their starting squares, and a vellum bound book containing the poetry of Thomas Campbell.*

Enter **Sabrina Hall** and **Adellah Willis** from stage left.

Sabrina: *(talking quickly)* Can you believe it, Della? His train was due in at Cornish Station at one fifty, and the clock just struck two. That means he's here – after a year and a half, he's finally here! He must be in the carriage with Pa right now, driving home. Here, sit down and get warm. Can I get you some tea, Della?

Adellah: No, thank you.

Sabrina: But wasn't it a cold walk over here? I know the rain's stopped, but that wind's sure been gusting. When I stepped outside to feed the chickens, I could not believe how cold it was! Mother Nature must still think it's winter. Please let me get you something to warm you up.

Adellah: I'm not thirsty. *(She sits down in the chair farthest to stage right.)*

Sabrina: I understand. *(She sits in the chair beside Adellah, to stage right of the fireplace.)* You must be dying with excitement, Della. I know I am, and he's just my brother. If it was my precious George coming home... I'd either be fainting or making an even bigger fool of myself. And George and I aren't even engaged, the way you and Frank are. *(A short beat.)* Oh, Della, you look ever so pretty in that new dress!

Adellah: *(Forcing a chuckle)* You say I look pretty in everything, Sabrina!

Sabrina: I say it because it's true. It's easy to see why my brother fell in love with you. And when he sees you today... why, he'll fall in love with you all over again! *(She smiles, as she gets up to poke the fire.)* And then, in a few weeks, I bet you'll look even prettier, in a wedding dress!

Adellah: *(blushing slightly)* Sabrina...

Sabrina: What? Now that Frank's home, there's no need for you two to wait any longer, is there? And you've been engaged a year and a half already! Oh, I just can't wait, Della. We'll finally be sisters, you and I. Isn't that wonderful? It's what we always dreamed of, ever since we were little girls!

Adellah: *(Looking away)* I... I wouldn't want to put too much on Frank, not when he's coming home wounded.

Sabrina: Frank wasn't hurt that badly, Della. Not like Jem Gordon was, when they took off his leg. *(At the mention of Jem Gordon, Adellah gives a start, one noticed by the audience, but not by Sabrina.)* Didn't Frank write to tell you that, Della? In his last letter to us, he said he feels just fine now, as if he didn't have any rebel lead in him at all. *(She sits back down.)*

Adellah: I don't know, Sabrina. If he were that well, I don't think they would be sending him home. They didn't send your brother Ollie home after he was wounded at Antietam. They just sent him right back to his regiment.

Sabrina: But Ollie wasn't hurt hardly at all. Just a scratch on the cheek, he said in his letter.

There is a tense beat of silence. Then Adellah stands up, suddenly, and looks over towards the window.

Sabrina: What is it?

Adellah: Nothing. I just thought I heard something outside.

Sabrina: *(Standing as well.)* It isn't Frank and my father yet, is it?

Adellah: *(Quickly)* No. It's nothing... *(There is a short beat of silence.)* Where's your sister, Sabrina? Isn't she coming round to greet Frank, too?

Sabrina: Lizzy did say she'd be here just after noon, to help me get the house ready. But she still isn't here. Something must have come up at the Gibson house. But it's quite fine – I've taken care of everything. I'm sure Lizzy'll be here soon. She wouldn't miss a day like this for anything.

Adellah: *(Peering again out the window, somewhat nervously.)* What could have come up, I wonder. Is Mr. Gibson sick again?

Sabrina: Perhaps. It must be awful taking care of that wretched old invalid. I don't know how Lizzy puts up with it. *(A short beat)* Still, I envy her a little.

Adellah: You do?

Sabrina: Yes. If only I'd fallen in love with a Gibson instead of a Waterman. Then Pa would have let George and me get engaged, or maybe even married, before the boys went off to Virginia. *(Adellah replies with an incredulous look.)* Della, it's true! I know Pa said it was because I was too young, but I'm sure if George was as rich as Bradford Gibson, I'd be a married woman now, just like Lizzy! Why, he let you and Frank get engaged, and you're only six months older than me. No one said you were too young.

Adellah: *(somewhat wistfully)* My father said exactly that.

Sabrina: But he was wrong, Della, and now you will be the happiest of brides.

Adellah: *(After a beat in which she forces a smile.)* Your father probably just didn't want to lose you, Sabrina. With Lizzy married, and the boys heading off to war, he needed you to stay and look after him.

Sabrina: *(Smiling)* Well, now he'll have you, too, Della, once you and Frank are married! *(When Sabrina sees Adellah finds no humor in this half-hearted joke, her smile fades.)* Oh, don't worry! Pa'd never make you keep house for us. We're not at all like those Gibsons. It's such a wonder, really. They must be the richest family in the county. They could have dozens of maids, if they wanted them, and yet they treat their daughter-in-law like their servant. *(She sighs and sits back down in her chair.)* Still, we shouldn't judge them too harshly. It must be just as hard on them as it's been on my sister, with what's happened to poor Bradford. Why, if we learned that the rebels had captured Frank... we'd all be upset, too, wouldn't we?

Adellah: Let's pray he gets paroled soon. *(She sits as well.)*

Sabrina: Yes, let's! Remember those boys from Keene Pa told us about, who got captured at Fair Oaks? They got paroled, and now Ollie writes they are back with the company. Hopefully poor Bradford's turn will come soon, too – for Lizzy's sake. I wonder if he regrets signing up with all those Harvard boys, instead of joining a good New Hampshire regiment like the rest of the boys. *(Another beat.)* Oh, I wish Pa had let me go with him down to Cornish Station! Remember when Jem Gordon came home, and all of Crendon turned out to greet him on the platform? That was grand, wasn't it? I wonder why Frank told us in his letter not to make a big to-do about his homecoming. *(As she delivers this last sentence, three muffled knocks are heard from offstage.)* There! That must be Lizzy now. *(She stands.)*

For a moment, there is silence. Adellah picks up the poetry book and looks it over diffidently.

Adellah: *(softly, muttering to herself)* I was too young... God, was I too young. *(She opens the book, and begins to skim through the pages. Then she looks up, suddenly.)* And to think I was angry at Daddy... Damn little fool...

Sabrina: *(offstage, somewhat muffled)* Oh, Mr. Gordon? Come on in, Mr. Gordon. *(Adellah slams the book shut and sits bolt upright.)* Have you come to call on Frank? He'll be here shortly. Please, come into the parlor. *(Enter Sabrina, from stage left, followed by James Gordon, who walks with a pronounced limp, favoring his right leg over his left; his left leg is a wooden one, but this is not visible to the audience, as it is hidden beneath his trousers.)* Can I get you some tea, Mr. Gordon? It's so dreadfully cold outside.

James: Coffee, if you have any. *(Gingerly, he sits himself down in the chair closest to stage left.)*

Sabrina: Certainly! Della, look – Mr. James Gordon is here.

Adellah: *(rising timidly)* Good afternoon, Mr. Gordon.

James: *(nervously)* Good day, Miss Willis. I just wanted to see Frank... hear what's new with the boys in Company E.

Sabrina: Frank will be here shortly, I'm sure. Now, if you will excuse me, I'll go fetch some coffee. *(She re-exits stage left.)*

Adellah: *(After a beat, in a quiet, but biting voice)* Why are you here? *(She glares at him.)*

James: Why shouldn't I be? Frank's a good friend of mine, 'specially after what we went through together in Virginia. The better question is why are you here?

Adellah: *(looking away)* You know why!

James: *(After a beat)* You didn't write him, did you? Della, you said you would–

Adellah: *(louder)* No, Jem, I didn't write him.

James: Why not?

Adellah: I couldn't... I just couldn't. I'm sorry! I'm sorry! What else do you want me to say?

James: Della, I want you–

Adellah: *Psst.* Sabrina's coming back!

(James and Adellah look away from one another. After a beat, reenter Sabrina, with a cup of coffee.)

Sabrina: Here you go, Mr. Gordon. *(She hands him the cup.)*

James: Thank you.

Sabrina: *(After looking back and forth, and sensing the tension. As she talks, and over the next several lines, Adellah starts fiddling with the chess set; she starts by setting up the first four moves of the game given below, but then continues as white with a different line. See appendix.)* It's so nice of you to come, Mr. Gordon. I'm certain... Frank will be delighted, I'm sure.... *(She sits in the last vacant seat.)*

James: *(after an awkward pause)* You heard from your brother Oliver recently?

Sabrina: His last letter was dated March the tenth. He writes there's not much new to report. They are still in winter quarters, on the Rappahannock – just drilling and all that, like you all did last winter. I pray everything will be quiet now, for a good long while.

James: Why do you say that?

Sabrina: I could not bear another big battle. After Antietam, I couldn't sleep for a week, once we found out your regiment had been right in the thick of it. And then after Fredericksburg... *(she draws a tense breath).*

James: You should be praying for battles, Miss Hall – big battles, where we lick the rebs and send them running back to their mamas. The quicker that happens, the quicker the boys get to come home. Otherwise, it'll be the full three years' enlistment for the lot of 'em, besides the ones lucky enough to get shot full of rebel lead like Frank and me.

Sabrina: Mr. Gordon! How could you say such things?

James: Because it's the truth. The boys want a battle too, you know. The big battle's gotta happen, sooner or later. Better it be sooner. You think peace and quiet is good, but it isn't. We lost a lot of men last year, when we were in winter quarters at Alexandria. Like Joe Swinnerton - the camp cough took him off, same as it did to Mike Alden. The rebel bullets ain't killed any of us Crendon boys... at least not yet.

Adellah: Can we talk about something else, please?

James: What do you got to worry about now, Miss Willis? You've got no brothers, and your beau's coming home, mostly intact. *(She glares at him, angrily.)*

Sabrina: It upsets all of us, Mr. Gordon. It's a happy day today. Frank is coming home. We should all be happy... And just think, now we will all have a wedding... to look forward to... *(Sensing the tension, she hurriedly switches subjects.)* It's spring now, as of yesterday... officially. It might not feel like it yet, but I'm sure it will get warmer soon.

James: Yes, I'm sure it will. *(A short beat of silence follows.)* How's the old Reverend doing these days, Miss Hall? Your father still well?

Sabrina: Well enough, I guess.

James: I know he must be a little mad at me, seeing as I don't get round to church much anymore.

Sabrina: I think he understands, what with your leg and all... *(She is interrupted by salvo of knocks from offstage, and pops to her feet immediately.)* Excuse me, please. That simply must be Lizzy. Pa and Frank wouldn't knock on the door. *(Exits, stage left. As soon as she leaves, James awkwardly hoists himself to his feet, and limps over towards Adellah. She pointedly refuses to look at him.)*

James: *(Gesturing towards the chess pieces.)* Hey! That's my gambit you're setting up there, isn't it?

Adellah: It's dubious for black. White is obviously better in this position.

James: Play me then, and we'll see.

Adellah: No. Not now!

James: *(With a smile.)* Why not? Am I not good enough, now that Frank is coming home? I thought you said I was getting good enough to beat him. *(He touches her tenderly, but she immediately wiggles free.)*

Adellah: I didn't say that. But you are getting better.

James: *(After a short beat.)* Della, you aren't thinking of... well... going on with the –

Adellah: No.

James: Then why didn't you write him?

Adellah: I told you I'm sorry! But I'm here to tell him now, once he arrives. Today.

James: Really?

Adellah: Yes.

James: That seems rather cruel to poor old Frank.

Adellah: Go home, Jem. Now.

James: Why?

Adellah: Because I told you to go. Because you are upsetting me. *(James turns back towards the door, but remains standing. Adellah continues in a half-whisper)* If you don't go, I won't tell him.

*Re-enter Sabrina, stage left, followed by **Elizabeth Hall Gibson**. Slightly older than her sister, she appears tired and haggard.*

Sabrina: ...Isn't it so wonderful, Lizzy? They surely must be trotting up the road this very moment, right as we speak! I almost can't control myself – I'm so excited. And look – Mr. Gordon has come, too.

Elizabeth: Hello, Mr. Gordon. Hello, Adellah. Why, you must be over the moon, to see your fiancé again! *(She sits in the chair to stage left that had previously been occupied by James.)*

Adellah: Of course. *(Sabrina and James both gesture for the other to take the last remaining chair.)*

James: I insist, Miss Hall.

Sabrina: Mr. Gordon – there's no need for you to stand so that us ladies can all have a seat. I'll go get another chair from the living room.

James: Oh, no need to bother yourself on my account.

Sabrina: But I must insist that you sit. I know you mean to be polite, but I couldn't bear it!

James: A poor cripple with a wooden leg standing while you all sit down? It's alright. I... I was just about to go, anyway.

Sabrina: But you only just arrived! You haven't even finished your coffee yet.

James: I'm done... not as thirsty as I thought, I guess. *(He hands the cup off to Sabrina.)*

Sabrina: Frank's going to be here any minute now, you know. Please, stay – at least until then. How could you think of going before you say hello to Frank? Wasn't that why you came?

James: I... well...

Elizabeth: It's no trouble for us to get you a chair, Mr. Gordon.

James: I... I just remembered something... Quite sorry, but I've just got to be off.

Sabrina: *(Patting the chair)* Please, sit down. It can't be so pressing that you cannot stay and wait for Frank.

Adellah: *(With a forced smile.)* Yes please, Mr. Gordon. Stay for a little bit.

James: All right. I guess I can't refuse three lovely ladies... *(He sits. Sabrina re-exits stage left.)*

Elizabeth: *(Looking about, and sensing a certain tension in the room.)* I'm sorry I'm so late. Poor Mr. Gibson's taken ill again, and it took simply forever for us to find Dr. Rollins.

Adellah: Mr. Gibson's been sick for a while, hasn't he?

Elizabeth: All winter he's had a bit of a cough, yes –

James: He's always had a cough. I remember when I was a kid, watching him sit in the front pew, hacking his lung out all through your father's sermons.

Elizabeth: But this is a turn for the worse. He's running a fever. All day, he's just sat in his chair and complained that his legs hurt too much for him to get up.

(While she speaks, re-enter Sabrina, this time with a chair similar to the ones already in the room, which she places next to Elizabeth on the stage left side.)

Adellah: Mr. Gibson must be getting up there now.

Elizabeth: He'll be seventy in May.

Sabrina: The promised three score and ten.

Elizabeth: *(with half facetious derision)* Sabrina, don't talk like that. *(In a somewhat hesitant tone.)* I hope Mr. Gibson lives to be a hundred.

(The sound of clattering hooves is heard. Sabrina and then Elizabeth stand up, and cross towards stage left, where they look out a window that is unseen to the audience. As they cross, Adellah stands, as well, hesitantly.)

Sabrina: *(excited)* He's here! That's Pa's carriage. Oh, goodness, Lizzy. He's really here. Look! There he is! *(Turns.)* He's here. Della, aren't you delighted? Come to the door with us. *(As Sabrina talks, she and Lizzy – followed somewhat tepidly by Adellah – cross back to stage.)* He'll probably want to see you first! I know if my George didn't want to see me first after a year and a half... why, I'd be heartbroken. *(She exits. Adellah stops just before following her.)*

Adellah: I think I'll wait here, if you don't mind. *(Her eyes dart towards James.)*

Elizabeth: *(also stopping before exiting.)* I understand. Here. Sit down and collect yourself. *(She escorts Adellah to the chair Sabrina has just brought in, beside James.)* It's a bit cold in here, isn't it?

James: I think it's fine.

Elizabeth: But poor Miss Willis has turned white as a sheet. *(She picks up the poker and prods the fire.)* You must be just overwhelmed. I know I would be... *(sadly)* I wish... I wish I could feel the same way.

Adellah: Bradford will be home soon, too. I'm sure of it.

Elizabeth: Maybe... God willing... maybe... *(She looks away, out towards the audience. Her face is near tears. Then she scampers off and exits, stage left.)*

Adellah: She's jealous of me. If she only knew.

James: If only Frank had been captured, and Bradford wounded, eh? Or better yet, if only Frank had been killed.

Adellah: Jem! Jem! Don't talk like that.

James: I know. I'm sorry. *(A quick beat)* You want me to tell him?

Adellah: No.

James: It'd spare you the pain. I know him better than you, I reckon, after Virginia. I could break it to him easy -

Adellah: No, Jem. I won't make you do it. It's... it's my cross to bear...

(As Adellah speaks, re-enter Sabrina leading Frank Hall.)

Sabrina: ... And there she is now. Go on ahead... don't be shy, you two.

Frank: *(Bashful)* Hello, Della. *(Re-enter Elizabeth, following Frank.)*

Adellah: *(Rising)* Hello, Frank.

Frank: *(After a beat, for lack of anything else to say)* Good day, Della... *(He notices James and his face brightens.)* Hello Jem! You come by to welcome me to the ranks of the invalids?

James: *(Rising as well)* Something like that. *(They embrace in a brotherly manner. The girls all look at one another.)* How go things in the Fightin' Fifth now that I've gone back up here?

Frank: Well, they don't call us that as a joke anymore, that's for sure... Guess I wouldn't really know what's been going on, recently. These last few months I've been lying around a bunch of hospitals, wondering when they're going to decide I'm too full of lead to go back to Virginia. *(He sighs.)* Jesus, I'm plumb beat. That goddamn train up from New London shook like an old drunk. *(The girls look at each other again, scandalized at his coarse language. He sits.)* Oh, sorry 'bout the language. Guess I forgot I wasn't in the army camp anymore.

Sabrina: You talk like that in the army camp?

Frank: You bet we do.

James: *(Sitting)* By camp standards, that was tame.

Frank: If you heard what we boys really said to one another in Virginia... why, it'd make your pretty little ears fall off, Sabrina.

Sabrina: Well, you best be careful to mind your manners around Papa. He hasn't stopped being a minister! *(Looking around.)* Oh, dear. Let me go fetch another chair! *(She dashes back out.)*

There is a short beat as the four of them look at one another.

Frank: Well, what's new around these parts? Anything exciting happening? Any scandalous gossip?

Adellah: No.

James: *(Overlapping with Adellah's line)* Nothing much.

Elizabeth: It's been a very cold winter.

Frank: That boring, huh? Gee, it almost makes me wish I was back in Virginia. You ever get to feeling that way, Jem?

James: Sometimes. Then I remember the hardtack and the mud and marching twenty miles on an empty stomach and that young pipsqueak Lieutenant Moore barking our ears off during the drills, and I'm glad to be home.

Frank: *(Suddenly pensive.)* He's dead, you know, Lieutenant Moore – Captain Moore, I guess he was at the end. He got shot dead at Fredericksburg, right before the rebel balls got me.

James: No kidding... He wasn't a bad man, really, young Moore. He was rough on us, yes, but fair.

Frank: If it wasn't for him, we'd've never gotten that bridge built across the Chickahominy... Lizzy and Della, did Jem here ever tell you about the time we New Hampshire boys saved the whole Army of the Potomac?

Elizabeth: Really? You did that?

James: I wouldn't go that far, Frank.

Frank: But it's true. That bridge we built out of grapevines and beanpoles saved the whole army from getting cut in two at Fair Oaks. *(While he speaks, re-enter Sabrina lugging another chair.)* When the river came up in the flood, all the other bridges washed away... except ours. Got a whole corps across that bridge – wagons and all - before it gave out – saved the whole army that day, we did.

James: And we got a nice barrel full of whiskey for our troubles.

Frank: That we did too! Burned like the devil all the way down. But it warmed a poor soldier up from the inside! *(The girls once more look scandalized.)* You know, Jem, the generals never gave us a barrel of whiskey ever again, after that day.

James: Wonder why! *(He and Franks share a loud, boisterous laugh. Following that is a beat of painful silence.)*

Sabrina: Where's Pa, Frank?

Frank: He's gone over to the Gibsons's house. We saw Doc Rollins's phaeton hitched up outside on our way back here. Is the old bird sick again, or something, Lizzy?

Elizabeth: Sadly yes. I'm glad to hear Doc Rollins has made it over, finally. Poor Mr. Gibson been asking for a doctor since he woke up in the morning.

Sabrina: *(crossly)* I can't believe it. Frank's come home after a year and a half, and Pa goes right over to the Gibsons! Doesn't he care to meet his son?

Frank: It's alright. The Right Reverend father talked enough at me on the way back from Cornish Station. I don't think he let me get a word in edgewise.

James: *(After a short beat)* You know what I do miss about Virginia, Frank?

Frank: What?

James: Going down the line. Particularly with old McHeath – God rest his soul. That son-of-a-gun could smell a house of-

Frank: Quiet now, you old hound-dog. There are ladies present!

Sabrina: What do you mean by that... going down the line?

Frank: *(Quickly)* Nothing. Just army talk, that's all. *(He stands up.)* You know, I'm famished. Got any grub you could rustle up for me? The vittles in those hospitals weren't much better than what we had in camp, and what I had to eat on the train... that wasn't worthy of being called food.

Sabrina: Certainly, Frank. I'll go fix you something right away. *(She stands.)*

Elizabeth: *(Standing as well.)* Here, I'll help you, Sabrina.

Adellah: *(Also standing.)* I'll come too!

Sabrina: Goodness me! It's not that much trouble. Stay and talk with Frank. It's been so long. I'm sure he's got so many stories to tell.

Frank: *(Sitting back down again.)* It's alright. I'm not going anywhere. You'll be sick of all my stories in a couple weeks, anyways.

Sabrina: *(To Adellah)* But... don't you want to...

Adellah: It's fine. I'm sure Frank will be happy to talk with Mr. Gordon for a bit. *(Forces a smile.)* Plus, you can teach me how to cook for your brother!

Sabrina: I.. I guess so. Come on, then. *(The three girls exit. As soon as they leave, Frank gets up from his chair and crosses towards James, who has turned his attention to the chess board, which he is now resetting for a new game.)*

Frank: *(harshly)* Jem, you idiot!

James: *(With an impish grin, though his attention is still devoted towards the chess pieces.)* What did I do?

Frank: You're sitting with my two sisters and my fiancé, and you start talking about going down the line! Tell me; when they took off your leg, did they cut out part of your brain, too?

James: *(in a mocking tone)* You mean to say, you didn't write to Adellah and tell her about that night in Alexandria, when you and McHeath went up against each other, whore for whore, until –

Frank: Christ almighty!

James: How many of 'em did you lay in a row to beat him, eh? Six? Wasn't that right?

Frank: Seven.

James: I bet they still talk about you in Company E for that! The legendary Frank Hall – the minister's son, who could take on seven ladies of the town in one night, and still get up for reveille in the morning. Or do they remember you instead for letting the whole Union down when we had that truce at Yorktown? *(He punctuates this speech by holding up a chess piece.)* That rebel officer really whooped your sorry ass, didn't he, when you played chess with him?

Frank: That wasn't just any old confederate. That was Paul Morphy himself.

James: You keep telling yourself that, Frank. But I think you're just not that good.

Frank: I can checkmate you, you son-of-a-bitch!

James: I've gotten better since Virginia. I've been playing Della all the time, now that I'm an invalid with nothing better to do. Here, play me. You can even be white.

Frank: Want odds?

James: Never. *(Frank sits beside him. He and Frank each play their first two moves quickly. See appendix for a description of the game that they play.)*

Frank: What's this?

James: A gambit I came up with. Della thinks it's dubious.

Frank: Della's right. *(The game continues, the moves again rapid.)*

James: She's better than you, isn't she?

Frank: She's at my level. Morphy would have walloped her just as hard as he walloped me.

James: *(After a beat, in which they continue to make moves.)* You've got to tell Della about the whores, Frank.

Frank: *(Slamming down a chess piece.)* Christ almighty! What kind of goddamn, son-of-a–

James: She deserves to know. On your wedding night, when you lay her for the first time, you're going to give her the clap.

Frank: First time? *(Forces a laugh, and then makes another move on the board)* Jem, old sport. You think I've never laid her before we went off to Concord for the muster?

James: *(As they continue to play)* I don't think nothing. I know you never laid her, Frank.

Frank: *(Taken aback. After a beat)* How would you know a goddamn thing?

James: Because I've laid her. *(Frank sit bolt upright.)* That's right. I've laid Adellah Willis. And when I did – the first time at least – she was still as pure as the Virgin Mary.

Frank: You goddamn son-of-a-bitch!

He jumps up to go at James. But James anticipates his movement and catches hold of his arms before his fists can fly.

James: Careful there. The ladies are just down the hall.

Frank: Give me one good reason not to tar your hide raw!

James: Because you never loved Della – not the way I do. And Della's done nothing to you that you haven't done to her ten times over. Compared to you, she's a goddamn saint.

Frank: Is this over that whore of yours, from back in Alexandria? 'Cause it's like I told you then; I didn't know she was yours.

James: It's not about her, Frank.

Frank: And this isn't about that time I caught you –

James: It's not about you, Frank. Or me, for that matter. It's about Della. She's in love with me, not you. Now are you gonna take all day, or are you going to make a move? *(Frank mutters something beneath his breath. However, he then makes a move on the chessboard, and the game continues.)*

Frank: You know, that whore of yours - she was a good lay, wasn't she? A damn good lay! What was her name again?

James: Emily. You wanna take that move back?

Frank: Why?

James: That hangs a horse. *(He moves, capturing.)*

Frank: But I can just – *(makes a move)*

James: Trap the bishop? That hangs mate. *(He delivers the coup de grace).* Good game, Frank. Guess I did get better. And there's no way in hell that was Paul Morphy. You wouldn't've lasted ten moves against Morphy, even at odds of a rook.

Frank: You goddamn prick! *(He turns away from James and storms away towards stage left, stopping while facing out towards the audience.)*

James: *(Rising)* Frank? *(Frank does not reply, so James repeats, in a slightly louder voice.)* Frank?

Frank: What?

James: *(Standing)* Come over here. I don't walk so good.

Frank: I don't either.

James: Be honest with me. You don't want to marry Della Willis. Maybe you thought you did, once. But you don't anymore, not after Virginia. I'm not your rival, Frank. I'm your saving grace.

Frank: The hell you are! *(But he turns around, and heads back towards James.)*

James: Della doesn't want to marry you either. She was going to write to you, to tell you she was through with you. But she couldn't bring herself to break your heart that way. *(Re-enter Sabrina, stage left, unseen by the two men.)* So why don't you make it easy on her? Tell her the engagement's off. You don't have to tell her about all the whores you've had. *(At the word "whore", Sabrina makes a noticeable movement.)* Just say you've changed, after Virginia.

Frank: No. Never!

James: Why not?

Frank: Because... *(He looks away from James, and, in doing so finally notices Sabrina.)* Yes?

Sabrina: *(In a timid voice)* Your luncheon is ready. Would you like to go into the dining room, or eat out here?

Frank: Out here's fine... I'm not really that hungry, really...

Sabrina: And you too, Mr. Gordon?

James: Oh, I'm just about to head out. Thanks for your hospitality, Miss Hall, but I really must be off. Remember when I said, earlier, that there was something... *(He starts shuffling off towards the door.)* Well, there's something. Good day, Miss Hall. Good day, Frank.

Sabrina: Good day, Mr. Gordon. *(James exits, stage left. Sabrina immediately turns back to Frank, her voice sharp.)* What's this all about? What were you two talking about?

Frank: Nothing.

Sabrina: But he said something about... oh, bless me!

Frank: *(Looking away)* Maybe he did say something about something.

Sabrina: *(Stammering)* You didn't... you didn't...

Frank: Sleep with a bunch of whores back in Virginia? You bet I did!

Sabrina: .How.... how could you?

Frank: You think I'm some great sinner? All the boys in the whole goddamn army went down the line, at least once in a while! We're only flesh and blood, Sabrina. You know what it's like, huh? You ever sleep in the mud or pick maggots off your food, or march twenty miles in hundred-degree heat? You ever stand in a line of battle, with the smoke around you so thick you couldn't see and the cannons booming so loud you couldn't think? You ever been so scared you shat yourself – or would've, if thehardtack hadn't sewn your arse shut? You ever seen a boy get cut in half by a shell, or heard a thousand wounded men, dying on a battlefield, all crying out for water? And you dare cast stones at me, or any of us! Damnation! Jem went down the line himself, you know, many times! Ollie did, too. Hell, I'll bet even that rat Bradford Gibson bought whores by the dozen, before the rebels captured him!

Sabrina: But poor Della! How could you betray poor Della?

Frank: Easy! The same way George Waterman's betrayed you. *(Sabrina gasps.)* That's right! That little dreamboat of yours is flesh and blood, too.

Sabrina: You lie! My George would never–

Frank: Sleep with a woman of the town? Oh, you bet he did! I was there, Sabrina. We were on furlough together a couple of times, in Alexandria. That one night, he picked out two girls, and neither one looked a damn thing like you.

Sabrina: *(Bitterly angry, and nearly yelling)* No! It's not possible! You're lying, Frank. You might have... but not... *(Reenter Elizabeth, stage left, followed, somewhat hesitantly, by Adellah)* not George... not... *(She bursts into tears.)*

Elizabeth: My goodness! Sabrina? What's the matter, Sabrina? *(She crosses and gives her sister a hug. Sabrina sobs, and continues to do so over the next set of lines. Frank rises and crosses behind them. Elizabeth glares at him.)* What did you say to her, Frank? And where's Mr. Gordon?

Frank: He's gone off. You got that food ready for me, Della?

Adellah: We've set out a tray in the dining room. *(Frank nods and continues towards stage left, as if to exit.)*

Elizabeth: Goodness, Frank! What did you say to your little sister?

Frank: Nothing much. Just the truth.

Elizabeth: The truth?

Frank: Yes. But you ladies pretend you don't want to hear it. Now, where are those victuals, Della?

Adellah: This way. *(Frank and Adellah re-exit, stage left. Elizabeth continues to pat Sabrina on the back.)*

Elizabeth: There, there. What did he say? Did he scare you with stories from the battlefield?

Sabrina: *(amid whimpers)* He said... He said all the boys bought whores in Virginia. *(At this, Elizabeth gives a noticeable start.)* All of them. Jem, Ollie, even... even Bradford and George. Oh, Lizzy! I know it's not true. He's just... he's just tormenting me.

Elizabeth: *(looking out towards the audience.)* Perhaps he is.

Sabrina: *(Breaking away from her sister's embrace.)* Perhaps? I know he is! *(She wipes her face. She has stopped crying now.)* He wants to torment me, and all the rest of us, too. He's not... He's not Frank anymore – not like he was, when he and the boys marched off...

Elizabeth: I'm sure the war has changed them all.

Sabrina: Do you worry about Bradford being changed, too? *(Elizabeth winces at the mention.)* Sorry. Oh, I shouldn't have said that, Lizzy.

Elizabeth: No. It's alright. I guess... I guess I do worry a bit, what he'll be like, if he comes home.

Sabrina: When he comes home, Lizzy. *(She sighs.)* Poor Della! Should we tell her, Lizzy? We should tell her...

Elizabeth: Tell her what?

Sabrina: What Frank said... Our brother's defiled himself with women of ill-fame!

Elizabeth: *(Sharply)* No, Sabrina. We shouldn't tell Adellah.

Sabrina: But-

Elizabeth: Some things are best left unsaid. It's all hearsay, anyway.

Sabrina: But Della's my-

Elizabeth: If our brother wants to confess his sins to her, that's his prerogative, not ours.

Sabrina: Frank? Frank wouldn't tell her a thing like that.

Elizabeth: What makes you so sure of that, Sabrina? He told you, didn't he? And Bradford told me all about... *(her voice drifts off, suddenly.)*

Sabrina: *(aghast)* What?

There is a short pause in the dialogue, as Elizabeth staggers into one of the chairs.

Sabrina: *(Timidly)* What is it Lizzy?

Elizabeth: Sabrina, let me confess something to you. *(A beat.)* I never loved Bradford Gibson. And he never loved me. *(Smiling)* There, I said it.

Sabrina: Then why-

Elizabeth: - did I marry him? Because his family is the richest in the county. Why did he marry me? Because I'm the minister's daughter, and the Gibsons look down on everyone else in this town. He told me, right to my face, the morning before he went off to Massachusetts to join up with his Harvard boys, that he would not be faithful to me, the moment he left Crendon. And since then, he's written me, many times, of what he's been up to - "going down the line," as Mr. Gordon called it.

Sabrina: Goodness, Lizzy! And you put up with this?

Elizabeth: What else is there for me to do? I cannot leave him. Neither Pa nor the Gibsons would ever let me to show my face in all of New Hampshire, ever again, if I did something like that! I can only hope...

A knock at the door echoes through the room.

Sabrina: Oh, dear. I wonder who can that be? Let me-

Elizabeth: No. Let Frank get the door. Have you looked at yourself, Sabrina? You're in no condition to be greeting anyone. Here. *(She produces a handkerchief, and wipes her sister's face.)* You know what? I'm so glad I've told everything to you, Sabrina. You wouldn't believe how hard it's been, to put on the act, anytime someone mentions Bradford, when the truth is I don't care a fig for him. I hope the war's changed him; it cannot have made him worse. And if he dies on Belle Isle, I'll be just as sad for him as for the tens of thousands of other brave boys who had died for our Union. *(Sabrina turns away, out towards the audience. Once more, tears begin to glisten on her face.)* And don't get me started about his father, that old worm Mr. Gibson. You know, as much as I would like to be done take care of his every last whim, I really hope he isn't dying. It would be near impossible for me to shed tears by his grave!

Sabrina: *(murmured in a quiet voice.)* So it's true then... It must be true... about George.

Elizabeth: Consider yourself lucky that Pa didn't let you marry that Waterman boy. You're too young to be chained like that... and in his case, there isn't even a fortune on the other side. At least I get to look forward to a rich widowhood, someday.

(Over the course of the previous line, re-enter Adellah, stage left, looking somewhat agitated.)

Adellah: Mrs. Gibson?

Elizabeth: What is it?

Adellah: It's a message from the Gibsons. Your father-in-law... *(Her voice trails off dolefully.)*

Elizabeth: Dead? (*Adellah nods.*)

Adellah: I am sorry... very sorry, Mrs. Gibson.

Elizabeth: (*Putting on a rather convincing doleful face.*) Thank you, Miss Willis. (*She stands, and tidies herself up. As she does, Adellah scurries back offstage.*) Well, Sabrina, it looks as though I shall have to take my leave of you all. I know... it will hurt you deeply, to think about George. And every once in a while, from now on, when you think of him again... But it will get better, Sabrina – in time, it will get better. (*Suddenly smiles.*) You know what – it's given me a great idea, on how I can cry when they bury that old toad. I'll just remember my own lover, who broke my heart.

Sabrina: Bradford?

Elizabeth: No... Jem.

Sabrina: (*In surprise.*) Jem? Jem Gordon?

Elizabeth: The very same... Oh, don't look all surprised. He is quite handsome, really. And we weren't really lovers; we were too young for that, then. But I did kiss him a few times, by the creek that runs behind the Gordon farm. He tasted so sweet, like raspberries... (*She giggles.*)

Sabrina: When was this?

Elizabeth: Oh, long ago – in the summer of '56. I had just turned fifteen. Then he broke it off, all of a sudden. He never told me why. I still remember that dance in the Swinnerton barn, when he waltzed with Fanny Rollins three times in a row. It was like a knife being driven straight through me, each one-two-three, one-two-three. Fanny Rollins? Fanny Rollins over me? (*Tears glisten on her face now.*) See? I tear up, even today... what, seven years later. (*Re-enterer Frank, stage left.*) And let me tell you, Sabrina – Fanny Rollins was no prettier then than she is now. (*She heads towards the door, but right before she exits, she runs into Frank.*)

Frank: Sorry to hear about your father-in-law, Lizzy. It must be a big blow to you, after all that's happened. (*He gives her a hug.*)

Elizabeth: (*With a good feigned sniffle.*) Thank you, Frank. Unfortunately, I think I have to go back home now... to take care of things, you know. Until tomorrow, perhaps?

Frank: Whenever you can. I'm not going anywhere anymore. Good bye, Lizzy. (*Elizabeth exits. Frank turns his attention to Sabrina, and walks slowly towards the middle of the room*) You're looking a little better, Sabrina.

Sabrina: Thanks.

Frank: (*Looks around. Then in a quieter voice.*) Why'd you leave me alone with Della?

Sabrina: (*crossing her arms*) I thought you'd want to be alone with her, after all this time.

Frank: Well... (*he sighs and sits down in the chair just to stage right of the fireplace, adjacent to the chessboard.*) It's a bit... unnerving, really. You know, the whole time we were alone just then, I don't reckon we said more than three words to one another.

Sabrina: (*rolling her eyes*) Sounds romantic. (*A beat.*) You must confess everything to her, Frank. Everything you confessed to me.

Frank: (*A wry smile on his face.*) Sabrina.

Sabrina: You must break off with her, Frank. It's over between you two. That much is obvious.

Frank: Oh, I wouldn't say that. There's still something left. If it was really and truly over, we'd've been chatting away, about this, that, or the other. But the fact we couldn't find the words... that means there must still be something left.

Sabrina: Well, it should be over.

Frank: On account of me being flesh and blood? I wouldn't necessarily say that. After all, I'm not the only one who's flesh and blood. *(As he delivers this line, re-enter Adellah, stage left. Frank looks over at her to deliver the next line.)* We're all flesh and blood, at least for a little while. And then, someday, we'll all be dust and bones. I say it's best we enjoy it while it lasts.

Sabrina: *(After a tense beat.)* Oh, Frank. Why do you say such things? It's like I hardly recognize you anymore. You've changed so much.

Frank: And not for the better, let me guess. Della, dear, what do you think? Have I changed for the better now that I am full of rebel lead and old war stories?

Adellah: I think we've all changed.

Sabrina: Not me! I'm still the same.

Frank: And who's fault is that? *(He smiles.)* C'mon, Sabrina. Stop acting like a child. Go out and live a little. Let that hair down. Steal Pa's bottle of medicinal brandy and get blind drunk. Have a love affair – or two or three. Enjoy that flesh and blood of yours, before it's all dried up and withered.

Sabrina: *(Angrily)* Frank!

Frank: Don't worry! The boys will be back, soon enough. Have you seen those rebels? Half of them don't have shoes on their feet. A few more battles, and we'll have them all crying uncle. You'll get to have that dreamboat of yours again. Or another fella, if you don't want to forgive him

Sabrina: *(Standing.)* I wish there'd never been a war. What do we care about the south, anyway? We should've just let them go on their merry way, and been done with it all. Then none of you would've ended up like this... all broken and jaded. *(She crosses, as if to exit.)*

Frank: Where are you going?

Sabrina: Out. Somewhere. Anywhere. *(Forcing a smile.)* Perhaps I'm going to take your advice, and go live a little...

Frank: Sabrina? *(She exits.)* Sabrina? *(Silence. For a moment, Adellah and Frank glance at one another.)*

Adellah: Jem told you everything, didn't he? *(Frank nods. She stands and sighs.)* I knew he would. I told him not to, that it was my cross to bear... but I knew.

Frank: Did he tell you about me? About all the times I went down the line with him in Virginia? *(Adellah nods.)* Let me guess... it was how he seduced you. *(Adellah nods again.)* What a cad! You can't really love him, can you?

Adellah: I don't know. I thought I did. But then again, I thought I loved you, too. *(She sighs again and crosses over to where Frank is seated.)* I... I was just...

Frank: You don't have to tell me. I understand completely.

(There is another beat of silence.)

Adellah: We were young and foolish, Frank. We got caught up in the whirlwind, when the war began. We should have never gotten engaged. Why did we get engaged, really? I can't even remember. It wouldn't've mattered, had we waited.

Frank: If you want to call it off, Della... *(His voice trails off.)*

Adellah: I'm not really sure what I want anymore.

(There is another brief beat of silence.)

Frank: Jem Gordon's rotten, you know. I caught him kissing my sister Lizzy once, back when we were kids. I would have beaten him up for it. But he said he was sick of her, anyway, and broke it off himself. Snapped her little heart in two, he did. *(Sighs)* Reckon I should've beaten him up for that instead.

(During the course of the previous line, Adellah does not look at Frank. Instead she sits down on the chair at far stage right, on the opposite side from the table as Frank and examines the chessboard. When he reaches the end of the line, she is still looking away from him.)

Frank: *(resigned)* I guess I'm just as rotten, too.

Adellah: It's a nice mate, isn't it, with just the two bishops? You beat Jem?

Frank: Yes. *(He smiles, but immediately thinks better of it.)* Actually, he beat me.

Adellah: Really?

Frank: You've been teaching him well, and I'm out of practice. Want to play me? *(Adellah shakes her head, and stands back up again.)*

Adellah: *(Looking out into the audience)* I guess I'm more ashamed than anything else – ashamed of my weakness, that I gave in to him, that I could fancy myself falling in and out of love so easily.

Frank: Oh, that's nothing. We men can be quite charming, can't we?

Adellah: I didn't even realize Jem was charming me, at first. I thought it was just about chess. He would come play me on Sunday afternoons. I thought he was just bored and morose. I felt bad about what had happened to him in Virginia. Then, before I realized it... I'm sorry, Frank.

Frank: I'm sorry, too, Della. *(There is another short beat.)* You know, I've been thinking of re-enlisting.

Adellah: Goodness, Frank. Aren't there bullets still inside you?

Frank: Oh, not in the regular army – they wouldn't take me back there now, anyway. But I could probably sign up for the Invalid Corps. *(He stands, as if to show off that he is still somewhat hale.)* Then, when this war is finally over... when I came home again, for good this time... Well, we could see how we feel about it then. What do you say to that, Della?

Adellah: Put it off?

Frank: Yes. Put it off... stay engaged, so no one gossips. Then who knows what might happen? You might fall in love with someone else. Or I might fall in love with someone else. But maybe... well, maybe we'll find out, we weren't quite such big of fools, after all.

Adellah: *(Looking straight into his eyes.)* Maybe. *(After a beat, she suddenly, and impulsively, kisses him on the lips. He reciprocates, and for a moment, they are in a passionate embrace. Then she just as spontaneously breaks away from him. She turns and walks towards the door that lies to stage left. Suddenly she stops, and turns out towards the audience.)* Maybe...

Curtain.

Notes:

The chess opening Adellah sets up is as follows. The first moves (up to 4: ...Bxe6) are played quickly (with the exception of 3:Nc3, where Adellah briefly considers 3:c4). The remainder are played slowly, as Adellah works out variations in her head. It is not necessary for Adellah to get all the way to 7: Bd3 before the scene concludes.

1: e4 – d5

2: exd5 – Nf6 (anachronistically the Scandinavian defense, modern variation)

3: Nc3 – e6 (transposes, again anachronistically, into a variation of Alekhine's Defense)

4: dxe6 – Bxe6

5: Nf3 – Be7

6: d4 – O-O

7:Bd3

The chess game played between Frank (as white) and James (as black) progresses as follows

1: e4 – d5

2: exd5 – Nf6

3: Nc3 – e6

4: dxe6 – Bxe6

5: h3 – Bd6

6: Nge2 – O-O

7: d3 – Re8

8: Be3 – Nbd7

9: Qd2 – c6

10: a3 – Qc7

11: O-O-O – b5

12: Na2? – Bxa2 ("That hangs a horse.")

13: b3?? – Bxa3# ("That hangs mate.")

Characters:

Sabrina Hall – The younger Hall child, now in her late teens. She keeps house for her father, the town's Congregationalist minister, after the death of her mother some years before. Her choice of dress and toilette is both quite conservative (as befitting a clergyman's daughter) and somewhat juvenile, giving her an appearance of girlishness that matches her overarching naivety.

Adellah "Della" Willis – A childhood friend (and neighbor) of Sabrina's, who was betrothed to Sabrina's brother Frank Hall before the men of the town left to fight for the Union in September of '61. Though only six months older than Sabrina in age, she appears much less girlish, with a more mature choice of outfit and hair style, and a face of stone that displays little hint of the stormy conflicts going on within her.

James “Jem” Gordon – Neighbor of the Halls, perhaps a year or two older than Frank. A veteran of the 5th New Hampshire Volunteers, Company E, James was wounded at Fair Oaks in the spring of 1862, and had his left leg amputated. He now has a wooden leg, which he keeps hidden, but which forces him to walk with a limp. In appearance, he is not exactly good-looking, but has the sort of artificial charm that one encounters often amongst lotharios; he is well dressed and well-groomed, in his preparedness for a battle of a different sort than the ones he fought in Virginia.

Elizabeth “Lizzy” Hall Gibson– The eldest Hall daughter, about twenty-two. Married to Corporal Bradford Gibson, 20th Mass Regiment in 1861, and now lives with her father-in-law, a rich invalid. Her husband was captured in December 1862 during the prelude to Fredericksburg. Her choice of dress is also quite conservative, and seems contrived to make her appear like a middle-aged widow. Though her face is expressive, there always seems to be something not wholly authentic in her expressions, as if she is an actress eternally onstage.

Frank Hall – The youngest Hall son, about twenty years of age (he was born between Lizzy and Sabrina). He was discharged (from company E of the 5th New Hampshire volunteer regiment) after being wounded at the battle of Fredericksburg. He is somewhat unkempt in appearance (for instance, he is not closely shaven), possibly because of his long journey and his fragile state of health, but possibly because he no longer feels the need to keep up appearances. Though quite handsome, he nonetheless has a tired, haggard look about him – the sort of 1000 yard stare, shell-shocked quality that would become so famous years later in the trenches around Ypres.