

Federico García Lorca

The House of Bernarda Alba

(La casa de Bernarda Alba)

1936

A drama of women in the villages of Spain

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Cast List

Bernarda, aged sixty
María Josefa, (Bernarda's mother), aged eighty
Angustias, (Bernarda's daughter), aged thirty-nine
Magdalena, (Bernarda's daughter), aged thirty
Amelia, (Bernarda's daughter), aged twenty-seven
Martirio, (Bernarda's daughter), aged twenty-four
Adela, (Bernarda's daughter), aged twenty
Servant, aged fifty
La Poncia (a servant), aged sixty
Prudencia, aged fifty
Beggar woman with little girl
Women mourners
Woman 1
Woman 2
Woman 3
Woman 4
Young girl

The poet declares that these three acts are intended to serve as a photographic record.

Act I

(The bright white interior of Bernarda's house. Thick walls. Arched doorways with canvas curtains edged with tassels and ruffles. Rush chairs. Paintings of non-realistic landscapes with nymphs and legendary kings. It is summer. A vast shadowy silence fills the scene. When the curtain rises the stage is empty. The tolling of bells is heard. The Servant enters.)

SERVANT: I can feel the tolling of those bells right between my temples.

LA PONCIA: *(She enters eating bread and sausage)* They've been making that row for more than two hours now. There are priests here from all the villages. The church looks lovely. During the first response Magdalena fainted.

SERVANT: She's the one who'll be most bereft.

LA PONCIA: She was the only one who loved her father. Ay! Thank God we're alone for a while! I was hungry.

SERVANT: If Bernarda could see you...!

LA PONCIA: Now she's not eating, she wants us all to die of hunger! So strict! So domineering! But hard luck! I've opened the sausage jar.

SERVANT: *(Sadly, with longing)* Poncia, won't you give me some for my little girl?

LA PONCIA: Go on, and take a handful of chick-peas too. She won't notice it, today!

VOICE: *(From within)* Bernarda!

LA PONCIA: The old woman. Is she locked in?

SERVANT: Two turns of the key.

LA PONCIA: You should use the bolt too. She's got fingers like picklocks.

VOICE: Bernarda!

LA PONCIA: (*Shouting*) She's coming! (*To the Servant*) Make sure the whole place is clean. If Bernarda doesn't find everything gleaming she'll pull out the little hair I have left.

SERVANT: What a woman!

LA PONCIA: Tyrant of all she surveys. She could squat on your chest for a year and watch you die slowly without wiping that cold smile from her cursed face! Clean those pots: go on!

SERVANT: My hands are red raw from endless cleaning.

LA PONCIA: She's the cleanest; she's the most decent; she's the loftiest of beings. Her poor husband deserves a good rest.

(*The bells cease ringing.*)

SERVANT: Are all the relatives here?

LA PONCIA: On her side. His family detests her. They came to make sure he was dead, and make the sign of the cross.

SERVANT: Are there enough chairs?

LA PONCIA: Plenty. Let them sit on the floor. Since Bernarda's father died no one has set foot inside these walls. She doesn't want them to see her in her stronghold! Curse her!

SERVANT: She's always been good to you.

LA PONCIA: For thirty years I've laundered her sheets; for thirty years I've eaten her leftovers; spent nights awake when she had a cough; whole days peering through the cracks to spy on the neighbours and bring her the news; there are no secrets between us, and yet I curse her! May needles prick out her eyes!

SERVANT: Woman!

LA PONCIA: But I'm a good bitch and bark when I'm told, and bite the heels of the beggars when she whips me on; my sons work her fields and they're both married too, but one day I'll have had enough.

SERVANT: And then...

LA PONCIA: Then I'll lock myself in a room with her, and spit on for her a year. 'Bernarda, here's for this, and that, and the other,' until she looks like a lizard the children squashed, because that's what she is, and all her family. But I don't envy her life, that's for sure. She's five women on her hands, five ugly daughters. Except for Angustias, the eldest, who's the first husband's daughter and has some money, the rest of them have lots of fine lace, and linen camisoles, but their only inheritance is bread and water.

SERVANT: I wouldn't mind having what they have!

LA PONCIA: We have our hands, and we'll have a hole in God's earth.

SERVANT: That's the only earth they'll give us, who have nothing.

LA PONCIA: (*By the cupboard*) This glass has marks on it.

SERVANT: They won't come off even with soap and water.

(*The bells sound.*)

LA PONCIA: The final prayers. I'm off to hear them. I love the priest's singing. In the paternoster his voice rose up, and up, and up like a pitcher slowly filling with water. Of course at the end he gave a screech, but it was a glory to hear him! There's no one these days to match the old sexton, Tronchapiños. He sang at the Mass for my mother, who is in glory. The walls would shake, and when he said Amen it was if a wolf was in church. (*Imitating him*) Ameeeen! (*She begins coughing*)

SERVANT: You'll strain your windpipe.

LA PONCIA: I may have strained something else! (*She goes out laughing*)

(*The servant goes on cleaning. The bells ring*)

SERVANT: (*Picking up the sound*) Ding, ding, dong. Ding, ding, dong. May God grant him forgiveness!

BEGGARWOMAN: (*With her little girl*) Praise be to God!

SERVANT: Ding, ding, dong. May he wait long years for us. Ding, ding, dong.

BEGGARWOMAN: (*Loudly with annoyance*) Praise be to God!

SERVANT: (*Annoyed*) Forever!

BEGGARWOMAN: I've come for the leavings.

(*The bells cease ringing.*)

SERVANT: The street's that way. Today's leavings are for me.

BEGGARWOMAN: You've someone to feed you, woman. My child and I are on our own!

SERVANT: The dogs are on their own too, but they survive.

BEGGARWOMAN: They always give me the scraps.

SERVANT: Get out of here. Who said you could enter? You've left dirty footmarks already. (*The woman leaves. The Servant goes on cleaning.*) Polished floors, cupboards, pedestals, iron bed-frames, while those of us who live in a mud hut with only a plate and a spoon have a bitter pill to swallow. I pray for the day when there's none of us left to tell the tale! (*The bells ring out again*) Yes, yes, go on ringing! Bring on the box with its gold trimmings and the silk straps to lift it by! We'll both end up the same! Rot then, Antonio María Benavides, stiff in your wool suit and your tall boots. Rot! You'll not be lifting my skirts again behind the stable door!

(*At the back of the stage the Women Mourners enter in pairs. They wear voluminous black skirts and shawls and carry black fans. They enter slowly until they have filled the stage.*)

SERVANT: (*Beginning to wail*) Ay, Antonio María Benavides, never will you see these walls again or eat bread in this house! I was the one of all your

servants who loved you most. (*Pulling at her hair*) Must I live on when you are gone? Must I live on?

(*The crowd of women have now entered, and Bernarda appears with her five daughters.*)

BERNARDA: (*To the Servant*) Be silent!

SERVANT: (*Weeping*) Bernarda!

BERNARDA: Less wailing and more work. You should have made sure this house was clean for the mourners. Go. This isn't your place. (*The Servant exits sobbing.*) The poor are like animals. It's as if they're made of some other substance.

FIRST WOMAN: The poor have their sorrows too.

BERNARDA: But they forget them faced with a plate of chickpeas.

YOUNG GIRL: (*Timidly*) You have to eat to live.

BERNARDA: At your age you shouldn't speak in front of your elders.

FIRST WOMAN: Hush, child.

BERNARDA: I never let anyone lecture me. Be seated. (*They sit. Pause.*) (*Firmly*) Magdalena, stop crying. If you want to weep, get under your bed. Do you hear me?

SECOND WOMAN: (*To Bernarda*) Have you started harvesting?

BERNARDA: Yesterday.

THIRD WOMAN: The sun feels as heavy as lead.

FIRST WOMAN: I've not known heat like this for years!

(*Pause. They fan themselves.*)

BERNARDA: Is the lemonade ready?

LA PONCIA: (*Entering with a large tray, full of small white jars which she hands around.*) Yes, Bernarda.

BERNARDA: Give some to the men.

LA PONCIA: They've already have theirs in the yard.

BERNARDA: Let them leave the way they entered. I don't want them coming through here.

YOUNG GIRL: (*To Angustias*) Pepe el Romano was with the mourners.

ANGUSTIAS: He was there.

BERNARDA: It was his mother. She saw his mother. No one saw Pepe, neither she nor I.

YOUNG GIRL: I thought...

BERNARDA: The widower from Darajali was there. By your aunt. We all saw him.

SECOND WOMAN: (*Aside, in a low voice*) Evil, worse than evil!

THIRD WOMAN: (*To the Servant*) A tongue like a knife!

BERNARDA: Women shouldn't look at any man in church except the priest, and only because he wears a skirt. Gazing around is for those seeking the warmth of a pair of trousers.

FIRST WOMAN: (*In a low voice*) Dried up old lizard!

LA PONCIA: (*Muttering*) A crooked vine to be looking for a man's heat!

BERNARDA: (*Striking the floor with her stick*) Praise be to God!

ALL: (*Crossing themselves*) May He be blessed and praised forever!

BERNARDA: Rest in peace, with the host

of saints above your head!

ALL: Rest in peace!

BERNARDA: With St Michael the Archangel
armed with his sword of justice.

ALL: Rest in peace!

BERNARDA: With the key that opens all gates
and the hand that closes them.

ALL: Rest in peace!

BERNARDA: With all those who are blessed
and the little lights of the field.

ALL: Rest in peace!

BERNARDA: With holy charity
and the souls of earth and sea.

ALL: Rest in peace!

BERNARDA: Grant rest to your servant Antonio María Benavides, and the
crown of your sacred glory.

ALL: Amen.

BERNARDA: (*Rises and chants*) 'Requiem aeternam dona eis, Domine'.

ALL: (*Rising and chanting in Gregorian mode*) 'Et lux perpetua luceat eis'.
(*They cross themselves.*)

FIRST WOMAN: May you have health to pray for his soul.

(*They begin to file out.*)

THIRD WOMAN: You shall never want for a loaf of warm bread.

SECOND WOMAN: Nor a roof over your daughters' heads.

(They file out past Bernarda. Angustias exits through the door leading to the courtyard.)

FOURTH WOMAN: May you enjoy the true harvest of your marriage.

LA PONCIA: *(Entering with a bag)* This money is from the men, for prayers.

YOUNG GIRL: *(To Magdalena)* Magdalena.

BERNARDA: *(To Magdalena who is starting to cry)* Shhh! *(She strikes the floor with her stick. They all leave.)* *(Towards those who have left)* Go on, back to your caves and criticise everything you've witnessed! I hope it will be long before you darken my door again.

LA PONCIA: You've no room for complaint. The whole village was there.

BERNARDA: Yes, to fill my house with the sweat from their clothing and the venom of their tongues.

AMELIA: Mother, don't speak like that!

BERNARDA: It's the only way to speak when you live in a cursed village without a river, without wells, where one drinks the water fearing always that it's poisoned.

LA PONCIA: Look what they've done to the floor!

BERNARDA: As if a flock of goats had trampled over it. *(La Poncia scrubs at the floor.)* Child, pass me a fan.

AAMELIA: Take this one. *(She hands her a circular fan decorated with flowers in red and green.)*

BERNARDA: *(Throwing the fan on the ground)* Is this the fan to hand to a widow? Give me a black one, and learn to respect your father's memory.

MARTIRIO: Take mine.

BERNARDA: And you?

MARTIRIO: I don't feel hot.

BERNARDA: Find another one, you'll need it. Through the eight years of mourning not a breeze shall enter this house. Consider the doors and windows as sealed with bricks. That's how it was in my father's house and my grandfather's. Meanwhile, you can embroider your trousseaux. In the chest I've twenty pieces of cloth from which you can cut sheets and covers. Magdalena can embroider them.

MAGDALENA: It's all the same to me.

ADELA: (*Sourly*) If you don't want to embroider them, leave them plain. *Yours* will look better that way.

MAGDALENA: Yours *and* mine. I know I'll never be married. I'd rather hump sacks to the mill. Anything but sit here day after day in this dark room.

BERNARDA: That's what it is to be a woman.

MAGDALENA: Then curses on all women.

BERNARDA: Here, you do what I say. You can't go telling tales to your father. A needle and thread for women. A whip and a mule for men. That's how it is for people born without wealth.

(*Adela exits*)

A VOICE: Bernarda! Let me out!

BERNARDA: (*In a loud voice.*) Let her out, now!

(*The servant enters.*)

SERVANT: It was an effort to hold her down. She may be eighty years old but your mother is tough as an oak tree.

BERNARDA: It runs in the family. My grandmother was the same.

SERVANT: While the mourners were here I had to gag her several times with an empty sack because she wanted to shout for you to bring her a drink of dishwater, and the dog meat she says you give her.

MARTIRIO: She's a troublemaker!

BERNARDA: (*To the Servant*) She can let off steam in the yard.

SERVANT: She's taken the rings and amethyst earrings from her box, and put them on, and she tells me she wants to get married.

(*The daughters laugh.*)

BERNARDA: Go with her and take care she doesn't go near the well.

SERVANT: I doubt she'll throw herself in.

BERNARDA: No, not that...but if she's there the neighbours can see her from their windows.

(*The Servant exits*)

MARTIRIO: We'll go and change our clothes.

BERNARDA: Very well, but keep your headscarves on. (*Adela enters.*) And where's Angustias?

ADELA: (*Pointedly*) I saw her peeping through a crack in the gate. The men have just left.

BERNARDA: And why were you at the gate, yourself?

ADELA: I went to see if the hens had laid.

BERNARDA: But the male mourners should already have left!

ADELA: (*Deliberately*) There was a group of them still standing outside.

BERNARDA: (*Angrily*) Angustias! Angustias!

ANGUSTIAS: (*Entering*) What is it?

BERNARDA: What were you gazing at, and whom?

ANGUSTIAS: No one.

BERNARDA: Is it proper for a woman of your class to be trying to attract a man on the day of your father's funeral? Answer me! Who were you gazing at?

(*Pause*)

ANGUSTIAS: I...

BERNARDA: You!

ANGUSTIAS: No one!

BERNARDA: (*Advancing with her stick*) Spineless, sickly creature! (*She hits her.*)

LA PONCIA: (*Rushing over*) Bernarda, be calm! (*She holds her: Angustia weeps.*)

BERNARDA: All of you, leave! (*They exit*)

LA PONCIA: She did it without thinking what she was doing, and that is was wrong of course. I was shocked to see her sneaking towards the courtyard! Then she stood by the window listening to the men's conversation, which as always was not fit to hear.

BERNARDA: That's what they come to funerals for! (*With curiosity*) What were they saying?

SERVANT: They were talking about Paca la Roseta. Last night they tied her husband to the manger, and carried her off on horseback to the heights of the olive grove.

BERNARDA: And she...?

LA PONCIA: She was willing enough. They said she went with her breasts exposed and Maximiliano held her tight as if he were gripping a guitar. Disgraceful!

BERNARDA: And what happened?

LA PONCIA: What was bound to happen. They came back at daybreak. Paca la Roseta had her hair down, and a garland of flowers on her head.

BERNARDA: She's the only loose woman in the village.

LA PONCIA: Because she's not from here. She's from far off. And those who went with her are sons of foreigners too. Men from here aren't up to such things.

BERNARDA: No, but they like to look on, and gossip, and smack their lips over what occurred.

LA PONCIA: They said other things too.

BERNARDA: (*Looking round with some apprehension.*) What sort of things?

LA PONCIA: I'm ashamed to mention them.

BERNARDA: And my daughter heard them.

LA PONCIA: She must have done?

BERNARDA: She takes after her aunts; white and sickly and making sheep's eyes at any old flatterer's compliments. How we have to suffer and struggle to make sure people act decently and don't slide downhill!

LA PONCIA: Your daughters are of an age to receive compliments! They scarcely oppose you. Angustias must be over thirty by now.

BERNARDA: Thirty nine to be exact.

LA PONCIA: Imagine. And she's never had a suitor...

BERNARDA: (*Angrily*) No, none of them has, and they don't need them! They're fine as they are.

LA PONCIA: I didn't mean to offend you.

BERNARDA: There's no one who can compare to them for miles around. The men here are not of their class. Would you have me give them up to any beggar who asks?

LA PONCIA: You should have moved to some other village.

BERNARDA: Indeed, to sell them off!

LA PONCIA: No, Bernarda, for a change...Of course anywhere else they'd be poor!

BERNARDA: Hold your spiteful tongue!

LA PONCIA: There's no talking to you. Are we not friends?

BERNARDA: No, we're not. You serve me, and I pay you. Nothing more!

SERVANT: (*Entering*) Don Arturo is here, he's come to discuss the will.

BERNARDA: I'm coming. (*To the Servant*) Start whitewashing the courtyard. (*To Poncia*) And you: go and put all the dead one's clothes in the big chest.

LA PONCIA: We could give some of the things....

BERNARDA: Nothing. Not a button! Not even the handkerchief we covered his face with! (*She goes out slowly, leaning on her stick and looks back at her servants as she goes. The servants leave. Amelia and Martirio enter.*)

AMELIA: Have you taken your medicine?

MARTIRIO: For all the good it will do!

AMELIA: But you've taken it.

MARTIRIO: I do things without any faith in them, like a piece of clockwork.

AMELIA: You seem better since the new doctor arrived.

MARTIRIO: I feel the same.

AMELIA: Did you notice? Adelaida wasn't there at the funeral.

MARTIRIO: I knew she wouldn't be. Her fiancé won't let her walk in the streets. She used to be happy: now she doesn't even powder her face.

AMELIA: I no longer know if it's better to have a fiancé or not.

MARTIRIO: It makes no difference.

AMELIA: It's all the gossip that's to blame, they won't let you live. Adelaida must have had a bad time of it.

MARTIRIO: They're afraid of mother. She's the only one who knows the truth about Adelaida's father and how he got his land. Whenever she comes here, mother sticks the knife in. Her father killed his first wife's husband, in Cuba, in order to marry the wife. Then he abandoned her here, and went off with another woman who had a daughter, and then had an affair with the daughter, Adelaida's mother, and married her when the second wife died insane.

AMELIA: And why is the wretch not in jail?

MARTIRIO: Because men cover up things of that nature among themselves, and no one's willing to speak out.

AMELIA: But Adelaida's not to blame for all that.

MARTIRIO: No, but tales are repeated. And to me it all seems one dreadful repetition. Her fate is the same as her mother's and her grandmother's, both wives of the man who engendered her.

AMELIA: What a terrible thing!

MARTIRIO: It's preferable never to see a man. Since childhood they make me afraid. I'd see them in the yard yoking the oxen and lifting the sacks of

wheat, shouting and stamping, and I was always afraid of growing older and suddenly finding myself in their arms. God has made me feeble and ugly and has always kept them away from me.

AMELIA: Don't say such things! Enrique Humanes was after you and he liked you.

MARTIRIO: People invent things! Once I stood by the window in my nightgown till dawn, because his farmhand's daughter told me he was going to stop by, but he never came. It was all talk. Then he married another girl with more money than I.

AMELIA: And she, as ugly as the devil!

MARTIRIO: What does beauty matter to them? What matters are land, oxen, and a submissive bitch to fetch them their food.

AMELIA: Ay!

(Magdalena enters)

MAGDALENA: What are you doing?

MARTIRIO: Standing here.

AMELIA: And you?

MAGDALENA: I'm walking about, to stretch my legs a while. I've been looking at the pictures grandmother embroidered, the little poodle and the Negro fighting a lion that we loved so much when we were children. That was a happier time. A wedding lasted ten days and there was no malicious gossip. Today they're more refined. Brides wear white veils as they do in the towns, and we drink bottled wine, but we waste away because of their chatter.

MARTIRIO: God only knows what used to go on!

AMELIA: *(To Magdalena)* One of your shoelaces is undone.

MAGDALENA: What of it!

AMELIA: You'll step on it and fall!

MAGDALENA: One less...

MARTIRIO: Where's Adela?

MAGDALENA: Oh, she put on the green dress that she first wore on her birthday, and went into the yard and shouted: 'Hen, hens, look at me!' I had to laugh!

AMELIA: If mother had seen her!

MAGDALENA: Poor thing! She's the youngest of us and full of illusions. I'd give anything to see her happy.

(Pause. Angustias crosses the stage with some towels in her hands.)

ANGUSTIAS: What time is it?

MAGDALENA: It must be twelve.

ANGUSTIAS: That late?

AMELIA: It's about to strike!

(Angustias exits)

MAGDALENA: *(Pointedly)* Have you heard...? *(Indicating Angustias)*

AMELIA: No.

MAGDALENA: Come on!

MARTIRIO: I don't know what you're referring to!

MAGDALENA: You know more about it than I. You always have your heads together, like little sheep, but you never tell anyone anything. This business about Pepe el Romano!

MARTIRIO: Oh that!

MAGDALENA: (*Imitating her*) Oh that! It's talked about all over the place. Pepe el Romano is to marry Angustias. He was round the house last night, and I think he'll soon send someone to ask for her.

MARTIRIO: I'm pleased! He's a good man.

AMELIA: And I. Angustias has fine qualities.

MAGDALENA: Neither of you are pleased.

MARTIRIO: Magdalena!

MAGDALENA: If he wanted Angustias for herself, for Angustias the woman, I'd be pleased, but he's after the money. Angustias is our sister but we're family and know she's ageing and unwell, and of us all she has always had the least to offer. If she looked like a broomstick with clothes on at twenty, what is she now at forty!

MARTIRIO: Don't talk like that. Good fortune comes to those who least expect it.

AMELIA: She speaks the truth though! Angustias has her father's money, she's the only wealthy one in this house and now that our father is dead and they're sharing out his estate, they're after her!

MAGDALENA: Pepe el Romano is twenty-five years old and the handsomest man in the whole neighbourhood. The natural thing would be for him to court you, Amelia, or Adela, who is only twenty, but not go after the least attractive one in this house, a woman who, like her father, talks through her nose.

MARTIRIO: Perhaps he likes her!

MAGDALENA: I've never been able to stand your hypocrisy!

MARTIRIO: Heaven preserve us!

(*Adela enters*)

MAGDALENA: Have the chickens seen you in that yet?

ADELA: And what would you have me do with it?

AMELIA: If mother sees you she'll drag you about by the hair!

ADELA: I'm so pleased with this dress. I thought I'd wear it if we were to go and eat melons by the mill. There'd be nothing to equal it.

MARTIRIO: It's a lovely dress!

ADELA: And it suits me. It's the best Magdalena ever made.

MAGDALENA: And what did the chickens say to it?

ADELA: They passed on some of their fleas, and my legs got bitten. (*They laugh.*)

MARTIRIO: You could dye it black.

MAGDALENA: The best she can do is pass it on to Angustias when she weds Pepe el Romano.

ADELA: (*With suppressed emotion*) Pepe el Romano!

AMELIA: Haven't you heard the talk?

ADELA: No.

MAGDALENA: Well now you know!

ADELA: But it's not possible!

MAGDALENA: Money makes everything possible!

ADELA: Is that why she followed the mourners and looked through the door. (*Pause*) And that man is capable of...

MAGDALENA: He's capable of anything.

(Pause)

MARTIRIO: What are you thinking of, Adela?

ADELA: I'm thinking that this mourning period has come at the worst possible time in my life.

MAGDALENA: You'll get used to it.

ADELA: *(Bursting into angry tears)* No, no I won't get used to it! I don't want to be shut in. I don't want my skin to become like yours. I don't want to lose my bloom in these rooms! Tomorrow I'll put on my green dress and I'll go for a walk in the street! I want to go out!

(The Servant enters.)

MAGDALENA: *(Authoritatively)* Adela!

SERVANT: Poor child! She misses her father so! *(She exits.)*

MARTIRIO: Hush!

AMELIA: It will be the same for all of us.

(Adela calms down.)

MAGDALENA: The servant almost overheard you.

SERVANT: *(Appearing)* Pepe el Romano's at the top of the street.

MAGDALENA: Let's go and look!

(They exit swiftly)

SERVANT: *(To Adela)* Aren't you going with them?

ADELA: No, I'm not interested.

SERVANT: When he turns the corner you can see him best, from the window in your room. (*She exits.*)

(*Adela remains there, in two minds. After a moment she too rushes out, to her room. Bernarda and La Poncia enter.*)

BERNARDA: Cursed will!

LA PONCIA: What a lot of money for Angustias!

BERNARDA: Yes.

LA PONCIA: And for the others, quite a lot less.

BERNARDA: You've said it three times already and I chose not to answer. Quite a lot less: much less. Don't remind me again.

(*Angustias enters, her face made up.*)

BERNARDA: Angustias!

ANGUSTIAS: Mother.

BERNARDA: How dare you powder your face? How dare you even wash it, on the day of your father's funeral?

ANGUSTIAS: He wasn't my father. Mine died years ago. Have you forgotten about him?

BERNARDA: You owe more to this man, your sisters' father, than your own! Thanks to this one you've inherited a fortune.

ANGUSTIAS: That remains to be seen!

BERNARDA: If only out of decency! Out of respect!

ANGUSTIAS: Mother, let me go out.

BERNARDA: Out! After you've cleaned that powder from your face! Cunning little hypocrite! Just like your aunts! (*She rubs the powder off vigorously with her handkerchief.*) Now, go out!

LA PONCIA: Bernarda, don't meddle so much!

BERNARDA: Even if my mother's crazy I have my five senses intact, and I know exactly what I'm doing.

(*The other daughters enter.*)

MAGDALENA: What's going on?

BERNARDA: Nothing's going on.

MAGDALENA: (*To Angustias*) If you're arguing about the inheritance, you, the richest of us anyway, you can stick the lot of it.

ANGUSTIAS: Watch your foul tongue!

BERNARDA: (*Banging on the floor with her stick*) Don't think it will give you any power over me! Till I leave this house, feet first, I'll manage your business and mine!

(*Voices are heard and María Josefa, Bernarda's mother, appears, very old and with hair and breast decked with flowers.*)

MARÍA JOSEFA: Bernarda, where's my shawl? You don't need anything of mine, not my rings, and not my black moiré dress, because none of you will ever be married. Not one! Bernarda, give me my pearl necklace!

BERNARDA: (*To the Servant*) Why did you let her in here?

SERVANT: (*Trembling*) She escaped me!

MARÍA JOSEFA: I escaped her because I want to get married, because I wish to marry a handsome young man from the seashore: here the men run away from women.

BERNARDA: Be quiet, mother!

MARÍA JOSEFA: No, I won't be quiet. I don't want to see these single women, foaming at the mouth for marriage, their hearts turning to dust, and I want to go back to my village. Bernarda, I want a man to marry and be happy with!

BERNARDA: Lock her up!

MARÍA JOSEFA: Let me go out, Bernarda!

(The Servant takes hold of María Josefa.)

BERNARDA: Help, all of you!

(They all help to drag the old woman away.)

MARÍA JOSEFA: I want to go! Bernarda! I want to be married by the seashore, by the seashore!

Swift Curtain

Act II

(The bright white interior of Bernarda's house. The doors on the left lead to the bedrooms. Bernarda's daughters are seated on low chairs, sewing. Magdalena embroiders. La Poncia is with them.)

ANGUSTIAS: I've finished cutting the third sheet.

MARTIRIO: It's for Amelia.

MAGDALENA: Angustias, shall I do Pepe's initials as well?

ANGUSTIAS: *(Drily)* No.

MAGDALENA: *(Loudly)* Adela, are you coming?

AMELIA: She's lying down.

LA PONCIA: She's got something. She's restless, quivering, frightened, as if she had a lizard between her breasts.

MARTIRIO: She's got nothing more than what we all have.

MAGDALENA: All except Angustias.

ANGUSTIAS: I'm fine, and anyone who doesn't like it can go to the devil.

MAGDALENA: Well, one has to say the best things about you have always been your figure and your sensitivity.

ANGUSTIAS: Fortunately, I'll soon be free of this hell.

MAGDALENA: Perhaps' you won't be!

MARTIRIO: Let's change the subject!

ANGUSTIAS: And, besides, better an ounce of gold in one's coffer than a pair of dark eyes in one's head!

MAGDALENA: In one ear and out the other.

AMELIA: (*To La Poncia*) Open the door to the courtyard, and see if we can have a little fresh air in here.

(*La Poncia does so.*)

MARTIRIO: All last night I couldn't sleep with the heat.

AMELIA: Nor I!

MARTIRIO: I got out of bed to cool myself. There was a black storm cloud and even a few drops of rain.

LA PONCIA: It was one in the morning, and the earth was still fiery. I got out of bed too. Angustias was at the window with Pepe.

MAGDALENA: (*Ironically*) Was it as late as that? What time did he leave?

ANGUSTIAS: Magdalena, why ask since you saw him?

AMELIA: He left at about half past one.

ANGUSTIAS: Yes. How do you know that?

AMELIA: I heard his cough, and the hooves of his mare.

LA PONCIA: But I heard him leaving at four!

ANGUSTIAS: Then it wasn't him!

LA PONCIA: I'm sure it was!

AMELIA: It seemed to me too...

MAGDALENA: How odd!

(*Pause.*)

LA PONCIA: Listen, Angustias, what did he say to you the first time he came to your window?

ANGUSTIAS: Nothing. What would he say? Trivial things.

MARTIRIO: What's truly odd is that two people who don't know each other should suddenly meet at an open window and become engaged.

ANGUSTIAS: I don't find it astonishing.

AMELIA: It would make me feel strange.

ANGUSTIAS: No it wouldn't, because when a man comes to your window he already knows from the coming and going, from the give and take, that the answer can only be yes.

MARTIRIO: Fine, but he still has to ask.

ANGUSTIAS: Of course!

AMELIA: (*Curious*) So, what did he say?

ANGUSTIAS: Well, nothing much. 'You know I'm after you, that I need a good woman, a modest one, and that it's you if you'll agree.'

AMELIA: Things like that embarrass me!

ANGUSTIAS: Me too, but you have to suffer them!

LA PONCIA: And did he say anything else?

ANGUSTIAS: Yes, he never stopped talking.

MARTIRIO: And you?

ANGUSTIAS: I couldn't speak. My heart almost leapt out of my mouth. It was the first time I'd been alone at night with a man.

MAGDALENA: And such a handsome man.

ANGUSTIAS: His figure's not bad.

LA PONCIA: That's how it is between people who have a little experience, who know how to speak and wave their hands about...The first time my husband Evaristo el Colorín came to my window...ha, ha, ha!

AMELIA: What happened?

LA PONCIA: It was quite dark. I saw him there and as he approached he said: 'Good evening.' 'Good evening,' I said in reply, and then we were silent for half an hour or more. Sweat bathed my whole body. Then Evaristo came closer, closer, as if he wanted to squeeze through the bars, and said in a whisper, 'Come here, let me feel you!'

(They all laugh. Amelia rises, runs to the door, and peers out.)

AMELIA: Ay! I thought mother was coming.

MAGDALENA: Then we'd have been for it! *(They continue laughing.)*

AMELIA: Shush...she'll hear us!

LA PONCIA: Afterwards he behaved very well. Instead of chasing after other things he bred linnets till the day of his death. It's good for you single women to know that a fortnight after the wedding a man forgoes bed for the table, and later on the table for the tavern. And the woman who can't accept it will waste away, crying in a corner.

AMELIA: You accepted it.

LA PONCIA: I could handle him!

MARTIRIO: Is it true you struck him on occasions?

LA PONCIA: Yes, and nearly blinded him.

MAGDALENA: That's how all women should behave!

LA PONCIA: I'm of your mother's school. One day he said something to me, who knows what, and I slaughtered all his linnets with the rolling pin. *(They laugh.)*

MAGDALENA: Adela, child, the things you're missing.

AMELIA: Adela. (*Pause.*)

MAGDALENA: I'll go and find her! (*She exits.*)

LA PONCIA: The child is ill!

MARTIRIO: Of course, she barely sleeps!

LA PONCIA: What does she do instead?

MARTIRIO: How do I know what she does!

LA PONCIA: You know better than I, you only have a wall between you.

ANGUSTIAS: Envy is eating her.

AMELIA: Don't exaggerate things.

ANGUSTIAS: I can see it in her eyes. She's beginning to look like a madwoman.

MARTIRIO: Don't talk about madness. This is the one place where such words should not be spoken.

(*Magdalena enters with Adela.*)

MAGDALENA: You weren't asleep, then?

ADELA: I felt unwell.

MARTIRIO: (*Pointedly*) Didn't you sleep well last night?

ADELA: Yes.

MARTIRIO: Then?

ADELA: (*Angrily*) Leave me alone! Sleeping or waking, it's nobody's affair but mine! I'll do as I want with my own body!

MARTIRIO: I'm merely concerned for you!

ADELA: Concerned, or inquisitive. Weren't you sewing just now? Well carry on. I wish I were invisible, so as to walk through these rooms without you forever asking where I'm going!

SERVANT: (*Entering*) Bernarda is asking for you. The man with the lace is here.

(*They exit, and as they do so Martirio looks fixedly at Adela.*)

ADELA: Stop staring at me! If you want you can have my eyes, that are hardly used, and my shoulders to bear that hump you carry, but turn your head away when I pass.

(*Martirio exits.*)

LA PONCIA: Adela, she's your sister, and the one that loves you most!

ADELA: She follows me everywhere. She even looks into my room to see if I'm asleep. She doesn't let me breathe. And always it's: 'What a shame about that pretty face! What a shame about that body, that no one will ever see!' It's not so! My body will be for whomever I want!

LA PONCIA: (*Pointedly in a low voice*) For Pepe el Romano, is that it?

ADELA: (*Startled*) What do you mean?

LA PONCIA: What I say, Adela!

ADELA: Be silent!

LA PONCIA: (*Loudly*) Did you think I hadn't noticed?

ADELA: Lower your voice!

LA PONCIA: Suppress such thoughts!

ADELA: What do you know about it?

LA PONCIA: Old women can see through walls. Where do you go at night when you get up?

ADELA: You should have your eyes put out!

LA PONCIA: My hands are as full of eyes as my head when it comes to this business. For all my thinking about it I don't know what you're up to. Why else were you standing there half-naked at the window with the light on when Pepe was here the second time he came to talk with your sister?

ADELA: That's not true!

LA PONCIA: Don't be such a child! Let your sister be, and if it's Pepe el Romano you want, reconcile yourself. (*Adela weeps.*) Besides, who says you can't marry him? Your sister Angustias is not well. She won't survive her first child. She's narrow-waisted and old, and from my experience I'd say she'll die. Then Pepe will do what all the widowers here do: he'll marry the youngest and prettiest, and that's you. Cling to that hope and forget him for now. Do what you like, but don't act against the law of God.

ADELA: Be silent!

LA PONCIA: I won't be silent!

ADELA: Mind your own business, you nosy traitor!

LA PONCIA: I shall be your shadow!

ADELA: Instead of cleaning the house and praying for the dead when you go to bed, you go around like an old sow poking around in men and women's business, so you can slobber over it.

LA PONCIA: I keep watch, so that people won't spit when they pass this door!

ADELA: What vast affection you suddenly feel for my sister!

LA PONCIA: I've no loyalty to any of you, but I want to live in a decent house. I don't want my old age to be tarnished.

ADELA: Your advice is useless. It's too late. I'd not just ignore you, but also my mother, in order to quench this fire that licks me from head to foot. What can you say of me? That I lock myself in my room and won't open the door? That I don't sleep? I'm cleverer than you. See if you can catch this hare in your hands.

LA PONCIA: Don't defy me, Adela, don't defy me! Because I can shout out loud, light all the lamps, and set the bells ringing.

ADELA: Bring four thousand yellow flares, and set them up on the walls of the stable-yard. No one can escape the fact that what is to happen will happen.

LA PONCIA: You want the man as much as that!

ADELA: Yes, as much as that! Gazing into his eyes I feel as if I'm slowly drinking his blood.

LA PONCIA: I won't listen to you.

ADELA: You'll listen! I was afraid of you. But now I'm stronger than you!

(Angustias enters.)

ANGUSTIAS: Forever arguing!

LA PONCIA: Of course. In all this heat she insists I go and fetch her something from the store.

ANGUSTIAS: Did you buy that bottle of scent for me?

LA PONCIA: The dearest one: and the powder. I've put them on the table in your room.

(Angustias exits.)

ADELA: Not a word!

LA PONCIA: We'll see about that!

(Martirio, Amelia and Magdalena enter.)

MAGDALENA: *(To Adela)* Have you seen the lace?

AMELIA: The lace for Angustias' wedding sheets is beautiful.

ADELA: *(To Martirio, who is holding some lace)* And that?

MARTIRIO: It's for me. For a petticoat.

ADELA: *(Sarcastically)* One has to have a sense of humour!

MARTIRIO: *(Pointedly)* For my own eyes. I don't need to show off to anyone.

LA PONCIA: No one sees you in your petticoat.

MARTIRIO: *(Pointedly looking at Adela)* Sometimes they do! But I adore underwear. If I were rich I'd have it of finest linen. It's one of the few pleasures left to me.

LA PONCIA: This lace is fine for a baby's bonnet or for a christening gown. I could never dress mine in it. Let's see if Angustias can hers. If she starts having children you'll be sewing day and night.

MAGDALENA: I've no intention of sewing a stitch.

AMELIA: Much less look after someone else's children. Look at the neighbours down the street, martyrs to four little idiots.

LA PONCIA: They're better off than you are. At least they have a laugh and you can hear them fighting!

MARTIRIO: Then go and serve them.

LA PONCIA: No. I've been sent to serve in this convent!

(Distant bells are heard, as if through several walls.)

MAGDALENA: It's the men going back to work.

LA PONCIA: It struck three a moment ago.

MARTIRIO: In this heat!

ADELA: *(Sitting down)* Oh, if I could only be out in the fields too!

MAGDALENA: *(Sitting down)* Each class to its own!

MARTIRIO: *(Sitting down)* That's so!

AMELIA: *(Sitting down)* Ay!

LA PONCIA: There's nothing like being in the fields at this time of year. Yesterday morning the harvesters arrived. Forty or fifty strapping men.

MAGDALENA: Where have they come from this year?

LA PONCIA: From a long way off. They're from the mountains. A happy crowd! Like sun-scorched trees! Shouting and throwing stones! Last night a woman with a sequined dress arrived in the village and danced to an accordion, and fifteen of the men hired her and took her off to the olive grove. I watched them from a distance. The one who organised the hiring was a young man with green eyes, lean as a sheaf of wheat.

AMELIA: Is that a fact?

ADELA: Well, it's possible!

LA PONCIA: Years ago one of these women came here and I gave her money myself so my eldest could go with her. Men must do these things!

ADELA: Everything is forgiven them.

AMELIA: To be born a woman is the great crime.

MAGDALENA: Not even our eyes are our own.

(The sound of singing is heard in the distance. It draws nearer.)

LA PONCIA: That's them. They have some fine songs.

AMELIA: They're off to the reaping, now.

CHORUS: The reapers are leaving,
 they're off to the reaping,
 and with them the hearts
 of all the girls watching.

(Tambourines, and carrañacas – traditional instruments, small wooden or metal plates scraped with sticks – are heard. Pause. All the women listen, in a silence pierced by sunlight.)

AMELIA: The heat doesn't bother them.

MARTIRIO: They reap amidst the fiery rays.

ADELA: I'd like to be a reaper so I could come and go at will. Then I'd be able to forget what's gnawing at us.

MARTIRIA: What is it you need to forget?

ADELA: Each of us has something.

MARTIRIO: *(With feeling)* Each of us!

LA PONCIA: Hush! Hush!

CHORUS: *(Far off)*

 You girls there from the village
 open your doors and windows;
 the reaper wants your roses
 to brighten his sombrero.

LA PONCIA: What a song!

MARTIRIO: *(Nostalgically)*

 You girls there from the village
 open your doors and windows...

ADELA: (*Passionately*)

...the reaper wants your roses
to brighten his sombrero.

(*The sound of the singing grows fainter.*)

LA PONCIA: They're turning the corner now.

ADELA: Let's go and watch them from the window of my room.

LA PONCIA: Take care not to open it too wide, because they're up to shoving at it to see who's looking at them.

(*The three of them leave. Martirio remains seated on the low chair with her head in her hands.*)

AMELIA: (*Approaching*) What is it?

MARTIRIO: The heat is making me ill.

AMELIA: No more than that?

MARTIRIO: I wish it was November, with days of rain and frost; anything but this interminable summer.

AMELIA: It will pass and return again.

MARTIRIO: Of course! (*Pause*) What time did you go to sleep last night?

AMELIA: I don't know. I sleep like a log. Why?

MARTIRIO: Nothing, only I thought I heard someone in the stable yard.

AMELIA: You did?

MARTIRIO: Very late.

AMELIA: And you weren't scared?

MARTIRIO: No. I've heard it on other nights.

AMELIA: We should be on guard. Might it have been the farmhands?

MARTIRIO: The farmhands aren't here till six.

AMELIA: Perhaps a young mule that needs breaking in.

MARTIRIO: *(In a low voice, full of hidden meaning)* Ah, yes! A young mule, one that needs breaking in.

AMELIA: We should warn the others.

MARTIRIO: No! No, say nothing. It's probably my imagination.

AMELIA: Perhaps.

(Pause. Amelia starts to leave.)

MARTIRIO: Amelia.

AMELIA: *(In the doorway)* What is it?

(Pause)

MARTIRIO: Nothing.

(Pause)

AMELIA: Why did you call to me?

(Pause)

MARTIRIO: It slipped out. It was unintentional.

(Pause)

AMELIA: Go and lie down for a while.

ANGUSTIAS: (*Entering angrily in a way which creates a sharp contrast with the previous pauses.*) Where is the photograph of Pepe that was under my pillow? Which of you has it?

MARTIRIO: Neither of us.

AMELIA: It's not as if Pepe was a silver Saint Bartholomew.

(*La Poncia, Magdalena and Adela enter.*)

ANGUSTIAS: Where is the photo?

ADELA: What photo?

ANGUSTIAS: One of you has hidden it.

MAGDALENA: How dare you say that to us?

ANGUSTIAS: It was in my room and now it's not.

MARTIRIO: Maybe it slipped out to the stable yard in the night? Pepe likes to stroll in the moonlight.

ANGUSTIAS: Don't waste your wit on me! When he comes I'll tell him.

LA PONCIA: No, don't do that! It will turn up! (*Looking at Adela*)

ANGUSTIAS: I want to know which one of you has it!

ADELA: (*Looking at Martirio*) Someone does! But not me!

MARTIRIO: (*Pointedly*) Naturally!

BERNARDA: (*Entering leaning on her stick*) What's this noise in my house amidst all this stifling silence? The neighbours must have their ears glued to the walls.

ANGUSTIAS: They've stolen my fiancé's photograph.

BERNARDA: (*Fiercely*) Who has? Who?

ANGUSTIAS: They have!

BERNARDA: Which of you was it? (*Silence*) Answer me. (*Silence. To La Poncia*) Search their rooms, and their beds. This is what comes of not keeping you all on a tighter leash. But I'll haunt your dreams! (*To Angustias.*) Are you sure?

ANGUSTIAS: Yes.

BERNARDA: You've searched for it properly?

ANGUSTIAS: Yes, Mother.

(*They are all standing. An awkward silence ensues.*)

BERNARDA: At my time of life, you'd make me drink the bitterest venom a mother has to swallow. (*To La Poncia, entering*) You found it?

LA PONCIA: Here it is.

BERNARDA: Where did you find it?

LA PONCIA: It was...

BERNARDA: Don't be afraid to say.

LA PONCIA: (*Surprised*) Between the sheets of Martirio's bed.

BERNARDA: (*To Martirio*) Is that true?

MARTIRIO: It's true.

BERNARDA: (*Advancing and striking her with her stick*) May you be cut to pieces, you good-for-nothing! You sower of discord!

MARTIRIO: (*Angrily*) Don't you hit me, Mother!

BERNARDA: As much as I want!

MARTIRIO: If I let you! Do you hear? Get away from me!

LA PONCIA: Show your mother some respect.

ANGUSTIAS: (*Restraining Bernarda*) Leave her alone. Please!

BERNARDA: Not a tear in her eyes.

MARTIRIO: I'll not cry just to please you.

BERNARDA: Why did you take the photo?

MARTIRIO: Can't I even play a joke on my sister? Why else would I want it?

ADELA: (*Jealously*) This was no joke: you've never liked jokes. It was something else in you seeking expression. Out with it now.

MARTIRIO: Be quiet, and don't make me talk, because if I do the walls will close in from shame!

ADELA: An evil tongue never stops inventing things!

BERNARDA: Adela!

MAGDALENA: You're both mad.

AMELIA: And thinking evil thoughts about us.

MARTIRIO: Others do worse things than that.

ADELA: Until they strip them naked and throw them in the river.

BERNARDA: Wicked girl!

ANGUSTIAS: It's not my fault that Pepe el Romana fell for me.

ADELA: For your money!

ANGUSTIAS: Mother!

BERNARDA: Silence!

MARTIRIO: For your fields, and your orchards.

MAGDALENA: That's right!

BERNARDA: Silence, I said! I knew the storm was coming, but I didn't expect it so soon. Ay! What a shower of stones rains down on my heart! But I'm not an old woman yet and I've haltered for all five of you and this house that my father built so that not even the weeds will know my desolation. Get out of here! (*They leave. Bernarda sits desolate. La Poncia stands near the wall. Bernarda composes herself, bangs her stick down and speaks*) I shall have to take a firm grip! Remember, Bernarda, it's your duty!

LA PONCIA: Can I say something?

BERNARDA: Speak. I'm sorry you had to hear that. It's not good to have an outsider mixed up in family matters.

LA PONCIA: What I've seen, I've seen.

BERNARDA: Angustias must get married at once.

LA PONCIA: You must get her away from here.

BERNARDA: Not her. Him!

LA PONCIA: Yes, you must get him away from here! A good thought.

BERNARDA: I don't think. There are things you can't and shouldn't think about. I command.

LA PONCIA: And you think he'll be prepared to go?

BERNARDA: (*Rising*) What's going on in that head of yours?

LA PONCIA: Of course he'll marry Angustias!

BERNARDA: Say it. I know you well enough to spot when you're ready to stab with your knife.

LA PONCIA: I've never considered a warning to be murder.

BERNARDA: You're going to warn me of something?

LA PONCIA: I'm not accusing you of anything, Bernarda. I'm merely saying: open your eyes and see.

BERNARDA: And what is there to see?

LA PONCIA: You've always been sharp. You can see the evil in people a hundred miles off. I've often thought you can read others' minds. But it's different with your daughters. Now you're blind.

BERNARDA: You mean Martirio?

LA PONCIA: Indeed, Martirio... (*Expressing curiosity*) Why did she hide the photo?

BERNARDA: (*Protective of her daughter*) After all she says it was just a joke. What else could it be?

LA PONCIA: (*Sarcastically*) You believe that?

BERNARDA: (*Energetically*) No I don't. You're right!

LA PONCIA: Fair enough, it's your family. But if it was the neighbour across the street, what then?

BERNARDA: Now you're beginning to twist the knife.

LA PONCIA: (*With sustained cruelty*) No Bernarda; something serious is in the wind here. I don't wish to blame you, but you've not allowed your daughters their freedom. Martirio is made to fall in love readily, whatever you may say. Why didn't you let her marry Enrique Humanes? Why on the very day he was going to come to her window did you send him a message not to come?

BERNARDA: (*Forcefully*) I'd do it a thousand times over! My blood will not mix with that of the Humanes family as long as I live! His father was a farmhand.

LA PONCIA: And this is what your pride has brought you to!

BERNARDA: I'm proud because I've a right to be. And you haven't, since you know very well what you come from.

LA PONCIA: (*With hatred*) Don't remind me! I'm old now, and I've always been grateful for your protection.

BERNARDA: (*Imperiously*) It doesn't seem like it!

LA PONCIA: (*Her hatred smoothly concealed*) Martirio will forget about him.

BERNARDA: And if she doesn't the worse for her. I don't think there is 'something serious' going on here. Nothing's going on here. It's only what you'd like to be happening! And if anything does be sure it won't escape these walls.

LA PONCIA: I don't know about that! There are those in the village who can also read hidden thoughts from afar.

BERNARDA: How you'd love to see me and my daughters on the road to the nearest brothel!

LA PONCIA: No one knows where anyone will end up.

BERNARDA: I know what my end will be! I and my daughters! The brothel was fitting for a certain dead woman...

LA PONCIA: (*Fiercely*) Bernarda! Respect my mother's memory!

BERNARDA: Then don't persecute me with your evil thoughts!

(*Pause*)

LA PONCIA: It's better if I have nothing to do with it.

BERNARDA: That's what you should do. Work and keep silent about things. That's the duty of anyone who's paid to work.

LA PONCIA: But I can't. Do you think Martirio is better suited to marry Pepe than...say Adela?

BERNARDA: I don't see why.

LA PONCIA: (*Pointedly*) Adela. She was made to be a Romano's fiancé!

BERNARDA: Things are never as we'd wish them.

LA PONCIA: But it's hard to go against one's true inclinations. It seems wrong to me that Pepe is with Angustias, and it seems wrong to others too, and even to Nature herself. Who knows whether they'll pay for it somehow!

BERNARDA: Here we go again...You slip things in to give me bad dreams. And I don't want to listen to you, because if I did understand all you were saying I'd be tempted to scratch your eyes out.

LA PONCIA: It won't come to it!

BERNARDA: Fortunately my daughters respect me, and have never gone against my wishes!

LA PONCIA: That's so! But as soon as you let them free they'll be climbing the roof.

BERNARDA: I'll hurl stones to bring them down again!

LA PONCIA: You've always been the pluckiest!

BERNARDA: I was always a fiery one!

LA PONCIA: But it's strange how things turn out! At her age: you should see Angustias' enthusiasm for this fiancé of hers! And he seems taken with her too! My son told me that yesterday when he went past with the oxen at four thirty in the morning, they were still talking.

BERNARDA: At four thirty!

ANGUSTIAS: (*Entering*) That's a lie!

LA PONCIA: That's what they told me.

BERNARDA: (*To Angustias*) Well?

ANGUSTIAS: Pepe has been leaving at one, for more than a week. God strike me dead if I'm lying.

MARTIRIO: (*Entering*) I heard him leaving at four as well.

BERNARDA: But did you see him with your own eyes?

MARTIRIO: I didn't want to look out. Don't you talk to him from the window in the alleyway?

ANGUSTIAS: No, I talk to him from my bedroom window.

(*Adela appears in the doorway*)

MARTIRIO: Then...

BERNARDA: What has been going on here?

LA PONCIA: Beware what you might find! Anyway, it's clear that Pepe was at one of the windows at four in the morning.

BERNARDA: You know that for certain?

LA PONCIA: Nothing's certain in this life.

ADELA: Mother, don't listen to her: she wants to destroy us all.

BERNARDA: I'll find out for myself! If the people in this village want to make false accusations they'll find me hard as rock. We'll not speak of this any more. Sometimes people will throw mud at others to destroy them.

MARTIRIO: I've no wish to tell lies.

LA PONCIA: There must be something in it.

BERNARDA: There's nothing in it. I was born with my eyes open. And they'll stay open till the day I die.

ANGUSTIAS: I have a right to know what's going on.

BERNARDA: Your only right is that of obedience. Nobody tells me what to do. *(To La Poncia)* And you: keep to your own affairs. No one will take a step here without my knowing!

SERVANT: *(Entering)* There's a big crowd at the top of the street and all the neighbours are at their doors!

BERNARDA: *(To La Poncia)* Run, and see what's happening! *(The women start to run off)* Where are you going? I always knew you were the sort of women who can't wait to display themselves at windows, and break your mourning vow. All of you, to the courtyard!

(They leave as does Bernarda. Distant murmurs are heard. Martirio and Adela enter and stand listening, not daring to take another step towards the exit.)

MARTIRIO: Be grateful I kept my tongue in check.

ADELA: I could have spoken too.

MARTIRIO: And what would you have said? To wish is not to do!

ADELA: The one who does is the one who can, and who gets there first. You wished but you couldn't have him.

MARTIRIO: You won't have him much longer.

ADELA: I'll have him all to myself!

MARTIRIO: I'll snatch him from your arms!

ADELA: *(Pleading)* Martirio, let us alone!

MARTIRIO: Never!

ADELA: He wants me to live with him!

MARTIRIO: I saw him embrace you!

ADELA: I didn't want him to. It's as if I was dragged along by a rope.

MARTIRIO: I'll see you dead first!

(Magdalena and Angustias appear. The noise outside increases.)

LA PONCIA: *(Entering with Bernarda)* Bernarda!

BERNARDA: What's going on?

LA PONCIA: Librada's daughter, the unmarried one, has had a daughter and no one knows who the father is.

ADELA: A child?

LA PONCIA: And to hide her shame she killed it, and buried it under some rocks; but the dogs, with more heart than many a human creature, dug it up and, as if guided by God's hand, left it on her doorstep. Now people want to kill her. They're dragging her down the street, and there are men running along the paths, and out of the olive-groves, shouting loud enough to make the earth tremble.

BERNARDA: That's right, let them bring olive branches and pick-handles, and let them kill her.

ADELA: No, no, not kill her!

MARTIRIO: Yes, and let us go see.

BERNARDA: And may she who tramples on her honour pay the price.

(A woman's cry and a great uproar are heard outside.)

ADELA: Let them only release her! Don't go outside!

MARTIRIO: (*Gazing at Adela*) May she pay what she owes!

BERNARDA: (*In the archway*) Finish her off before the police come! A burning coal in the place of her sin!

ADELA: (*Clutching her belly*) No! No!

BERNARDA: Kill her! Kill her!

Curtain

Act III

(Four white walls, bathed in pale blue light, in the internal courtyard of Bernarda's house. It is night. The setting should be utterly simple. The doorways, illuminated by interior lighting, cast a bright glow on the stage. In the centre a table with an oil lamp, at which Bernarda and her daughters are eating. La Poncia is serving them. Prudencia is seated apart. As the curtain rises there is a complete silence, broken only by the sound of plates and cutlery.)

PRUDENCIA: I should go. It's been a long visit. *(She rises.)*

BERNARDA: Stay. We never see each other.

PRUDENCIA: Has the last bell for the rosary sounded?

LA PONCIA: Not yet.

(Prudencia sits down.)

BERNARDA: And how is your husband?

PRUDENCIA: The same.

BERNARDA: We never see him either.

PRUDENCIA: You know what he's like. Since he quarrelled with his brothers over the inheritance he never goes out the front door, he uses a ladder and climbs over the wall by the stable-yard.

BERNARDA: So like a man. And your daughter...?

PRUDENCIA: He hasn't forgiven her.

BERNARDA: He's right.

PRUDENCIA: I don't know what to say. It makes me suffer.

BERNARDA: A disobedient daughter ceases to be your daughter and instead becomes your enemy.

PRUDENCIA: I let it flow over me. The only comfort I have is to take refuge in the church, but now I'm losing my sight I'll have to stop going so the children won't mock at me. (*A heavy blow against the wall is heard.*) What was that?

BERNARDA: The stallion, he's shut in, and kicks at the wall. (*Calling out*) Hobble him, and let him out in the yard! (*In a lower voice*) He must be hot.

PRUDENCIA: Are you going to let him loose on the new mares?

BERNARDA: At dawn.

PRUDENCIA: You've done well to increase your stable.

BERNARDA: By dint of pain and money.

LA PONCIA: (*Interrupting*) And now she's got the best stable in the region! It's a shame prices are so low.

BERNARDA: Would you like some honey and cheese?

PRUDENCIA: I don't feel like eating.

(*Another blow is heard.*)

LA PONCIA: Dear God!

PRUDENCIA: That went straight to my heart!

BERNARDA: (*Rising angrily*) Do I have to say everything twice? Let him out to roll in the straw! (*She pauses, and as if speaking to the stable lads*) Shut the mares in the stable, but let him out, before he brings the wall down. (*She goes back to the table and sits down*) Ay, what a life!

PRUDENCIA: You have to do a man's work.

BERNARDA: That's right. (*Adela gets up from the table*) Where are you going?

ADELA: For a drink of water.

BERNARDA: (*Calling*) Bring a jug of fresh water. (*To Adela*) You can sit down. (*Adela sits*)

PRUDENCIA: And Angustias, when does she get married?

BERNARDA: They'll ask for her hand in three days time.

PRUDENCIA: You must be very happy!

ANGUSTIAS: Of course!

AMELIA: (*To Magdalena*) Now, you've spilt the salt!

MAGDALENA: Things can't be worse for you than they are already.

PRUDENCIA: It always brings bad luck.

BERNARDA: Enough of that!

PRUDENCIA: (*To Angustias*) Has he given you the ring yet?

ANGUSTIAS: (*Displaying it*) See for yourself.

PRUDENCIA: It's beautiful. Three pearls. In my day pearls signified tears.

ANGUSTIAS: Well times have changed.

ADELA: I don't think so. Such things mean the same. An engagement ring should be set with diamonds.

PRUDENCIA: That's more appropriate.

BERNARDA: With pearls or without them, it's what you make of things.

MARTIRIO: Or what God makes of them.

PRUDENCIA: They tell me your furniture is fine too.

BERNARDA: It's cost me a small fortune.

LA PONCIA: (*Intervening*) The best piece is the wardrobe, with a mirror.

PRUDENCIA: I've never seen a wardrobe with a mirror.

BERNARDA: All we had was a chest.

PRUDENCIA: What's important is that everything works out for the best.

ADELA: One can never tell.

BERNARDA: There's no reason why it shouldn't.

(*The distant sound of bells is heard.*)

PRUDENCIA: The last call. (*To Angustias*) I'll visit again so you can show me your trousseau.

ANGUSTIAS: Whenever you wish.

PRUDENCIA: God give us goodnight.

BERNARDA: Goodbye, Prudencia.

THE FIVE DAUGHTERS: God go with you.

(*Pause. Prudencia exits.*)

BERNARDA: We've finished. (*They rise.*)

ADELA: I'm going to the main door to stretch my legs and get some air.

(*Magdalena sits down in a low chair against the wall.*)

AMELIA: I'll go with you.

MARTIRIO: And I.

ADELA: (*With suppressed hatred*) I won't get lost.

AMELIA: Darkness begs company.

(They leave. Bernarda sits. Angustias is clearing the table.)

BERNARDA: I've told you, I want you to talk to your sister Martirio. What happened with the photograph was a joke and should be forgotten.

ANGUSTIAS: You know she doesn't like me.

BERNARDA: Each sees into their own heart. I never pry into hearts, but I desire a united front and family harmony. Do you understand?

ANGUSTIAS: Yes.

BERNARDA: Then that's fine.

MAGDALENA: *(Half-asleep)* Anyway, you'll have left here before you know it! *(She falls asleep)*

ANGUSTIAS: Not soon enough.

BERNARDA: What time did you finish talking last night?

ANGUSTIAS: Twelve-thirty.

BERNARDA: What does Pepe have to say?

ANGUSTIAS: He seems distracted. He talks to me as if he's thinking of something else. If I ask him what's on his mind, he just says: 'We men have our own worries.'

BERNARDA: You shouldn't ask him; that's even more true when you're married. Speak if he speaks, and look at him when he looks at you. You'll be better off that way.

ANGUSTIAS: Mother, I think he hides a great deal from me.

BERNARDA: Don't try and find out what it is, don't question him, and, above all, don't let him ever see you cry.

ANGUSTIAS: I should be happy and I'm not.

BERNARDA: It's no matter.

ANGUSTIAS: I often gaze at Pepe through the bars of the window, and his image is blurred, as if he were cloaked in a shroud of dust thrown up by his sheep.

BERNARDA: You're not well, that's all.

ANGUSTIAS: I hope it's that!

BERNARDA: Is he here tonight?

ANGUSTIAS: No. He's gone to the city with his mother.

BERNARDA: Then we'll retire early. Magdalena!

ANGUSTIAS: She's asleep.

(Adela, Martirio and Amelia enter.)

AMELIA: What a dark night!

ADELA: You can't see two feet in front of you.

MARTIRIO: A fine night for thieves, or for someone who needs to hide.

ADELA: The stallion was in the centre of the yard. So white! Twice as big, and filling the darkness.

AMELIA: That's right. He was frightening. Like a phantom!

ADELA: The sky is filled with fistfuls of stars.

MARTIRIO: She stared at them so hard she almost strained her neck.

ADELA: Don't you love them too?

MARTIRIO: What happens above the rooftops means nothing to me. What goes on inside these four walls is enough for me.

ADELA: That's typical.

BERNARDA: She has her ways as you have yours.

ANGUSTIAS: Good night.

ADELA: You're off to bed already?

ANGUSTIAS: Yes, Pepe's not here tonight. (*She exits.*)

ADELA: Mother, when a meteor passes, or there's a flash of lightning, why do people say:

Blessed Santa Barbara
in the sky with paper
you're writ, and holy water?

BERNARDA: In past days they knew many things that we've forgotten.

AMELIA: I shut my eyes so as not to see them.

ADELA: I don't. I like to see things flash out fire that have been dormant for years and years.

MARTIRIO: Those things have nothing to do with us.

BERNARDA: And it's best not to think of them.

ADELA: What a beautiful night! I'd like to stay up late to catch the breeze from the fields.

BERNARDA: But it's time for bed. Magdalena!

AMELIA: She's fast asleep.

BERNARDA: Magdalena!

MAGDALENA: (*Annoyed*) Leave me in peace!

BERNARDA: It's time for bed!

MAGDALENA: *(Rising in a bad mood)* You can't let anyone alone! *(She exits muttering)*

AMELIA: Good night. *(She exits.)*

BERNARDA: You two, go on now.

MARTIRIO: Why isn't Angustias' fiancé coming by tonight?

BERNARDA: He's away.

MARTIRIO: *(Looking at Adela)* Ah!

ADELA: Till the morning. *(She exits)*

(Martirio has a drink of water and exits slowly looking towards the door of the stable-yard. La Poncia enters.)

LA PONCIA: You're still here?

BERNARDA: Enjoying the silence and unable to understand what this 'serious thing' is that's supposed to be going on here.

LA PONCIA: Bernarda, forget about it.

BERNARDA: Everything is as it should be in this house. My vigilance guards against all.

LA PONCIA: Nothing you can see, that's true. You daughters live as though they were shut in a cupboard. But neither you nor anyone else can see inside someone's heart.

BERNARDA: My daughters can breathe tranquility.

LA PONCIA: That matters to you because you're their mother. I've enough to do looking after this house.

BERNARDA: So you're saying nothing.

LA PONCIA: I keep to my place, in peace.

BERNARDA: The fact is there's nothing to say. If there was grass here you'd be the first to let the neighbours' sheep in to graze.

LA PONCIA: I conceal more than you think.

BERNARDA: Has your son seen Pepe here again at four in the morning? Are people still repeating a litany of lies against this house?

LA PONCIA: No one says a thing.

BERNARDA: Because they can't, because there's nothing for them to sink their teeth into. My vigilance has seen to that!

LA PONCIA: I don't want to say anything, Bernarda, because I don't know what you're after. But don't be so certain.

BERNARDA: I'm utterly certain!

LA PONCIA: Perhaps a lightning bolt will suddenly strike you! Perhaps a blood clot will suddenly block your heart!

BERNARDA: Nothing will happen. I'm alert to all your suspicions.

LA PONCIA: All the better for you then.

BERNARDA: Certainly!

SERVANT: (*Entering*) I've finished washing the dishes. Do you need anything else, Bernarda?

BERNARDA: (*Rising*) Nothing. I'm going to bed.

LA PONCIA: What time do you want me to call you?

BERNARDA: Don't bother. I'll sleep well tonight. (*She exits.*)

LA PONCIA: When you can't fight the tide, the easiest thing is to turn your back on it.

SERVANT: She's so full of pride she has a mote in her eye.

LA PONCIA: I can't do anything about it. I want to stop things before they go any further, but they frighten me too much. You hear this silence? Yet there are storms brewing in each of these rooms. The day they break out they'll sweep us all away. I've had my say.

SERVANT: Bernarda thinks no one can match her, but she doesn't know the effect a man can have on a house full of single women.

LA PONCIA: It's not all Pepe el Romano's fault. It's true that last year he was after Adela, and she was mad about him, but she should have kept to herself and not incited him. A man is a man,

SERVANT: Some say he's been talking with Adela too often at night.

LA PONCIA: They're right. (*Whispering*) And there have been other things.

SERVANT: I don't know what will happen here.

LA PONCIA: I'd like to cross the water and leave this warring house.

SERVANT: Bernarda is hastening the wedding on, and maybe nothing will happen.

LA PONCIA: Things have already gone too far. Adela is determined, while the others keep watch on her all the time.

SERVANT: Martirio too?

LA PONCIA: She's the worst. She's a poisonous well. She knows Pepe is not for her and she'd drown the world if she could so no one else should have him.

SERVANT: They're wicked girls!

Bernarda,
leopard-face.
Magdalena
she-hyena.
Little lamb!
Baa, baa.
Flowers there'll be at Bethlehem Gate.

(She laughs.)

You and I don't want to sleep.
By itself the door will open
we'll hide along the shore
deep inside a reef of coral.
Bernarda,
Leopard-face.
Magdalena,
she-hyena.
Baa, baa.
Flowers there'll be at Bethlehem Gate.

(She goes out singing. Adela enters. She looks around her carefully, and vanishes through the door to the stable-yard. Martirio enters through another door and stands centre-stage in a state of agonised alertness. She is also in her petticoat. She has covered herself with a waist-length black shawl. María Josefa enters.)

MARTIRIO: Grandmother, where do you think you're going?

MARÍA JOSEFA: Are you going to open the door for me? Who are you?

MARTIRIO: What are you doing here?

MARÍA JOSEFA: I escaped. Who are you?

MARTIRIO: Go to bed.

MARÍA JOSEFA: You're Martirio, I see that now. Martirio: with the face of a martyr. When are you going to have a child? This is mine.

MARTIRIO: Where did you find the lamb?

MARÍA JOSEFA: I know it's a lamb, but why shouldn't a lamb be a child? It's better to have a lamb than nothing at all. Bernarda with a leopard's face: Magdalena with a hyena's.

MARTIRIO: Don't raise your voice.

MARÍA JOSEFA: True. It's all quite dark. Because I've white hair you think I can't have a child, but I can: children, children, and more children. This child will be clothed in white, and there'll be another child and another and they'll all be snow-white, and we'll be like the waves, every one of us. Then we'll know everything, and our heads will be white, and we'll be sea-foam. Why is there no sea-foam here? Here there are only mourning shawls.

MARTIRIO: Hush, hush.

MARÍA JOSEFA: When my neighbour had a child, I would take it chocolate and afterwards she would bring me some, and so it was, always, always, always. You'll have white hair, but the neighbours won't visit you. I want to take a walk but I'm afraid the dogs will bite me. Will you go with me till we're past the fields? I don't like fields. I like houses, but houses that are wide open, and the women, our neighbours, sleeping in their beds with their little children, and their men outside sitting on chairs. Pepe el Romano is an ogre. All of you want him. But he'll devour you. Because you're grains of wheat. No, not grains of wheat. Tongue-less frogs!

MARTIRIO: (*Energetically*) Come, you must go to bed. (*She pushes at her.*)

MARÍA JOSEFA: Yes, but you'll let me out later, won't you?

MARTIRIO: Of course I will.

MARÍA JOSEFA: (*Weeping*) Little lamb, my little one,
we'll go, down to the sea.
The little ant shall open his door,
I shall give you milk and more.

(She exits. Martirio shuts the door through which she has gone, and moves towards the door to the stable yard. She hesitates then advances a few more steps.)

MARTIRIO: *(Whispering)* Adela. *(Pause. She continues to the door. Loudly)* Adela!

(Adela appears. Her hair is tousled.)

ADELA: Why are you calling me?

MARTIRIO: Leave that man alone!

ADELA: Who are you to speak to me like that?

MARTIRIO: It's not the role of an honest woman.

ADELA: Wouldn't you love to be there yourself!

MARTIRIO: *(Loudly)* It's time for me to speak out. This can't go on.

ADELA: It's only just beginning. I've had the courage to take what I want. The spirit and power you lack. I've felt death beneath this roof and I'm off to seek what is mine, what belongs to me.

MARTIRIO: That man without a soul came here for another woman. You intercepted him.

ADELA: He came for the money, but his eyes were on me all the time.

MARTIRIO: I won't allow you to take him. He's to marry Angustias.

ADELA: You know as well as I he doesn't love her.

MARTIRIO: I know.

ADELA: You know, because you've seen: he loves me.

MARTIRIO: *(Desperately)* Yes.

ADELA: (*Coming closer*) He loves me, he loves me.

MARTIRIO: Stick a knife in me, if that's what you wish, but don't speak those words again.

ADELA: That's why you don't want me to see him. You don't care if he embraces someone he doesn't love. Nor do I. He can live with Angustias for a hundred years. But it's him embracing me that's so terrible for you, because you love him, you love him too!

MARTIRIO: (*Dramatically*) Yes! I can say it without shame. Yes! Let my bitter heart split open like a pomegranate. I love him!

ADELA: (*Impulsively, moving to embrace her*) Martirio, Martirio, it's not my fault.

MARTIRIO: Don't touch me! Don't try to soften my heart. My blood is no longer like yours, and even if I wish to see you as a sister now I only see you as the other woman. (*She pushes her away*)

ADELA: There's no remedy here. Whoever must drown will drown. Pepe el Romano is mine. He will take me to the rushes by the shore.

MARTIRIO: He will not!

ADELA: I can't stand the horror of living under this roof having tasted the sweetness of his mouth. I'll be whatever he wants me to be. With the whole village against me; scorched by their tongues of fire, hounded by those who call themselves decent people, I'll stand before them all with a crown of thorns on my brow, the one that a woman loved by a married man wears.

MARTIRIO: Be silent!

ADELA: Yes, yes. (*Quietly*) Let's go to sleep, let him marry Angustias. I don't care. I'll go and live in a little house all by myself, where he can see me whenever he wants, when need overcomes him.

MARTIRIO: That won't happen as long as I've a drop of blood in my veins.

ADELA: Not to you, who are weak: but I can bring a wild stallion to its knees by lifting my little finger.

MARTIRIO: Don't raise your voice, it disturbs me. My heart is gripped by so evil a force that, regardless of my wishes, it's smothering me.

ADELA: They tell us to love our sisters. God must have abandoned me, in the midst of darkness, because I see you more clearly than ever before.

(The sound of someone whistling is heard and Adela runs to the door, but Martirio blocks her passage.)

MARTIRIO: Where are you off to?

ADELA: Get away from the door!

MARTIRIO: Push past me if you can!

ADELA: Away! *(They struggle.)*

MARTIRIO: *(Shouting)* Mother! Mother!

ADELA: Let me go!

(Bernarda appears. She is wearing petticoats and a black shawl.)

BERNARDA: Quiet. Quiet. A pity I haven't a lightning bolt in my hand!

MARTIRIO: *(Pointing at Adela)* She was with him! Look at her petticoat covered with straw!

BERNARDA: A bed of straw is the bed of a whore! *(She approaches Adela angrily.)*

ADELA: *(Confronting her)* That's enough of your gaoler's voice! *(She takes hold of her mother's walking stick and breaks it in half.)* That's how I treat the tyrant's rod. Don't take another step. No one but Pepe can command me!

(Magdalena appears.)

MAGDALENA: Adela!

(La Poncia and Angustias enter.)

ADELA: I'm his woman. *(To Angustias)* Listen, go into the yard and tell him so. He'll rule this whole household. He's there now, breathing like a lion.

ANGUSTIAS: Dear God!

BERNARDA: The shotgun! Where's the shotgun? *(She exits in haste)*

(Amelia enters upstage, looking on in terror, her head against the wall. Martirio exits.)

ADELA: No one can stop me! *(She starts to exit.)*

ANGUSTIAS: *(Restraining her)* You'll not leave here in triumph, you thief, to dishonour our house!

MAGDALENA: Let her go: so that we'll never have to see her again!

(A gunshot is heard.)

BERNARDA: *(Entering)* Go on, look for him now if you dare!

MARTIRIO: *(Entering)* That's the last of Pepe el Romano.

ADELA: Pepe! My God! Pepe! *(She rushes out.)*

LA PONCIA: Did you finish him off?

MARTIRIO: No! He galloped off on his horse!

BERNARDA: It wasn't for want of trying. But we women are poor shots.

MAGDALENA: Why say such things, then!

MARTIRIO: For her benefit! I'd like to pour a whole river of blood over her head.

LA PONCIA: You witch.

MAGDALENA: You she-devil!

BERNARDA: It's better this way. (*A thud is heard.*) Adela! Adela!

LA PONCIA: (*At the door.*) Open up!

BERNARDA: Open up now. Don't think this house can hide your shame.

SERVANT: (*Entering*) You've woken the neighbours.

BERNARDA: (*In a low harsh voice*) Open the door, before I break it down! (*Pause. Total silence.*) Adela! (*She moves away from the door.*) Bring an axe! (*La Poncia pushes open the door and goes inside. She utters a scream and reappears.*) What is it?

LA PONCIA: (*Clasping her hands to her throat*) Pray God none of us may end like that!

(*The sisters shrink back. The servant crosses herself. Bernarda gives a cry and steps forward.*)

LA PONCIA: Don't go in!

BERNARDA: No. No, I shall not! Pepe: you may have fled for your life now through the dark branches, but one day you'll be brought low. Cut her down! My daughter died a virgin! Carry her to her room and dress her as a maiden. No one will dare say a word! She died a virgin! Tell them to ring the bells twice at dawn.

MARTIRIO: She was a thousand times fortunate: to have had him.

BERNARDA: And no tears. Death must be stared straight in the face. Silence! (*To another daughter*) Silence, I say! (*To another*) You can shed tears when you're alone. We'll drown ourselves in a sea of mourning! She, the youngest of Bernarda Alba's daughters died a virgin. Do you hear? Silence, Silence I say! Silence!

Curtain

Friday the 19th of June, 1936.