

# Letters from a New England Negro

Sherley A. Williams

## The Character

*Hannah, a young black woman of free, New England ancestry. Her passion and intelligence are often masked by an earnest gentility learned from her abolitionist mentors. It is through the assumed forms of gentility—her slightly stilted speech, her hats which are both chic and sensual—that she expresses an innate dignity and an integrity of vision that are slightly at variance with the conventional New England schoolmarm she thinks she will be. Her self assurance, at times, is undermined by feelings of insecurity—she is a teacher as much by luck as by training. She has also a robust sense of humor and a sense of herself as a participant in the grand adventure of educating the minds and, as she ultimately realizes, understanding and communicating with the hearts and spirits of the ex-slaves she has come to teach.*

## The Setting

*The action takes place on a southern plantation that houses a school for ex-slaves run by northern teachers. There are three playing areas, the parlor and Hannah's bedroom in the Big House, a front stoop in the former Slave Quarters, and the School, symbol of a new relationship between Quarters and House.*

## Synopsis of Scenes

*All action takes place on a southern plantation that now houses a school for ex-slaves run by northern teachers.*

## Act One

*Scene I:* An early morning in late summer, 1867; Hannah's classroom at the School and the teacher's living quarters, the former Big House.

*Scene II:* The Big House, fall, 1867.

*Scene III:* The Big House and the School, a few weeks later.

## Act Two

*Scene I:* The former Slave Quarters, where some of the freedmen live, December, 1867.

*Scene II:* The Big House, February, 1868.

*Scene III:* The Big House and the School, some hours later.

## ACT ONE

### Scene I

*Time:* An early morning in late summer, 1867.

*Setting:* In the darkness, we hear a male voice raised in a meditative, almost wordless holler; it is darkly triumphant, a song of pain and suffering endured and outlasted. After a moment the voice is joined by another and another, then others and the sound of field hands on the way to work as the lights rise slowly on the School. Voices and sounds gradually pass into the distance as the lights come up to three quarters full. There is a pause, then the bell rings, clamorously, discordantly.

*Action:* Hannah enters the illuminated area around the School from stage right, the area of The Quarters. Her demeanor is serious and earnest and this is reflected in her dress: neat and plain. Her hair is dressed naturally and she wears a hat, a bit of straw and net, set at a rakish angle; it is a bit impish compared to the plainness and correctness of the rest of her appearance—mitts, a reticule and book satchel.

*The bell ceases as Hannah approaches her desk. The lights on the desk area rise to full as Hannah takes off her hat, empties her book bag and generally makes herself ready to receive her students. She then comes to stand at ease in front of the desk.*

*There is a pause.*

HANNAH: The 54th group will work on our continuing saga of how the Arabic numbering system freed Europe—and us—from those cumbersome Roman numerals. Today's story is the Nines Multiplication Table—which the 54th will tell us here at the blackboard.

The Douglass Group will sit back in that corner and review the spelling lesson. Belle, you may listen to the new scholars say the alphabet, here. And I shall listen to the Tubmans read over here.

*(Spots come up on the areas she has indicated as she carries her chair downstage left, placing it in front of the reading circle. She sits.)*

Lester, you may begin.

*(There is an attentive expression on her face as she listens to the stumbling reader, now and then interposing a helping word.)*

Thank you Lester, a much improved reading; please pass the reader to Harriet.

*(Hannah gradually relaxes into her chair as Harriet reads. There is a moment's silence as all lights, except the four spots on the designated areas, dim. Hannah rises.)*

Well done, Harriet; you may continue, Gabriel.

*(Hannah paces thoughtfully on a course that will take her to the spots on the designated areas during the following interior monologue. She stops occasionally to give a word of encouragement to each group of students.)*

The children, I am told, had  
little notion of order  
and none of school. The first months  
here, by all accounts, were  
hectic. New students came daily  
and changed their names almost  
as often, or came and went  
at will and those that stayed, talked  
throughout the lesson.

They sit  
now as prim as Topsy must  
have done when first confronted  
with Miss Ophelia, hands  
folded neatly, faces lit

with pious expectancy.

We teach them to read and write  
their names, some basic sums and  
talk to them of Douglass and  
Tubman and other heroes  
of the race.

They are bright  
enough—as quick as any  
I taught in Newport, R. I. Yet—  
behind  
their solemn stares, I sense  
a game such as I played with those  
mistresses who tried to teach  
me how best to do the very  
task for which I had been  
especially recommended,  
and so suspect that what we  
call learning is, in them, mere  
obedience to some rules.

*(Hannah turns now to the students in the reading circle.)*

That was well done, Washington. The Douglass Group will have to be very good tomorrow if they are to keep up with your progress. You may all return to your seats now. . . . Joseph, would you please collect the slates from the spellers? . . . Thank you. . . . How did the new scholars do, Belle? . . . Well, as you become more familiar with the alphabet, the letters will be easier to remember.

*(Turning to the blackboard and quickly checking the equations written there)*

We can see in the Nines, something that you do not see in any other multiplication table. The numbers in each of the products, added together, always equal nine. A handy way to check your answers. If the answer doesn't add up to nine, it's wrong. . . . Well done, Armstrong. . . . Melly; I can see that the 54th will be in top form for this afternoon's recitation.

Yesterday, we established that the President signed the Emancipation

Proclamation because in doing so he thought to hasten the Union victory—

*(A student interrupts with a comment; Hannah hesitates, then continues with a smile.)*

That is an interesting comment, Washington; I am pleased to hear you speak up. Emancipation did not come about in precisely that way. But, there is no doubt that the President had to end slavery in order to end the War. So, though no one actually stood behind Mr. Lincoln with a pistol, as Washington has heard, saying, “Sign it, Abe; sign it!,” your freedom was—in a manner of speaking—got at the end of a gun.

And we did fight to free ourselves—I have told you stories of the colored regiments. Yet, when Mr. Douglass—*(with a quick grin)* no, not *our* Douglass, but Mr. Frederick Douglass—went to see the President, he was armed, not with bullets, but with Right. *(Writing on the board as she speaks)* In-a-li-en-a-ble Right. That’s a word from the. . .what—?

*(She pauses expectantly at the end of each half-asked question; each pause is longer than the last. Hannah repeats each answer with an animation that becomes slightly forced by the end of this exchange.)*

Yes, the Declaration of Independence. The root word, here in the middle, of *inalienable* is “alien.” That means something strange, unfamiliar, something outside of you or your experience. But, “able” is a suffix—And what is a suffix—? . . . Ursele? . . . No; no, a suffix—All right, Melly?. . . Yes. A suffix is always added to the end of a word and the suffix, “able” has to do with action. With making something or causing something to be done—in this case, making alien. But, we also have a prefix— . . . Melly. . . Correct, a prefix goes at the beginning of the root word. And the prefix here means. . .what?. . . Correct, Ursele. This prefix signifies, No. Not. Negative.

*(With increasing enthusiasm as she regains her rhythm.)* In other words, we’re talking about something that is so much a part of you, it cannot be made strange to you; something that everyone comes into the world with—like sight, like taste or feel. It is a part of you that no one gives. But where you might lose your sight or even your sense of taste, you can’t lose something that’s inalienable. Nothing can get between you and it.

No one can take it away. They can keep you from using your inalienable rights. But that is slavery and that is a crime! against nature, against humanity—But. No One Can Take Inalienable Rights from us. We, all of us, have the Inalienable Right to. . .? Life and Liberty!

Think of it! A former slave, telling *that* to the President of these United States! But, a former slave with what? . . . Education and Great Learning. And we must have many such if we are to make our freedom real. Former slaves—Free Men! Free Women who will speak up for our rights before presidents or kings and be our might from within.

Gracious (*looking at her lapel watch*). Time does run. We'll hear the spellers after recess. . . . Yes, and hear the 54th, too. Please tidy your areas. We cannot leave until all is orderly and quiet. Good. (*crossing to the door*) One line. . . one line, here, by the door.

(*Hannah waits until the last student exits to the schoolyard, then she too exits. Once outside, she looks around the playground somewhat uncertainly and waves with a rather professional brightness in one direction.*)

No, no, Cassie, please continue the London Bridge with the children.

(*She takes a seat on the bench and sits quietly for a moment, looking around self-consciously. Then, looking up pleased, she speaks.*)

It is very kind of you to want to keep me company, Harriet, but—Are you sure you wouldn't rather join your friends?

(*She is slightly stiff in the manner of shy adults trying to set children at ease while lacking ease themselves. Now she smiles and makes a place on the bench.*)

Then of course you may sit. . . . And you you, too, Charlotte? . . . I do not believe I know your name—Minnie. From Miss Beryl's class. Well, you are all most welcome.

(*She arranges her skirts so that others may sit at her feet. There is another pause as she waits for the children to speak. They do not and finally she does.*)

What are we to talk about today? . . . (*laughing*) I assure you, Minnie, Ursele is quite correct: I do indeed live in the Big House with the white teachers, Miss Beryl, Miss Cassie and Miss Esther. . . . Of course, I don't

do all the work, Harriet. Mrs. Rosewell, Melly's mother, cooks and washes for us and we share the rest of the chores between us. . . .

*(Her manner has a sort of professional brightness about it, as though she has answered these questions in various forms many times before.)*

As to what it is like to live with white people—. . . No, it is not the same as living with one's family, Melly. —Though whites are not so different from us. . . . My only previous meeting with Miss Esther was in Boston, when she hired me. . . . Oh yes, she is the head teacher. A great teacher in fact. It was on the strength of her reputation that the money was raised to found this school. . . . No, I did not know Miss Cassie or Miss Beryl before I came here. Though we are all just getting to know each other, we go on very well. —And they are, none of them, devils as these southern whites have told you!

. . . . *(startled)* Why, of course, Miss Beryl is a Christian, Minnie. . . . No, no, it is true, Charlotte. Christians in the North do not believe that to cross one foot in front of the other is a dance. And many do not believe that a dance condemns the soul to hell. But. . . but I am sure Miss Beryl and Miss Cassie too, will want to play the game—the. . . Willobee? —correctly, if you teach them. I am sure they would be hurt if you did not ask them to play again. . . .

You were not born here then, Harriet? . . . And you, Belle? . . . Mobile? My, that is a long way to come. . . . *(She listens soberly for a moment)* I have seen some of the hardships and ravages of the War at home—though the North was spared much. But the suffering, here, in the South, especially, among our people, was so much greater. . . . And you have survived, my dear, and will learn to write the tale. . . .

*(Hannah is more relaxed now; though her manner remains somewhat pedantic during the following exchanges, her "teacherness" is tempered by sincerity and idealistic resolve together with a genuine sense of humor of which she, herself, is often the object.)*

. . . . I came South to teach, Belle. Our need is great everywhere. We are kept out of work, out of housing, out of politics, out of life and the only way to. . . to enter into, to participate fully in the life we are now born to, is through learning and education! That is what we need to make our Freedom real!

. . . . Nonsense, Charlotte, I left nothing in the North as great as what I have found here— (*laughing suddenly and affectionately*) that even such a sleepy-head as you can learn the ABC's, though I agree that it seemed, at first, impossible.

(*Somewhat impatiently*). . . Freedom is not a big house, Melly, nor yet the chance to buy one—though a chance is what some blacks do get in the North. . . . Oh, yes, there are Negroes in the North who live in houses such as the Big one here—a few. And I was not one. . . . Ah, my father was a farm hand and my mother and all his children worked the fields beside him. It was his dearest wish that my brother, George Adam, learn a trade. . . . Farming in the North is not so steady an occupation as it was here. My family followed the crops up through Massachusetts and Vermont and once as far as the state of Maine, working here and there at whatever a farmer was willing to pay for.

. . . . No, Belle, George Adam never did learn a trade; there is much prejudice against coloreds, even in the North. And first my mother died and then my father and we children were scattered to the winds. Ruth was put with a family that moved to New York and George went up to Boston. He searched me out before he went away to the War—

. . . . Oh, yes, Charlotte, he fought with the gallant 54th, that I know; but whether he was killed in some battle or captured by the rebels, or maybe settled someplace else—I do not know.

. . . . What happened to me, Belle? Well, I would not be put any place. I worked as a scullery maid, nurse maid, ladies maid—and once as a milliner's apprentice, but I had no true vocation for hats—always striving to better myself and my condition. . . . How did I better myself? Mostly with a great deal of help and encouragement from others, white and colored. —Such as the Harrises—Miss Nettie and Uncle Josiah; they gave me this (*pointing to lapel watch*), so that I should be in fashion and on time. . . . No, Miss Nettie and Uncle Josh are not rich—except in love and feelings for others less fortunate than themselves. As I was when I met them. . . . They are colored. . . . I had been turned off from my post—my mistress had no use for a maid who, she said was always hidden away with a book. That was not true, of course; my father always insisted we give an honest day's work for an honest day's hire. I think she did not want me or any servant to learn to read and so, when she



turned me off, she would not give me a character. . . . Oh, a character is the letter, one's employer, the person for whom you work, writes when you leave that job so that others who might think to hire you will know that you are a good worker. Without a character, it is very hard, especially for a colored person, to obtain work. Mother Harris—Miss Nettie—heard of my situation and helped me find another job. She has stood my friend ever since. . . . They have a son, Edward, and they have treated me as they would a daughter. I think sometimes that Miss Nettie has mothered every Negro in Rhode Island.

. . . . No, there was no longer slavery in the North, Harriet, not as it was practiced here. But the North is not the heaven you suppose. It was not against the law for me to learn to read and write—though I could not go to school to do so—and my father, I think, voted once in an election. But to live, we must have what Mr. Frederick Douglass has taught us to ask for—“Equal pay for equal work and equal advancement for equal service.”

. . . . (*laughing*) Yes, I know, Melly, but it is a lesson as important as spelling or the multiplication tables and so is well worth repeating.

. . . . Oh. Miss Esther. Good morning; the girls have been giving me a quiz on the North. —Did I pass?. . . (*teasing*) Are you really sure I am truly a Northerner, now?. . . (*Hand going involuntarily to her hair*) Why—(*looking quickly at Miss Esther*) . . . I guess one cannot, in truth, call this a style—(*stiffly*). Hats are more the custom in the North, Melly; none of us any longer have to dress to please some “master.” (*turning*) Miss Esther, there are a few things I must see to before class resumes. Girls, perhaps Miss Esther will be good enough to answer such questions as you still have about the North. Please excuse me.

(*She crosses purposefully to the doorway and enters. She is shaken and confused by the encounter and she examines this in the following interior monologue.*)

The girls are bold, fingering  
our dresses, marveling at  
our speech. They cluster around  
us at recess, peppering  
us with questions about the  
North and ourselves.

Today, one  
asked why I did not cover  
my head or at least braid my  
hair as is decent around  
“white folk.”

Blacks do not speak of  
hair in the North, at least in  
public, and I answered sharply  
“It is not the custom in  
the North and I am from the  
North”—meaning, of course, that I  
am freeborn.

I know how  
chancy freedom is among  
us and so have never  
boasted of my birth. And  
they were as much stung by my  
retort as I by their question—

But in the moment of my  
answer the scarves worn by the  
women seemed so much a symbol  
of our slavery that I would  
have died before admitting  
my childhood longing for just  
such patient plaiting of my  
tangled hair or cover now  
my wild and sullen head.

*(The lights dim as the bell rings. Dark.)*

*(Lights up on Hannah at the Schoolroom door.)*

. . . .Good-bye. . .See you tomorrow. . .on time, mind.

*(She waves the last student out the door and visibly relaxes, then begins to straighten the room preparatory to leaving. She continues these activities talking to herself all the while.)*

Well; one student at least spoke up without my prompting and that is progress. *(she laughs)* "Sign it, Abe; sign it—" It is a much better story. And Charlotte's definition of unChristian behavior—crossing one foot in front of the other! I guess it is as Beryl said at lunch. At worst some half remembered witticism Charlotte latched onto to tease the Northern teachers; at best primitive Christianity made elastic by the desire to dance! And Charlotte is an imp to try to catch Beryl on that score with a children's game. *(sobering)* Though, in truth, that was not just Charlotte; she seemed to be speaking for them all. Not as though it were some childish teasing or an old wives' tale resurrected to trick teacher—but a—a commonly held belief about which they feel strongly—as Melly seemed to speak when she talked about—

Really. What is so important about the styling *(with a defiant pat to her hair)* or lack of style, to one's hair. You were merely being overly sensitive, my dear, and they were merely being curious, as children will. Yes *(with some laughter)* as though I were a . . . a moonling or a two-headed calf at the fair. . . . And you had thought to be an example, a model of what they too might become! And in front of Miss Esther, as though—

No, I am reading too much into a small incident, letting, as Mother Harris would say, fancy rule me. *(With mock sternness, speaking in a Mother Harris voice)* They are Christian? . . . They come to school? . . . Hannah Gilcrest, you have been in this place less than three weeks—

Yes, yes. I know.

*(She sets her hat proudly, squarely on her ruffled hair and turns to exit downstage center.)*

Well, Mother Harris will certainly want to know more than where I live and what the school looks like. I must finish the letter to her sometime, and write to Edward, and Ann—and the Missionary Board!

*(Beginning cross from School to Big House, stage left.)* The ladies of the Greater Newport All Christian Missionary Society's Aid to the Freedmen will expect to hear how eager the freedmen are to learn and of our—my success in teaching them, *(on a rising histrionic note)* about the hardships we teachers have endured, the dangers we have faced and the prejudice we have conquered!

*(Dropping her melodramatic pose)* Well at least *that* is not so far from the truth. It is not considered respectable for women to teach, as we do, all who come to us—though no whites have thus far come. Yet Miss Esther's bearing is such that she is accorded grudging civility by even rabid rebels. There was at first some muttering at young white women teaching Negroes, but now Cassie and Beryl are likewise accepted. We hear of the lawlessness and terror and so are careful. But caution is not so necessary here as in some other parts of the region. And so the school escapes reprisals. *(With a quick grin)* There is also a company of soldiers garrisoned—

*(She jumps back at a sudden rustling in the bushes)* Lester! . . . Of course I didn't take you for a . . . a patroller Lester. *(Beginning with a smile and ending with a laugh.)* I don't know what I thought you were, but I knew that I didn't want to stay around to find out! What are you doing here? . . . Ah, hiding and seeking a way out of chores, I suspect. . . . *(Laughing and touching her hat self-consciously)* Do the whites really dislike my hats so? . . . Well, I am happy to hear you like them, Lester, for I like them, too. And I shall continue to wear them. *(Calling as she waves to him)* I hope you win. . . . Duncle! You have probably told every man, woman and child on the place where he is.

*(As she sets her hat at a jauntier angle)* So. I cannot now be, ah, *humble* enough to suit our "neighbors." My cast-off clothes are thought unsuited to my station, my head held too high as I step back to let the meanest white go before me. And if the local ladies lift their skirts aside as I pass—well, perhaps I should smirch them. What then, dear ladies, is a concert in Newport or a day in Providence, compared to the chance to be "arrogant" amongst so many southerners?

*(Hannah takes the last step onto the veranda with a saucy toss of her head and skirt, crosses, opens the front door into the house calling out, "Hello." The Big House consists of two playing areas, a dining room/parlor on the ground level and Hannah's bedroom on the upper level. French doors, stage left, lead onto the veranda from the parlor. A stairway, stage right, leads up to the bedrooms. There is a table near the stairway where mail is placed for pick-up.)*

*(Calling out)* Hello. . . . *(She looks through the mail)* —What? *(Finding nothing for herself, she starts up the stairs)* . . . They'll be along shortly, Miss Esther; I wanted to finish writing a few letters before supper.

*(She enters her bedroom. There is a narrow bed, a dresser and mirror and a small book case partially filled with books. A small writing table and a chair face downstage. Hannah takes off her hat, etc., before settling at her desk where she picks up a letter and begins to read.)*

“Mrs. Josiah Harris, Five, The Grange Street, Newport, Rhode Island. August 25, 1867. Dear Mother Harris, The school is in a spinney down behind the old Quarters where many of the freedmen who work this land for the Freedmen’s Bureau live. The teachers, myself included *(she pauses to underline “myself”)*, live in the Big House. Thus far, this has stirred little comment among the local whites.” Oh, Miss Nettie ‘will like that line!— “The school is the largest public building in which blacks and whites can safely congregate.”

*(She reflects a moment, then begins to write, reading aloud as she composes.)*

“Sunday services are held there and many of the freedmen attend. Miss Esther introduced me to several as the ‘Herald of Emancipation’s new day.’ They murmured discreetly among themselves, the women smiling quickly, the men nodding or cutting their eyes toward me. Finally, an older man stepped forward. ‘I’m Peters, Miss Patient Herald,’ he said pumping my hand. Then, with great satisfaction, ‘Lottsa room in the Big House. Now.’ ”

*(She is pleased with this and leans back in her chair, laughing a little and shaking her head. She hesitates a moment, then begins to write again.)*

“I have met a few of the people from the district headquarters of the Freedmen’s Bureau. But only what Miss Esther calls ‘the best,’ for everyone admits that some of these people are, as Miss Esther says, ‘no better than they should be.’ The ‘best,’ I am happy to state, seem as dedicated to the task of securing the freedmen’s rights as Miss Esther is to teaching them.

“I have learned much from her, even in the few days since my arrival. She is wonderfully well organized and her theories of teaching are exciting. The opportunity to work with such a master teacher, and amongst our own people too! might never come again. Edward was right, in this, to urge my coming. There are two other junior teachers, Cassie Thornton and Beryl Simpson. Cassie’s mother is an old friend of

Miss Esther's and, when Cassie's father and mother were killed in the War, Miss Esther stood in the place of a guardian to her, seeing to her education and now to her future. Beryl is from Hartford and, like all of us it seems, bereaved by the loss of someone dear in the War. Her fiancé was killed in some needless skirmish just after Appomattox. She has a calm friendliness that is charming, whereas Cassie is more lively and ready to tease. I expect to like both quite well as we become better acquainted. Please give my love to Uncle Josh and to Edward and know that you all are remembered in the heart of your loving, Hannah."

*(She waves the letter in the air to dry the ink, puts it aside, takes up another sheet of paper and begins to write.)*

"Dear Edward—"

*(She looks around startled as the dinner gong sounds and fumbles at her lapel watch. She rises hurriedly, checks her appearance and exits as lights fade to Dark.)*

## Scene II

*Several days later*

*(Lights come up gradually on the dining room/parlor. Upstage right is a piano and bench; sheet music is spread across the top of the piano. Downstage left, four chairs are drawn up as at a dining room table. Hannah sits in one of the middle chairs. A meal is in progress and Hannah tries to mind her table manners, eat and attend the conversation all at the same time. She is not always able to do this with ease.)*

HANNAH: I—I guess I agree with Beryl that the . . . the passivity of the children is not desirable—though I see your point, Miss Esther, about boisterous behavior—no, no. I do not say that we are at all like their former masters—only that because, because we live in the Big House. . . . *(Smiling self-consciously)* Beryl is right; I mean because you three are white and we all live in the Big House that the freedmen may equate us—at least in part—as, authority, you know—we are, in this way, to them, at least, like the slave masters. *(As though emboldened by getting out this sentence.)* And I, too, am annoyed, Miss Esther, when the ladies on the Missionary Board ask for stories about the "poor dear freedmen!"

*(Having said so much, she subsides.)*

... Yes ma'am, I sent the letter to the Missionary Board yesterday. I—I took the liberty of sending your respects to Mrs. Whittaker at the Board, Miss Esther. *(Hannah smiles shyly at Miss Esther's response)* . . . No ma'am, I didn't forget to send a thank you note to Mrs. Spencer; it was kind of her to make a contribution to the School in my name. But. . . Miss Esther, you know it is Ann Spencer who is my friend and not her mother. I—I do not want to presume. . . Yes, I know Mrs. Spencer can be a powerful friend of the school.

... I hardly know if Ann will continue at school, Beryl, her health is so uncertain. You lived near them in Connecticut did you not? . . . Ann counted it a victory that she was able to attend your sister's school, Miss Esther, for even a term. She said it was a pleasure to do something at last that taxed her mind more than the selection of which dress to wear for dinner.

*(Hannah smiles a little uncertainly at her own wit and eats quietly for a moment.)*

... No, Beryl, I have not had another letter from the Harrises yet, not since the ones I received on my arrival here. . . Well. . . Miss Nettie is not so acute an observer of the human scene as . . . as Miss Esther's correspondents are nor perhaps so amusing as Cassie's but I shall be happy to share with all of you such portions of the letters that you might find interesting. . . You are right, Cassie, few of my letters could have reached Rhode Island.

... Edward, the Harris' son, is to go to New York soon, to Long Island . . . *(She trails off uncertainly.)* There is an attorney there who is said to be willing to let a colored man read the law with him. *(Hannah continues her meal for a moment in silence.)* What—? No, I'm afraid that I never heard Mr. Beecher preach, Cassie, but—

*(Cassie has obviously gone on to another topic, Hannah sits a moment in awkward silence, then continues to eat.)*

... Oh; that. . . It was really nothing, Miss Esther. The girls were teasing more than I thought proper. . . Thank you; I—one is never quite sure of how to respond when they do show some . . . some spirit.

*(The last words are said to her plate for Miss Esther's attention has wandered. The conversation and meal continue in pantomime as the Voice Over begins. During this sequence, it is obvious that the other women make some attempt to bring Hannah into the conversation; it is just as obvious that her own lack of confidence and their inattention to her responses make it difficult for her to bear a real share in the conversation.)*

Mr. Edward Harris, Five  
The Grange Street, Newport, R.I.  
September 25, 1867.

Dear Edward, I do know some  
of those of whom they speak,  
especially the ones now  
dead, Pope and Homer, though I  
cannot read the Greek; such  
discussions are the dreams I  
dreamed myself in my one short  
year at school. But Homer, as  
you warned, does not so often  
figure in conversation  
as I had supposed.

I nod  
and smile as Mother Harris  
bade me but my silence is  
more noticeable here than  
at her table. I have told  
my tale of meeting Emerson  
while a servant for the Straights;  
they have marveled at that  
lucky fate. And only  
after the moment passes  
do I remember the joke some  
child shared or of—of being  
frightened by 'patrollers' in  
the woods.

Still, I chat with some ease



with Cassie now and am truly  
fond of Beryl; even Miss Esther  
seems less awesome than at first.  
And sometimes . . . sometimes, I think  
that this is what my dream was,  
myself and these voices, these  
voices and my silent self  
dreaming dreams in which I speak.

*(The meal is at an end and Hannah sits awkwardly for a moment listening.)*

Please do play, Beryl. . . . *(smiling shyly)* And I shall turn the pages for  
you on the next tune. . . . *(rising)* Miss Esther, it won't take a minute  
for me to clear the table. You go sit on the porch—perhaps there's some  
breeze out there.

*(“Come Where My Love Lies Dreaming” by Stephen Foster is begun on the  
piano. Hannah speaks as she clears the table.)*

We sit on the veranda  
most evenings and sometimes, Beryl  
consents to play for us. There  
are not here the long twilights  
of home; the Southern dusk is  
quick and hot. I see the old  
nights in these evenings. The  
mistress at the piano,  
light from twin candelabra  
bringing color to her cheeks,  
the French doors open to the  
darkness and the veranda  
where listeners sit quietly  
in the heat.

*(A sprightly blues yodel is heard faintly in counterpoint to the piano. Hannah  
begins to waltz with mock soulfulness; the yodel rises in volume to the end of  
Hannah's dance.)*

Now and then

beneath the country airs that  
are Beryl's specialty comes a  
snatch of melody such as  
no mistress ever played and  
I am recalled to the present  
place.

*(Hannah stops dancing and speaks with a burst of genuine enthusiasm.)*

Free men sing here now. It is  
Cassie or Miss Esther who  
turns the music's page.  
Or myself.

*(She executes a deep curtsey on the line as the music comes to an end. She laughs. . . looks around guiltily to see if anyone has heard or seen her.)*

Miss Esther—I was just getting ready to join you—

*(Her face glowing as she listens)* . . . Thank you, Miss Esther. I know you care too much for Teaching to . . . to flatter. Such honest coin, where it concerns my progress as a teacher, is doubly welcome. I am pleased you think me ready to instruct an adult group. Edward—Edward Harris—says that Negroes everywhere are come into a new birthright through the abolition of slavery and now we must begin the work of holding it. And we hold some small portion of it here, at the School. I—I have sometimes fancied that I held twin torches aloft, Education and Colored Emancipation and you have just told me that my arms are getting stronger. Thank you.

*(Hannah puts on her hat, cloak, gets her book satchel and other teaching materials and descends the veranda steps. She crosses to the Schoolroom during the following letter.)*

Miss Ann Spencer, Lyme on Eaton,  
New Strowbridge, Connecticut  
October 22, 1867,  
Dear Ann,

My group numbers twenty, aged

six through fourteen, now that  
harvest is done. There are no  
grades of course and Tuesday  
nights I take a group of grown-ups  
over the lessons I give the  
youngsters the following week.

*(She approaches the Quarters, just skirting the pool of light that dimly illuminates it.)*

Good evening Mr. Byrd. . . . I'm fine; and how are you, Mrs. Henry?  
*(to another with a smile)* Oh, we still have a place for you at school—and  
shall keep one. No one gets too old to benefit from education. *(She passes on.)*

The grown-ups are more shy with me  
than with Miss Esther and the other  
others, seldom speaking unless  
I have done so first and then  
without elaboration.  
I did not expect "immediate  
kinship," as Beryl chides. I am  
as stiff with them as they with  
me: Yet *(wistfully)*, in unguarded moments,  
I speak as they do, softly  
a little down in the throat,  
muting the harsh gutturals  
and strident diphthongs on my tongue.

*(She enters the School, deposits her books, removes her hat and generally makes ready to receive the students. She moves to the front of the desk. There is a pause.)*

*(As lights dim to Dark)* Good evening, class. Tonight we will continue our  
study of fractions and the Bill of Rights . . .  
*(Dark)*

### Scene III

*(Lights up on Hannah's bedroom. The rest of the stage is in darkness. Hannah,*

*dressed in a fresh white blouse and dark skirt sits at the desk writing. She continues to write for a moment after full illumination, then pauses to read aloud what she has written.)*

HANNAH: "November 15, 1867. Dear Edward, how nice to receive two letters from you in the same post. I am so pleased that Attorney Haywood has agreed to let you read law with him. He sounds a crusty old man who will work you hard, but, if he is fair and knows the law it is an even exchange. I am glad, too, that you will be no further away than Long Island; I know this makes Mother Harris and Uncle Josh happy. They would be much happier if you broke color barriers closer to home! and their pride in you can hardly be greater than my own. Dear Edward, you are the new age you hope to bring.

*(During the following lines, Hannah rises, dons hat, gloves, a thin stole, and crosses to the school which is now decorated for a party. A table with a punch bowl on it stands near the center of the room.)*

"You will be happy to know that I am learning to speak up with Miss Esther and Cassie now and to be less hasty in my speech with the freedmen. We have just had an open house that Miss Esther counts a success.

*(A lively version of the spiritual, "Traveling Shoes," sung a capella, rises in the background.)*

"And truly, the classes did well in their exercises and recitations. Stokes, a student in my evening class, recited a passage from Douglass in praise of the War dead—omitting all mention of North or South at Miss Esther's suggestion—and the mayor was astounded to learn it was written by a Negro! You would have laughed to see his face; he was so disconcerted to have praised the intelligence of a *darky*!

*(The singing ends and Hannah claps enthusiastically.)*

"The singing at the end was much applauded and light refreshments were served at the conclusion of the program.

*(Hannah enters the School and pantomimes stilted greetings with one or two people. She is uncertain whether to offer her hand; after one false start she settles for bowing stiffly and smiling.)*

“So Pleased. . . . How do you do? . . . (*finally escaping to the punch bowl*) The success of this event rests upon the attendance of two local whites, the mayor and the doctor, both of whom are counted scalawags by their neighbors. (*She turns and pours herself a cup of punch; then, more self-possessed*) I met the doctor over the punch bowl. (*She bows to the doctor*) He, thinking, perhaps, to be kind, made some remark about the weather. (*Brightly*) Yes. The weather is indeed pleasant. (*She sips. There is silence. Then, as though the thought has just struck her*) I hope it will continue mild!

(*In a more natural manner*) “I wish I could say that I was a revelation to the doctor similar in impact to Douglass’s speech on the mayor—at a higher level, of course, confounding rather than making him gawk and stare. I wanted, too, to show the freedmen that their former masters must, now at least, observe a minimum of decency. But you know how tongue-tied I am with strangers and I think I left no favorable impression.

“I endured a lecture from Cassie on my ‘common sense’ that is too sound to set store by the doctor’s conventional gallantries and a warning from Mrs. Rosewell, the cook, about how the doctor used his colored girls before the War—as though I could not recognize doubtful gallantry or would surrender to improper advances! But it does no good to get indignant. . . . Cassie merely thinks me coy; Mrs. Rosewell thinks me foolish. She advised me to get a ‘nigra’ with a trade and leave ‘dis trash,’ white or black, alone.

“The whites at the affair—mostly Bureau people, some few from the garrison, the doctor and the mayor—congregated near the door and the freedmen opposite it. And once through the door the freedmen did not come near it again until it was time to, Oh, Edward, how stiffly they stood, grimly smiling; their children—those who’d not escaped to the spinney or meadows—clutched at their sides as though to prevent their theft. The whites were more at ease and took scarcely any notice of the freedmen down at their end of the room. (*Filling a couple of cups with punch and placing them on a small tray*) But I could not help but notice. (*She crosses to desk*) Beryl and I brought Mr. Peters some punch and urged him to have the others get some too, for the refreshment table, being in the middle of the room, was at least neutral territory. (*She sets the tray down on the desk*)

“‘That look like comfort to me,’ he responded, ‘and white people don’t like for the colored to be too comforted around them.’ For himself, he was comforted with the School and wanted to do nothing to jeopardize it, so he would not mingle. But it was my place to go along with Miss Beryl.

*(There is a pause as she picks up the tray and begins to cross back to table)*

“There was something—oh, dignified and lovely in his refusal and I would not let Beryl urge him further. Though in truth I wanted to turn and demand as my right, entrance into that ‘comforted’ space he defines. *(Hannah glances back upstage then turns to face the audience)* And do not say as Mother Harris does, that I crave the companionship of the freedmen because I have never lived on equal terms with whites; that I should not now be afraid to take my place with the best white people—

*(As she crosses to the doorway)* “And Miss Esther is that. She has just that combination of formidable mind and graciousness that endears—though it often exasperates. *(Smiling, then sobering)* And she welcomes me on just such terms as the most critical of our people could desire—as I welcome her, welcome them all as colleagues and friends. I am comfortable. But—*(She sits, taking a pencil and pad from her reticule)* the value I place on Miss Esther’s esteem has nothing to do with my wondering at the freedmen.

*(As she writes)* “I think that Mr. Peters’ remark is more than quaint—for you know Edward, they do believe that business about crossing the feet—and something more than the submissiveness I saw in the women’s braids and scarves. *(She pauses, then musingly)* His words are like reasonings in another tongue that translations approximate without making plain. *(Writing again)* Perhaps it is all only fear of the whites, but sometimes—as at the open house, in the children as I first saw them at their lessons, I feel the presence of another set of *facts*, another sense of life that is unknown but not unknowable—*(wryly)* which they are disinclined to teach. Yet—*(pausing in the writing, then speaking quietly)* I would like to learn.

*(Briskly, writing again as lights dim to Dark.)* “I look forward, dear friend, to learning what you, who are so good at reading between the lines, will have to say on this. I remain your affectionate, Hannah.”

(Dark)

*(Lights up on Hannah in her bedroom, seated at the desk and dressed as at the beginning of the scene)*

*(Writing).* . . . “I remain your affectionate, Hannah.”

*(She glances at her lapel watch as she finishes, rises, puts on her hat—a bit of velvet and net—a cloak, gets her books and other teaching materials and descends the stairs as the lights come up on the first level of the house.)*

I’m on my way now, Miss Esther. . . . No, I’ve had only a note from Ann Spencer, but several letters from the Harrises. . . .

. . . Yes, the children have all made good progress. I am proud to send off my reports to the Missionary Board, the children make me look so good. . . . Thank you Miss Esther, I know the grown-ups will be pleased to know that their progress has come to your attention. . . . No, their promptness is not what one would wish . . . . But it is difficult to work and then come to school, especially work as demanding as the physical labor farming requires. Perhaps now that harvest is over, more will come.

. . . *(Laughing)* Mrs. Mathis said that to learn to tell time is the reason she came to school and once I have given that lesson she will be prompt. . . . Yes, they are more punctual now than when we started. . . . Of course, I’ll be careful. . . . Oh, I’ll be in as soon as class is over. Good night, now.

*(Lights dim as she descends the veranda steps and rise dimly on the Schoolroom. Hannah crosses quickly from the House to the Schoolroom, speaking as she enters the Schoolhouse spotlight)*

Good evening. . . . Why, I’m happy to meet you—Pansy? . . . and Mr. Martin. . . . You’re all joining the class? This is a pleasure! Do come in.

*(She enters the Schoolroom, deposits books on desk, removes hat, etc., as bell rings, then turns to face the class)*

We have several new students with us this evening. I know you join me in welcoming them to our grand adventure. Education—learning

to read and to cipher—is a venture among friends and you will find many in this classroom, not only among your classmates but in the books and journals we will read and in the tales of strange and far away places we will hear. With learning, we can go forth, though we never leave this spot. With learning, we can bring back answers to questions that trouble us right here—How much cotton did I really pick? How much money did I earn? What did that man who wants my vote really say? What can I use my freedom to create, for myself, my family? What can I make in freedom? We welcome you aboard. . . . Yes, Mr. Peters? . . . I'm going to ask Mr. Stokes to listen to the Prosser group, while Mrs. Mathis and I get the new students started. And if you and Mr. Ellis will work with the Delaney Group? . . . Good. We can begin, class.

*(Hannah picks up materials and crosses stage right.)* Mrs. Mathis, you sit here, please, and show the cards and say the letters. You three sit here, and I will help you to form the letters on the slate boards.

*(She pantomimes this action for a moment, murmuring encouragement. During this activity, the lights in the Schoolroom have come up as before, downstage left and right. Hannah rises.)*

They persist in calling me  
“Patient,” Edward, though I tried  
to make it clear that neither  
Emancipation nor Patience  
is part of my given name.  
They understand the Herald  
part and laugh at Peters who  
says he could not understand  
that New England talk. The  
following week, I am again  
“Miss Patient Hannah.” I tell  
myself it is not important  
and truly have ceased to argue,  
have come indeed to still any  
impulse to retort almost  
as it is born.

Tonight my



old devil tongue slipped from  
me after weeks of careful  
holding. I answered roughly  
some harmless question, "My name  
is Hannah, Hannah. There is  
no Patience to it!"

*(There is silence as lights dim, leaving Hannah to stand proudly in a single spotlight.)*

"Hannah,"  
Stokes said in the silence that  
followed my remark, "our name  
for the sun. You warm us like  
she do, but you more patient  
wid us when we come to learn."

*(Lights hold for a moment on Hannah's face. Lights gradually come up as before; Hannah stands bemused and beaming.)*

Why. . . why you, all of you, do me credit. You—Well. Shall we  
continue with the lesson?

*(She bows her head slightly, then crosses upstage center toward her desk. Dark.)*

CURTAIN

## ACT TWO

### Scene I

*Time: December, 1867*

*Setting: Hannah's Schoolroom*

*Action: Hannah is at the desk finishing a letter. She completes this task. During the monologue, she puts away materials, puts on her hat, etc., and exits to the school yard and crosses to the Quarters.*

HANNAH: Sometimes of an evening, I stop in at the Quarters and, if the

weather's mild, sit for a time and listen at the talk and tales. Not all of the people were born in this vicinity, though Peters says they were all raised *up* here. He is from a place in Kentucky where the master belled his slaves to prevent their runaway. When Freedom was proclaimed, he determined to go as far as wind and water would carry him—and laughs along with us when Pansy points out that he had to go some on land to get there!

The people delight in exaggerations of their folly—and this is curious to me—it has seemed to me that, to retell calamity is to call down more upon one's head. But here, the tale is used almost as a charm, its exaggerations warding off fear and harm. —The story of "How Possum Became Pig," for example, is a tale that Lemuel said kept his master from discovering that he was stealing the master's chickens!

And Stokes tells this story of a darky down in Texas who told his master that he could speak Spanish. Master took the darky along as an interpreter on a horse-buying trip into Mexico. Everything was fine until they came upon some Mexicans with a horse the master wanted to buy. The darky kept asking how much—Oh, I wish I could reproduce Stokes' "Spanish," but it defies writing!— And the Mexican kept answering, *Cinco pesos*—Spanish for five dollars—which, of course, the slave couldn't understand. Finally, the slave turned to the master and said, "Ma'rs Bob, you don't want dis hoss; sometime it be trottin' and think it's pacin'." And, according to Stokes, the same way that darky knowed Spanish, is how some colored think they know English!

There is not the rush of confidences that Cassie believes we share, though I have found friends here such as I have had only in letters—Peters and his wife, Irma, Stokes, Mr. Martin and his daughter, Pansy.

I think she—Pansy—first came to school to settle the dispute about my hats. For you know these hats caused as much talk among our people as they did among the whites, some seeing them as worldly, others as some "Northern airs." A few did side with Stokes, who said I wear them because they look so good, or with Peters who likes anything that irritates the "crackers." It was Pansy, so Peters said, who asked—after much study—"Why call her by the Sun, if you not going to let her shine?" And they could all accept that.

Perhaps as you say, Edward, Pansy and Stokes are the sister and brother who were taken from me and these evening gatherings my covenant with the past, the ragged memories of childhood here knitted up in the fellowship of the Quarters. In the telling of some incident—whether of the day or some happening before the War—from which they have wrung laughter or for some other reason set store, I have again what was in my childhood too brief to savor, almost too fleeting to remember; a sense of what one's grown-ups value, of how they reckon worth. And in this way I am no stranger in their world.

*(Lights come up slowly on the Quarters as Hannah approaches. There is muted laughter, rustling, a snatch of song, voices calling to and fro. Hannah sits on the top step)*

Oh, no. No, I cannot tell such stories as that; my life has been most, most unremarkable, nothing of any interest happened to me. . . . By chance. I was nursemaid in a house where there were young children. By being around the nursery so much, I came in contact with their books; and the children—I can't even remember their names, though I know they were boy and girl and fought amongst themselves all the time and wanted me to take sides! Well, they thought it fun to teach me. I was not their playmate, you understand, for I had to fetch and carry in the nursery and tend the baby. But . . . I wanted to read. I liked the pictures in the books. And in one of my—my positions—*(with mock pomposity, catching something of the spirit of the occasion)* I rose to maid in a very comfortable house—there were those employers who encouraged me to learn, who put me in the way of situations where I could learn—not only letters and later to count, but serving and attending a lady and some household management. At last I came upon a place where the mistress knew someone, who knew someone, who had a cousin, whose sister-in-law knew someone, who knew Miss Esther's sister. . .

And that is how I got into school. Of course I could not go to classes on laundry day or ironing day or when we baked the bread. But there are few who are as lucky as I. That I am here is interesting, but there is little excitement in the how or even in what happened on my way here.

. . . Now my father must have had some stories—for he was old before I was born. He bragged of being three score years—sixty—and not many

black men live to such an age. . . . No, he was never a slave. There had not been slavery in Rhode Island for a long time, even when he was a child and he was born there. . . .

We lived mostly in the country, on farms where whites were the only neighbors and seldom got to town. Though . . . there was in Warwick Neck, at the time we lived there, a black woman even the whites called Miss Girt. Her aunt had brought her out of slavery in the District of Columbia some fifty years before.

*(Hannah leans back, reflective, her speech slows as she relaxes into the past.)*

She was a familiar and striking figure in that town where there were few Negroes; of that color we call smoothblack, that dense and even tone that seems to drink the light. The strawberry pink of her mouth spilled over onto the darkness of her lips and a sliver of color seemed to cut the bottom one in two.

She kept a boarding house for Negroes, mostly men who worked at odd jobs up and down the coast.

*(Hannah pauses and looks around somewhat self-consciously; then, as though at the urging of her audience, rises with a laugh and continues. She gathers confidence as she speaks, hamming up her delivery in a manner that is both surprising and charming: the side of Hannah first glimpsed in the spinney and veranda scenes brought to full bloom.)*

The . . . the white children whispered about it—though the house differed from its neighbors only in being set in a larger plot with two or three vacant ones between it and its nearest neighbors. It was the closest thing to a haunted house the town provided and on idle afternoons, the white children “dared the boogey man”—though they seldom got close enough to disturb Miss Girt or her boarders with their rude calls and flourishes—and withdrew giggling and pushing at the slightest movement or noise.

Our trips to town were infrequent; children had no real business there in Papa’s view. But if he went alone, he would always bring Mamma back greetings from Miss Girt. And once, after his errands were done, he took us all to say hello. We stood in tie-tongued silence before one

so famous—though we never found out just what it was she had done to give herself such renown.

And on those few occasions when chores did not bind us to the place, we sneaked back into town—to see the boogey man and. . .

*(The whine of a blues harmonica, playing a low-down blues; it toys with the silence a moment as Hannah dances a slow drag. After a couple of bars, the harmonica is joined by a blues fiddle. Hannah stops dancing. During the following speech, laughter and voices rise to a muted level, weaving in and out of Hannah's remarks.)*

. . . sometimes heard a strain of music, a sudden snatch of laughter—these lured us quite as much as the reputation of the house—or watched the white children from a distance. Once, George Adam called out, “Here she come,” sending them into clumsy flight and us into delighted laughter. Once, Miss Girt herself came around the corner on the heels of their cry, “Nigger.”

“And a free one, too,” she called and laughed at their startled silence. They fled in disorder, routed, so George said, by the boldness of this sally, and, I thought, by the hot pink in the laughing dark of Miss Girt's face.

*(Hannah grins and bows elaborately. She rises to an upright position as the spotlight dwindles on her broadly smiling face)*

*(Dark)*

*(Lights up to three quarters illumination. Hannah stands laughing as she replaces her hat on her head.)*

*(As she crosses to pick up her bag, etc.)* I thank you for the compliment; but I have learned what story telling art I have at the feet of masters and I know I am far from ready to fill *your* shoes. . . . Good night, Mr. Martin, Lemuel. . . . Be sure to go over the spelling with Joseph, Annie; he can use your help. . . . Yes, I'm coming, Pansy. . . . Good night.

*(As they begin the cross to the Big House)* . . . Oh, Stokes, Pansy, how wonderful! When is the wedding to be? . . . I would be delighted to come

and watch you *write* your name in Mr. Johnson's book . . . Pansy! to call that gallant lady—and so education is—a, a white folks' tart! . . . Oh, you know what I mean. . . (*laughing*) I know you are surprised that I understood you. (*Sobering*) I think there are very few among us who have not had some painful knowledge thrust at us. (*Swinging back to the attack*) But education is no more the "white folks' hoe," than, than is Christianity!

*(Hannah laughs a little guiltily at the ease with which she has used the sexual metaphor. Decorum wars with humor and zest for this continuing debate; humor and zest win.)*

And so you know it! You aren't so set against school as you pretend, (*sweeping all arguments before her*) for why else do you encourage Stokes to study hard—and I know you do. Why do you come to class yourself!

*(They are at the Big House now and Hannah mounts the steps)*

So you give me the last word—this time. . . (*She hugs them*) I do wish you both happy. Good night. . . Do have a care.

*(She waves them off, then turns and enters the house, closes and locks the door behind herself. Her expression is thoughtful as she quietly mounts the stairs to her bedroom. She enters the room, puts down her bag and begins to make ready for bed during the following soliloquy.)*

They are rightly suspicious of all they call "white folks"—I think it is this distrust that, sometimes, we teachers mistake for ignorance. Yet, how can one really dispute their *facts*: the slave holders did prostitute "learning"—just as they tried to do with Christ: "Servants obey their masters." And the servants—(*she smiles*) the servants chose another text: "Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel?"

And this, this education I bring—(*she moves uneasily*) the school stands now where the praise grove was. The grass then was worn away by bended knees, the dirt packed hard by shouting feet.

*(In the dialect portions of the soliloquy, Hannah vividly evokes the pixyish spirit of Pansy)*

Pansy will mimic the old prayer, torso going in one direction, limbs in some other.

*(Hannah mimes the words)* “Go wid, Masa, Lawd; go wid Masa.” And the people respond with murmurs of “Do Lawd” and “Amen.”

But it is memory she dances; the praise grove was gone before the War, closed by the masters’ fears: “Dey ain’ trus’ mo’n one darky alone wid Chris’; two darkies together need a live white man near.”

Pansy’s mother and many others gathered then in twos and threes in secret clearings in the woods, quiet witness that our Savior lives.

“Go wid Masa, Jesus. Go wid dis white man! And Mr. Lincoln did!”

*(Hannah herself laughs at the joke)* Their triumph is renewed in our laughter. Yet, *(her uneasiness returns)* there are some—Pansy, I know is one—who scoff at “white folks’ ways” and gather now in the same hushed harbors to worship and to whisper of the new Jesus in the old praise grove’s heart.

*(Hannah is now ready for bed; she climbs in, sitting with her arms around her knees. She speaks quietly as lights dim)*

She is as dark and lovely as her namesake’s heart and teases me about “my learning.” She would row my head with seed plaits and prays I have not been ruined by the white man’s schooling.

*(Dark)*

## Scene II

*(Lights up on the parlor. Hannah stands at the piano, turning the music page at the appropriate intervals. “Jump Jim Crow,” in an elaborate and sprightly arrangement is being played on the piano. Hannah is considerably more at ease than in the first act and she sways a little to the lilt of the tune. Three to four chairs are arranged in a conversational grouping left of the piano. The music comes to an end and Hannah claps)*

HANNAH: *(As she crosses to sit in a chair downstage left)* You are better each

time I hear you, Beryl. I haven't heard that old minstrel tune done in quite that way before. . . . I didn't think you were playing what was on the page. . . . Improvising? Mr. Johnson will be pleased to know that he has influenced you in this new direction; it was a splendid rendition.

. . . Many of the songs they sing for us at church are mournful, Cassie; but they sing others. . . . Oh, I should not mind riding "a coal black crow so big one wing rests on morning and the other dusts the evening star." . . . From Irma Peters, she sometimes helps Mrs. Rosewell when we have guests—she claims acquaintance with people who have flown across seas of pearl jewels dissolved in running silver and landed on shores of grainy gold. . . . Of course it is an elaboration on the pearly gates, Cassie, and I rather like it because it is so gloriously "vulgar." And to know the names of Heaven's streets, which play bass and which soprano and how to step so the streets will harmonize on one's favorite tune when you walk! (*With a laugh as she turns to Beryl*) That, surely, is original and as "aesthetic" as it is sensual, Beryl.

. . . Yes, Miss Esther, I did get a letter from Ann Spencer. (*Searching in her pockets*) I had meant to share some of it with you. I did not get a chance to finish it before supper, but I thought we might enjoy parts of it.

. . . (*The letter found and unfolded, she reads*) "January 21, 1868, Dear Hannah, you must not mistake my silence for lack of interest. Your letters were bright spots in an otherwise dreary fall. Please write more often; your ventures among the unrepentant rebels and their former slaves are much needed diversion from the petty common-places created by my fickle health. I, who had thought to be a crusader, active and militant, now find even the minor exercise of study beyond reach." (*Looking up from the letter*) —That is a blow to her; she had set her heart on completing the school term.

"You are to laugh at my hyperbole, you know. I dare say I should have gone no higher than assistant bandage roller on volunteer days at the hospital." . . . How like Ann to dismiss her own problems so lightly! "You alone of our class have gone on to live dreams of brave and noble deeds. I take special delight in how your natural dignity is construed as arrogance by the Rebs—" I wrote her, Beryl, of our meeting with the minister's wife in the town—



. . . Oh, it was nothing, really, Miss Esther, or rather, the same thing that the local ladies have said to you time and again: that you and Cassie and Beryl lower yourselves by associating with me on equal terms. Well, this time, I lifted *my* skirts aside and passed on!

*(Laughing and returning to the letter)* . . . I admire your courage in broadening their experience of gallant spirits!

You are right, Beryl, I should like it better if the Rebs were a little more receptive to my teachings! To be required always to put such meaning into, "Have a care."

"Your students, I know, are not such cherubs on the playground as they are in your classroom—though possibly, you have discovered this by now. Obedience precedes learning. What angers your 'neighbors,' you will perceive, is that they see your difference from this sad band fate has placed under your wing. *(Hannah proceeds self-consciously)* And these, despite your grumblings, seem to be all that one could require in a flock."

*(Laughing, a little embarrassed)* I guess I did portray myself as *(with genuine amusement; striking a pose)* a symbol of Enlightenment—Pallas Athena, the torch of learning held aloft—*(abandoning the pose)* I thought I should never grow comfortable here. . . . Yes, I know, Miss Esther, I did tell you I was not lonely. And I was not, not in the sense that anything, other than time, could remedy. I was in a strange place and so, alone—until I grew accustomed to it. . . . Yes, Beryl, I am now; we all are I think—have made friends with each other and among the people. . . . Oh, yes, Stokes is a good friend, as is Pansy. Stokes is very pleased, by the way, to be promoted to your class of advanced scholars, Miss Esther. . . . Pansy is his fiance—he introduced her to you at one of the Sunday services—yes, there is more to the letter, but I shall write Ann that I am no ministering angel, nor is our "flock" so biddable as she supposes—

"I envy you your mission, to march at the head of even such a simple band, to welcome them at the beginning of the journey as one would children and say good-bye to them at journey's end as women and men."

*(Laughing as she continues to read silently for a second.)* Well, she goes on to admit that this is a highly romantic vision—but doesn't it remind you

of the letters we all received from various members of the Missionary Board when we first arrived, asking for stories of the “dear freedmen’s” pitiable state and degradation?

*(Reading again)* “The descriptions of your fellowshipping in the Quarters are fascinating. One is so conscious of the ravages of that diabolical system that we are pleased to see even the barest vestiges of the human spirit expressing itself. The tales you have sent me, the music you describe is more than this and you are right to explore and preserve this lore. Will you truly attend the wedding? I should love to dance at one myself. If a simple evening’s social is so entertaining to them, a wedding must produce jubilation of no mean order. I suppose the women—” *(Hannah falters and slows her recital)* “will tie their heads up in red cloths and raise their skirts just a little, and the men—” *(She stops)* Well. She says hello to you, Beryl, and asks to be remembered to Miss Esther. *(Putting aside the letter)* One hardly knows whether to be mortified or amused with such a letter. First I am confused with Florence Nightingale and then the people are mistaken for heathens—

. . .Stokes and Pansy’s wedding, Miss Esther. It will be a simple affair, not nearly so exotic as Ann makes it sound.

. . .Stokes and Pansy will not jump the broom, Cassie. That custom went out with the War.

. . .Why, Mr. Johnson, ma’am, the one called “Singing,” who sometimes leads the songs at church, will perform the ceremony. . . . *(Doubtfully)* I will ask him if he registers the marriages he performs with the Bureau.

*(Smiling and misreading the intent of the following questions, treating them as if they were simple requests for information rather than the points in an accusation against herself—which they are.)*

. . .Though he has married so many, whose knots as it were remain securely tied, that I had not thought to question that aspect of it. He keeps a “book” that has very little writing in it and most of that is very recent. But in previous years couples made their mark.

Stokes asked me; he and Pansy and a few others have formed the habit of walking me to the house after class.

Why I'm sure, Miss Esther, that there will be a walk or shout of some kind at the wedding, but you know they do not dance.

*(Carelessly and a little impatiently)* I really hadn't given the matter much thought, Cassie—though I am sure that the Missionary Board would be pleased to know we are accepted as part of the community, by the colored people at least.

*(With some exasperation)* "Why should we not be accepted?", indeed, Beryl. You have answered your own question countless times in this very room. You have spoken of how the Bureau and the School are looked upon as another form of Master—more benevolent than the old but one to be obeyed and perhaps feared in the same way.

... Cassie, we have "come to raise the lowly" only in the sense that the people do not have the, the tools—they cannot read their labor contracts, they cannot compute their wages; they do not know how to plan for the future they did not know they have. And we—we bring them tools that will allow them to use Emancipation. . . . Well, I do not see the wedding or anything that could happen there as devilment, something to be suppressed or hidden away. I write to Ann as a friend, Cassie, not as a possible benefactor of the school. I hardly think—

... *(Surprised)* Ma'am? You think the Missionary Board would object? ... a lack of decorum—Miss Esther— *(She is at a loss as to how to respond but regains her composure as the speech proceeds)* I cannot think that we honor our educational mission by refusing to celebrate the wedding of friends. Or that I cannot, with perfect propriety be teacher and friend to Pansy or Mr. Peters, or, or any of the people. . . . *(Rising, still shaken)* I—please, excuse me; I must prepare my lessons.

*(Lights fade to Dark as she exits)*

*(Dark)*

### Scene III

*(Lights up on the School; Hannah sits at her desk, writing. She pauses to read back what she has written)*

HANNAH: "February 7, 1868, Dear Edward, my visits to the Quarters have disturbed Miss Esther; she is shocked that I would even consider such excursions or go without asking leave of herself." *(She looks up)*

Beryl. *(Rising)* Of course you may come in. Please sit down.

*(She indicates a stool by the desk but does not sit herself. She speaks rather belligerently)*

I must tell you that if you have come to moralize as Cassie did, I will not bear it. *(Mimicking Cassie's voice)* "Your meetings ought to be confined to the classroom and the walk back to the house—as is proper between students and teachers. What are a few chats on someone's steps to give up—especially in this weather—if this will protect your reputation and the School's?"

... *(Becoming less defensive)* I know you don't moralize as a general rule, Beryl, but nothing seems as usual now. . . . I am going to the wedding of friends and there I may dance, walk, really, along with others, in honor of the bride and groom. For this I am to be chastised, constrained to be more "circumspect" in my dealings with my students, to exhibit more "decorum"—for heaven's sakes, Beryl, my friends are adults, people whom you and Cassie and Miss Esther have met at church or school—

*(Hannah listens intently, nodding, starting as if to speak and finally bursting into speech)*

It is all very well to see in the poverty of my childhood a dim reflection of the slavery in which Pansy lived. But all that you have said is about *me*, about what *you* think *I* must feel, what *I* must think—things that, truly, you cannot know, Beryl.

... *(As much puzzled as angry)* And is my friendship with Pansy and Irma Peters so different from yours with me? You patronize me then because I have so little formal education, because your father is a doctor and mine a laborer? . . . No, Beryl; I do not twist your words, I—

You see in her—indeed, in them all—some vestige of my "former" self that teaching *frees* me of. I see in Pansy some Other, not myself.

She is not so simple as we have thought her. She comes grudgingly to know the world within the printed page, yet rejoices in Stokes' progress. She trusts the power of the word only as speech.

*(Speaking now as much to herself and to an unseen audience as to Beryl)*

She sets me riddles whose answers I cannot speak:

How do the white man school you?

"Give a nigga a hoe." How do he control you?

"Put a mark on some paper turn our children to noughts."

How do master tell darkies apart?

"By looking at the lines and dots."

I tell myself it is the catechism of unlettered Negroes. Yet, there is always something so, truthful, in its phrasing. *(With a sudden conciliating gesture to Beryl)*

I know you are not wholly  
knowledgeable of all I  
try to tell you, Beryl. Yet your  
own eccentricity at  
times allows you to apprehend  
what most would miss. And I do  
not expect answers or advice.  
We stand outside each other's  
lives and are enchanted with this  
unlikely meeting: the blue  
stockinged white lady, the smart  
colored girl. I stand now  
outside the life I know  
as "Negro."

*(She hesitates a moment, then continues)*

It is true that  
though I call Miss Nettie  
mother, I am someone else's  
daughter, my learning got at  
back doors and crossroads, not the

desks where you and Cassie were trained.  
I have no clear recall of  
how I came to be at the  
door of my first mistress, kept  
little of that beginning save  
that through bargaining I fixed  
my wage and worked extra for  
room and board. I cannot now  
remember all the helping  
hands I passed through before the  
Harrises took me in. There are  
things I tell no one and have  
ceased to tell myself. I have  
grown to womanhood with my past  
almost a blank.

*(Hannah listens a moment, then shrugs helplessly. Beryl exits. After a pause, Hannah sits at her desk and writes)*

“We have come  
among Christians for whom  
‘dance’ is the crossing of the  
feet; what they do not know of  
the world is learnable. It  
is this we have come to teach.  
Neither Beryl nor Miss Esther has  
an eye for such distinctions,  
seeing only frenzy  
where I would be taught the speech  
of walk and shout.”

*(She sighs, then continues)*

“Sometimes, dear  
friend, as I try to make  
sensible all that I would tell  
you, I see myself as no  
more than a recorder and  
you a listening ear in  
some future house.”

*(She sits a moment at the desk, pen still, then, as though continuing the previous conversation)*

I do not  
recall, yet the memory  
colors all that I am. I  
know only that I was a  
servant; now all my labor is  
returned to me and all my  
waiting is upon myself.

*(Lights dim to dark. Drumming rises in the darkness, the sounds of feet patting and stamping, hands clapping juba as lights rise slowly to half illumination on Hannah's empty bedroom. Horns and other simulated instruments are added as indicated in Voice Over.)*

The men play their bodies like drums,  
their mouths and noses like  
wind instruments, creating  
syncopated rhythms, wild  
melodies that move the people  
to wordless cries as they dance.

*(A banjo and fiddle are added to the orchestra, male and female voices singing; flickering lights give the impression of many moving bodies.)*

There are true musicians—  
Givens who plays the banjo,  
Lloyd, the fiddler, many singers.  
Even the tamborinists  
and those who shake the bones coax  
beauty from nothingness and  
desire.

*(Lights begin to rise slowly downstage center on the strutting figure of Hannah. The music gathers intensity as the Voice Over continues.)*

Yet, it is the music  
of those who play themselves, that

tone, half instrument, half voice,  
that echoes in my head. To-  
night at Stokes' wedding, I  
was moved by this to moan and  
dance myself.

*(Music climaxes as Hannah struts to a collapse, panting. Dark.)*

CURTAIN