

ACT I

SETTING: *Various locations in and around the town of Niota, TN including: a field, the parlor at Hathburn, Forrest Hardware Store, and the front room at the Abbott house. Other locations include NAWSA headquarters in New York City, as well as the Hermitage Hotel and the State House in Nashville, TN. November, 1919 until the end of August, 1920.*

AT RISE: *The Abbott tenant farm in Niota. Dawn.*

SAMUEL (O.S.)

Ruth? Where are you? Ruth!

(RUTH ABBOTT enters at a run, carrying a hoe. She stops center, looks around then strikes at the earth with her hoe. Once, twice, three times she strikes, but the earth is frozen and won't give. She sinks to her knees.)

#1 Frozen Ground

RUTH

*Frozen ground
Frost come early
To this cold and grey November land*

*Frozen ground
Let me hold you
Let me feel your strength within my hand*

(She presses her fingers to the ground.)

*Here is home, beneath my fingers
In the earth so black and worn
Here below, a dream still lingers
Like a seed, like a seed a-waitin' to be born*

*Frozen ground
Winter's captive
But the Spring is comin' soon, you'll see*

(SAMUEL enters behind her, unseen.)

RUTH (cont)

*When it does
This I promise
I will return – I will...*

SAMUEL

(Interrupting)

Ruth.

(Music out.)

What you doin' out here? Winter crop's been put in over a week now. Ain't no more work to be done.

RUTH

Paw...

SAMUEL

You s'posed to be gone to Hathburn. Give me that hoe and be on your way.

(He holds his hand for the hoe. She takes a step back, clinging to it.)

Miss Febb's expectin' you, Ruth.

RUTH

Paw, I got somethin' to say.

(SAMUEL waits. He's heard this before.)

I don't want to go to Hathburn.

SAMUEL

Ruth...

RUTH

I don't belong in one of them fancy houses! I ain't got the right ways about me. I belong here, with the land.

SAMUEL

Miss Febb needs help up at the house. I told her you're a hard worker.

RUTH

But...

SAMUEL

You ain't got to live there. You come home ever night, sleep in your own bed.

RUTH

But the land...

SAMUEL

Stop with "the land" already! It ain't like it's ours – we're just tenant farmers. I want better'n that for my girl.

RUTH

It's good enough for you.

SAMUEL

No it ain't. Workin' someone else's fields ain't good enough for any man.

RUTH

Maybe I could go up to Hathburn next year.

SAMUEL

There ain't no next year! Mr. Waterbarger's thinkin' on sellin' this place.

RUTH

What?! Why would he do that?

SAMUEL

Because some damn Kraut shot his boy dead in France last year, that's why. Charlie Waterbarger's gettin' up in years – can't run a farm by hisself.

RUTH

Then we gotta leave here, we gotta move...

SAMUEL

Hold on, now, not so fast – I got a plan. You know them twenty acres of his down in the south end...? I had my eye on that land a long time now. If Waterbarger's sellin', I'm gonna buy it, but to do that I need cash. You workin' at Hathburn, you're gonna make money, real *cash* money.

RUTH

But, Paw...

SAMUEL

This is our chance, Ruth! Our one and only chance to work land what belongs to us! You want that much as me, don'tcha?

(Beat. He takes the hoe from her.)

SAMUEL (cont.)

Miss Febb's a good woman...

(FEBB BURN enters, carrying a cut-out newspaper article as the scene begins to shift to the parlor at Hathburn. The rest of the newspaper is tucked under her arm.)

She'll learn you what you need to know. Go on, now.

(SAMUEL exits. RUTH takes another look at the land.)

#1a Frozen Ground (Reprise)

RUTH

*Frozen ground
Winter's captive*

RUTH/FEBB

But the Spring is coming soon, you'll see

*When it does
This I promise*

RUTH

I will return...

RUTH/FEBB

I will set you free

(RUTH exits. Music out. FEBB crosses to the couch, reading her article. Sitting on one end of the couch is a brown leather scrap book.)

HARRY (O.S.)

Mama?

(HARRY BURN enters the Parlor. He carries his suit jacket in one hand while buttoning his vest with the other. He crosses to FEBB and throws his suit jacket on top of the scrapbook.)

HARRY

Mama, did the morning papers come?

FEBB

Right here.

(She hands him the newspapers and looks around. He opens the first one.)

Harry, have you seen my scrapbook? It has a leather cover... oh, there it is!

(She pulls it out from under his jacket.)

HARRY

Mama! Would you explain this, please?

(He holds up the newspaper. We see a giant hole in the front page, a hole that matches the article she's been reading.)

This is the third time this month! How am I supposed to stay abreast of current events if you keep cutting holes in the newspaper before I'm even out of bed?

FEBB

Maybe you should get up earlier.

HARRY

I'm serious.

FEBB

What are you looking for in the newspaper that's got you this upset?

HARRY

I'm not looking for anything and I'm not upset!

(He struggles to calm down.)

As a representative of this district, I have an obligation to my constituents to stay informed, and public opinion being what it is...

FEBB

You've been reading the editorials again, haven't you?

HARRY

No!

FEBB

Son, let it go. They'll stop writing about you by-and-by.

HARRY

I don't know what you're talking about.

FEBB

Not every law you sponsor is going to be popular – and you know how folks round here feel about their dogs. It's only natural they're upset. Now, where's my glue bottle...?

(She starts looking around for a glue bottle.)

HARRY

Upset? Buford Hash called me a *Bolshevist!*

FEBB

Did he? When?

HARRY

Last week, in the Knoxville Journal.

(He tosses the newspaper on the couch.)

FEBB

Buford Hash knows how to spell Bolshevist...? Aha! Found it!

(She finds the glue bottle and holds it aloft triumphantly.)

HARRY

Mama, what are you doing?

FEBB

Pasting this article in my scrapbook.

HARRY

Well, at least let me read it first.

(He holds out his hand for it. She presses it to her breast to hide it.)

FEBB

You don't want to read this.

HARRY

Why not? What is it? Did somebody write something about me?!

FEBB

No.

(He snatches the article from her and reads the headline aloud.)

HARRY

Famous Suffragist to speak next month in Knoxville...

(He reads a few moments longer then looks up, puzzled.)

Carrie Chapman Catt is coming to Tennessee to make a speech?

FEBB

Yes.

HARRY

Why is she coming here now, in November? The Susan B. Anthony Amendment passed back in June.

FEBB

It still has to be ratified.

HARRY

And she thinks giving a speech to a bunch of old hens in Knoxville is going to help? She's wasting her time. The Anthony Amendment will never win the approval of thirty-six states.

FEBB

I read that Maine ratified just last week.

HARRY

It doesn't matter what the North does, Mama. The South won't stand for giving women the vote. Georgia and Alabama have already voted against ratification, and it won't be too long before the rest follow suit.

FEBB

What about Tennessee?

HARRY

They'll never go for woman suffrage here.

FEBB

I read that Mrs. Catt has been pressuring governors to call special sessions...

HARRY

Mama...

FEBB

...to ensure women get the vote before next year's Presidential election.

HARRY

Mama, even if Al Roberts wanted to call a special session, he couldn't.

FEBB

Why not?

HARRY

Because it's against the law. In Tennessee, we can't debate a federal amendment until a new state legislature's been elected. That won't be 'til *next* November – by then it's too late. Besides, Governor Roberts has more important things to worry about than woman suffrage.

FEBB

Like what?

HARRY

Like the state budget, like the redistribution of the tax base...

FEBB

Like whether or not to tie up your dog...?

(HARRY shoots her a look.)

May I have that clipping back, please?

(She holds her hand out for clipping. He holds it away from her.)

HARRY

What do you want this thing for, anyway?

FEBB

Never you mind.

(She lunges for it. He holds it out of reach.)

HARRY

What else you got in that scrapbook?

FEBB

Harry!

(She snatches the clipping from him. At the same time he snatches the scrapbook from her.)

FEBB (cont.)

Harry Burn! Give that back!

(HARRY turns away from her and opens it. He flips through the pages – we see headlines from other newspaper clippings on various pages. He reads them aloud.)

HARRY

Suffragists Picket White House. Congress Passes Nineteenth Amendment...

(He flips through a few more pages.)

Woman suffrage....? I don't understand. You detest politics. When I decided to run for office last year, you positively discouraged it.

FEBB

I never...

HARRY

You said the Tennessee General Assembly was a nest of vipers.

FEBB

But I never told you not to run. I would never tell you or Jack what to do. When it comes to her grown children, a good mother minds her own business.

HARRY

Then mind your own business and don't get involved in this suffrage mess.

FEBB

Oh, for goodness sake, Harry – it's just a scrapbook.

HARRY

Even so, I don't think it's a good idea for you to keep adding things to it. We both know politics is no place for a woman.

(JACK BURN enters, gesturing at someone offstage to follow him.)

JACK

Mama, there's someone here...

HARRY

(Interrupting, waving the scrapbook)
Jack, did you know about this?!

JACK

About what?

(He crosses down to them. Behind him, RUTH enters unobserved and watches.)

HARRY

About Mama's new-found interest in politics.

(FEBB snatches the scrapbook from him.)

JACK

Don't be a fool, Harry. Mama's got too much sense for that. Besides, we all know politicians are nothing but a waste of the tax payer's money.

HARRY

So says the farmer.

JACK

At least farmers serve a purpose.

HARRY

Politicians serve a purpose, Jack.

JACK

You mean like passing some stupid Dog and Road Law?

HARRY

Don't start...

JACK

A dog living on a farm should be allowed to run free, Harry! It doesn't make sense to keep it tied up!

HARRY

It does if that dog running loose worries Sam McKinney's sheep half to death!

JACK

Then maybe Sam McKinney shouldn't keep sheep!