AMANDA-LAURA

SCENE 2

[LIGHT UPSTAGE.

LEGEND ON SCREEN: 'THE ACCENT OF A COMING FOOT'.

Friday evening. It is about five o'clock of a late spring evening which comes 'scattering poems in the sky.'

A delicate lemony light is in the Wingfield apartment.

AMANDA has worked like a Turk in preparation for the gentleman caller. The results are astonishing. The new floor lamp with its rose-silk shade is in place, a coloured paper lantern conceals the broken light fixture in the ceiling, new billowing white curtains are at the windows, chintz covers are on chairs and sofa, a pair of new sofa pillows make their initial appearance.

Open boxes and tissue paper are scattered on the floor.

LAURA stands in the middle with lifted arms while AMANDA crouches before her, adjusting the hem of the new dress, devout and ritualistic. The dress is coloured and designed by memory. The arrangement Of LAURA's hair is changed; it is softer and more becoming. A fragile, unearthly prettiness has come out in LAURA: she is like a piece of translucent glass touched by light, given a momentary radiance, not actual, not lasting.]

AMANDA [impatiently]: Why are you trembling?

LAURA: Mother, you've made me so nervous !

A M A N D A: How have I made you nervous ?

LAURA: By all this fuss ! You make it seem so important !

AMANDA: I don't understand you, Laura. You couldn't be satisfied with just sitting home, and yet whenever I try to arrange something for you, you seem to resist it. [She gets up.] Now take a look at yourself. No, wait ! Wait just a moment - I have an idea !

LAURA: What is it now?

[AMANDA produces two powder puffs which she wraps in handkerchiefs and stuffs in LAURA's bosom.]

LAURA: Mother, what are you doing?

AMANDA: They call them 'Gay Deceivers'!

LAURA: I won't wear them !

AMANDA: YOU Will !

LAURA: Why should I?

AMANDA: Because, to be painfully honest, your chest is flat.

LAURA: You make it seem like we were setting a trap.

AMANDA: All pretty girls are a trap, a pretty trap, and men expect them to be !

[LEGEND: ' A PRETTY TRAP']

Now look at yourself, young lady. This is the prettiest you will ever be ! I've got. to fix myself now ! You're going to be surprised by your mother's appearance ! [She crosses through portières, humming gaily.]

[LAURA moves slowly to the long mirror and stares solemnly at herself. A wind blows the white curtains inward in a slow, graceful motion and with a faint, sorrowful sighing.]

AMANDA [off stage]: It isn't dark enough yet. [LAURA turns slowly before the mirror with a troubled look.]

LEGEND ON SCREEN: ' THIS IS MY SISTER: CELEBRATE HER WITH STRINGS!' MUSIC.]

AMANDA [laughing, off]: I'm going to show you something. I'm going to make a spectacular appearance I

LAURA: What is it, Mother?

AMANDA: Possess your soul in patience ? you will see !

Something I've resurrected from that old trunk! Styles haven't changed so terribly much after all. [She parts the portières.]

Now just look at your mother !

[She wears a girlish frock of yellowed voile with a blue silk sash. She carries a bunch of jonquils - the legend of her youth is nearly revived.]

[Feverishly]: This is the dress in which I led the cotillion, won the cakewalk twice at Sunset Hill, wore one spring to the Governor's ball in Jackson !

See how I sashayed around the ballroom, Laura?

[She raises her skirt and does a mincing step around the room.]

I wore it on Sundays for my gentlemen callers ! I had it on the day I met your father I had malaria fever all that spring. The change of climate from East Tennessee to the Delta - weakened resistance I had a little temperature all the time - not enough to be serious - just enough to make me restless and giddy I Invitations poured in - parties all over the Delta! - 'Stay in bed,' said mother, 'you have fever!' - but I just wouldn't. - I took quinine but kept on going, going ! Evenings, dances ! - Afternoons, long, long rides! Picnics. - lovely! - So lovely, that country in May. - All lacy with dogwood, literally flooded with jonquils! - That was the spring I had the craze for jonquils. Jonquils became an absolute obsession. Mother said, 'Honey, there's no more room for jonquils.' And still I kept on bringing in more jonquils. Whenever, wherever I saw them, I'd say, "Stop ! Stop! I see jonquils ! I made the young men help me gather the jonquils ! It was a joke, Amanda and her jonquils ! Finally there were no more vases to hold them, every available space was filled with jonquils. No vases to hold them? All right, I'll hold them myself - And then I - [She stops in front of the picture. M U S I C.] met your father ! Malaria fever and jonquils and then - this - boy....

[She switches on the rose-coloured lamp.]

I hope they get here before it starts to rain.

[She crosses upstage and places the jonquils in bowl on table.]

I gave your brother a little extra change so he and Mr O'Connor could take the service car home.

LAURA [with altered look]: What did you say his name was?

AMANDA: O'Connor.

LAURA: What is his first name?

AMANDA: I don't remember. Oh, yes, I do. It was - Jim !

[LAURA sways slightly and catches hold of a chair.

LEGEND ONSCREEN: ' NOT JIM !']

LAURA [faintly]: Not - Jim!

AMANDA: Yes, that was it, it was Jim ! I've never known a Jim, that wasn't nice !

[MUSIC OMINOUS.]

LAURA: Are you sure his name is Jim O'Connor?

AMANDA: Yes. Why?

LAURA: Is he the one that Tom used to know in high school?

AMANDA: He didn't say so. I think he just got to know him at the warehouse.

LAURA: There was a Jim O'Connor we both knew in high school - [Then, with effort.] If that is the one that Tom is bringing to dinner - you'll have to excuse me, I won't come to the table.

AMANDA: What sort of nonsense is this?

LAURA: You asked me once if I'd ever liked a boy. Don't you remember I showed you this boy's picture?

AMANDA: You mean the boy you showed me in the year book?

LAURA: Yes, that boy.

AMANDA: Laura, Laura, were you in love with that boy?

LAURA: I don't know, Mother. All I know is I couldn't sit at the table if it was him!

AMANDA: It won't be him! It isn't the least bit likely. But whether it is or not, you will come to the table. You will not be excused.

LAURA: I'll have to be, Mother.

AMANDA: I don't intend to humour your silliness, Laura. I've had too much from you and your brother, both !

So just sit down and compose yourself till they come. Tom has forgotten his key so you'll have to let them in, when they arrive.

LAURA [panicky]: Oh, Mother - you answer the door !

AMANDA [lightly]: Ill be in the kitchen - busy !

LAURA: Oh, Mother, please answer the door, don't make me do it !

AMANDA [crossing into kitchenette]: I've got to fix the dressing for the salmon. Fuss, fuss - silliness ! over a gentleman caller !

[Door swings Shut. LAURA is left alone

LEGEND: ' TERROR!'

She utters a low moan and turns off the lamp - sits stiffly on the edge of the sofa, knotting her fingers together.

LEGEND ON SCREEN: ' THE OPENING OF A DOOR !'

T0M and JIM appear on the fire-escape steps and climb to landing. Hearing their approach, LAURA rises with a panicky gesture. She retreats to the portières.

The doorbell, LAURA catches her breath and touches her throat. Low drums.]

AMANDA [calling]: Laura, sweetheart ! The door !

[LAURA stares at it without moving.]

JIM: I think we just beat the rain.

TOM: Uh - huh. [He rings again, nervously. JIM whistles and fishes for a cigarette.]

AMANDA [very gaily]: Laura, that is your brother and Mr O'Connor ! Will you let them in, darling?

[LAURA Crosses toward kitchenette door.]

LAURA [breathlessly]: Mother - you go to the door !

[AMANDA steps out of kitchenette and stares furiously at LAU R A. She points imperiously at the door.]

LAURA: Please, please!

AMANDA [in a fierce whisper]: What is the matter with you, you silly thing?

LAURA [desperately]: Please, you answer it, please !

AMANDA: I told you I wasn't going to humour you, Laura. Why have you chosen this moment to lose your mind?

LAURA: Please, please, please, you go !

A M A N D A: You'll have to go to the door because I can't !

LAURA [despairingly] : I can't either !

AMANDA: Why?

LAURA: I'm sick!

AMANDA: I'm sick, too - of your nonsense ! Why can't you and your brother be normal people? Fantastic whims and behaviour !

[Tom gives a long ring.]

Preposterous goings on ! Can you give me one reason - [Calls out lyrically] COMING! JUST ONE SECOND! - why you should be afraid to open a door? Now you answer it, Laura !

LAURA: Oh, oh, oh ... [She returns through the portières. Darts to the victrola and winds it franticallly and turns it on.]

AMANDA: Laura Wingfield, you march right to that door !

LAURA: Yes - yes, Mother !

[A faraway, scratchy rendition of 'Dardanella' softens the air and gives her strength to move through it. She slips to the door and draws it cautiously open.

TOM enters With the caller, JIM O'CONNOR.]

TOM: Laura, this is Jim. Jim, this is my sister, Laura.

JIM [stepping inside]: I didn't know that Shakespeare had a sister!

LAURA [retreating stiff and trembling from the door]: How - how do you do?

JIM [heartily extending his hand]: - Okay !

[LAURA touches it hesitantly with hers.]

JIM: Your hand's cold, Laura !

LAURA: Yes, well- I've been playing the victrola....

JIM: Must have been playing classical music on it! You ought to play a little hot swing music to warm you up !

LAURA: Excuse me - I haven't finished playing the victrola. ... [She turns awkwardly and hurries into the front room. She pauses a second by the victrola. Then catches her breath and darts through the portières like a frightened deer.]

JIM: [grinning]: What was the matter?

TOM: Oh - with Laura? Laura is - terribly shy.

JIM: Shy, huh? It's unusual to meet a shy girl nowadays. I don't believe you ever mentioned you had a sister.

TOM: Well, now you know. I have one. Here is the Post Dispatch. You want a piece of it?

JIM: Uh-huh.

TOM: What piece? The comics?