THE RATCATCHER'S DAUGHTER
Or
Death Valley Daze

CAST OF CHARACTERS
(We couldn't call them anything but characters)

AUNTIE HUSH runs the orphanage. Already out of money, soon to be out of patience.

DEATH VALLEY NELL the sheriff. Knows all about buzzard's 'cause her brother was tarred and feathered.

SWEET LOTTA BLISS her father was a ratter but her mother was a lady.

FEATHERTOP an Indian with no reservations.
WHIPLASH SNIVEL he'd steal the pennies from a dead man's eyes and then come back for the eyeballs.

JANUARY an orphan.
FEBRUARY another.
MARCH more of the same.
CUSPIDOR an old prospector, formerly known as Spittoon.

LADY PILFER a chunk of larceny for a heart.
LAVINIA LAGOON a Temperance leader. Down with Demon Rum!

JACK SUNSHINE sells wash-and-wear furs, struggles against the lure of wicked whiskey.

EXTRAS, if desired orphans, townspeople.

Consult PRODUCTION NOTES at rear of playbook for suggestions of making cast larger or smaller, changing female characters to male, etc.

SYNOPSIS OF SCENES

ACT ONE: An orphanage in Death Valley . . . so hot even the sand fleas have fled.

ACT TWO: The orphanage again . . . so hot even wet blankets are steaming.
THE RATCATCHER’S DAUGHTER
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ACT ONE

SETTING: A former stagecoach stop, stuck in Death Valley. Now an orphanage. The basics: Table and three chairs DOWN LEFT. Bench DOWN RIGHT. There’s another table, longer than the first, positioned UP STAGE CENTER. Some bowls and spoons are scattered on top. A handbell, too. To these minimal stage properties can be added a few items to give rustic atmosphere to the scene . . . another chair, some stools, maybe a rug, a barrel, etc. The orphanage is a poor-looking place.

AT RISE: Sound of ORPHANS’ VOICES from OFF STAGE RIGHT.

ORPHANS’ VOICES: When do we eat?
I’m hungry!
Food!
Etc.

AUNTIE HUSH’S VOICE: Hush up, children, you’ll eat when it’s ready. (AUNTIE HUSH ENTERS RIGHT carrying a kettle with a large spoon sticking out. She wears a dust cap on her head, unlaced men’s boots, a soiled white apron. She MOVES behind the UP CENTER table.) That’s one thing I’ll say about orphans. They sure do like to eat. ‘Specially when they ain’t et for two days. (She puts the kettle atop the table and begins to spoon out “vittles” . . . the food is a lumpy mess.) It ain’t like eating in a fine restaurant, but it keeps body and soul together. (Sighs. Wipes her forehead with the back of her hand.) This heat! It gives no mercy. A body would have to be a rattlesnake or a Gila monster to appreciate living in Death Valley. (To Audience, to establish precise location.) California. (She returns to ladling out the slop.) This orphanage is too much work for an old woman like myself. I’m out of money and almost out of patience.

NELL: (DEATH VALLEY NELL, the sheriff, ENTERS LEFT. She’s an amazing creature with a voice that calls to mind a shifting gravel pit. She wears male attire, chaps, spurs, six-shooters, a vest with an over-sized tin star and a large cowboy hat.) Howdy, Auntie Hush.

AUNTIE HUSH: Howdy, Death Valley Nell. (To Audience.) The sheriff.
NELL: Dustiest, driest summer I seen in years. Even the sand fleas have left town. (She takes off her hat and slaps at her costume. Great billows of dust erupt. [NOTE: This effect is achieved by generously sprinkling NELL'S costume with talcum powder before she enters. The more powder and the harder NELL whacks, the more dust.] As the dust billows, NELL coughs. AUNTIE HUSH coughs, too, waving her arms or a dishtowel to keep the stale air circulating.) It's so hot outside . . .

AUNTIE HUSH: How hot is it, Nell?
NELL: I seen a coyote chasing a road runner.
AUNTIE HUSH: What's so unusual about that?
NELL: They was walkin'.
AUNTIE HUSH: Will you stay for vittles, Death Valley Nell?
NELL: (Sits at table.) Don't mind if I do. What's on the menu?
AUNTIE HUSH: (Dips spoon into kettle, comes up with some of the mess.) My famous Auntie Hush mush.
NELL: No offense, Auntie Hush, but I figure a person has to take enough lumps in life without finding them in a bowl.
AUNTIE HUSH: After Auntie Hush mush we're going to have buzzard croquettes.
NELL: (Grimaces.) Ain't hungry no more.
AUNTIE HUSH: Buzzards can be tasty.
NELL: (Rising from her seat.) No need to tell me about birds. I know all about them. Had a brother who was tarred and feathered.
(With an audible sigh of rapture, SWEET LOTTA BLISS, a vision of innocence and girlish charm, a parasol over her dainty head, floats in from OFF LEFT. She pays no attention to either NELL or AUNTIE HUSH. She strikes a romantic pose STAGE CENTER, sighs again, and CROSSES DOWN RIGHT by the bench. Another sigh, another pose. [NOTE: Consult "piano suggestions" at back of playbook.] Wondering what this is all about, NELL looks OFFSTAGE LEFT to see if anyone else is about to float in. NELL and AUNTIE HUSH exchange a questioning look. With another delirious sigh, SWEET LOTTA sits on the bench, folds parasol.)
AUNTIE HUSH: What can I do for you, miss?
LOTTA: I'm waiting for the next stage.
AUNTIE HUSH: You'll have a long wait.
NELL: This ain't a coach stop no more.
LOTTA: But the sign outside says otherwise.
AUNTIE HUSH: Nobody ever bothered to take it down.
NELL: Stage line gave out a few years back. Folks didn't like traveling through this inferno in no wooden box on wheels.
AUNTIE HUSH: The train depot is four miles east.
LOTTA: I know. I just came from there. *(Distressed.)*
Oh, dear. What am I to do? I didn’t have enough money to
purchase a train ticket all the way to Los Angeles, so I thought
I would go part of the way by stagecoach.
NELL: That would be a good idea if the stage was running.
Only it ain’t.
AUNTIE HUSH: You mean you walked from the train depot?
In this heat?
LOTTA: I enjoy seeing America on foot. I do it whenever I
can. I’ve been traveling across this great country for months
and months. *(Pause.)* And months. *(Another pause.*) And
months. *(Another.)* Months.
NELL: We get the general idea.
AUNTIE HUSH: Where are you from?
AUNTIE HUSH: England?
LOTTA: I walked so often in England that I lost ten pounds.
NELL: How much is that in American money?
LOTTA: I have come to America to open a school and seek my
fortune.
NELL: What kind of school?
LOTTA: As you say in this country . . . . “Reading, ’Riting and
’Rithmetic.” Spelling, too.
NELL: I never did learn how to spell when I went to school.
The teacher kept changing the words.
AUNTIE HUSH: If you’re from England how come you don’t
have an accent?
LOTTA: I lost it along the way. And in Denver I lost my
luggage. However, my journey has been educational. I learned
to speak the Indian tongue.
NELL: Why not the language?
LOTTA: *(Stands, curtseys.*) Permit me to introduce myself. I am
Sweet Lotta Bliss from London.
NELL: I can believe that. You’re kind of foggy.
AUNTIE HUSH: Do you feel like a bowl of mush?
LOTTA: Why, no. Do I look like one? *(NELL and AUNTIE
HUSH give LOTTA a hard stare. Next, they look to each other,
then out to the Audience, perplexed. They think LOTTA is
the most peculiar female they’ve ever met.)*
AUNTIE HUSH: *(MOVING in front of table.*) Where are your
folks? *(LOTTA points upward, indicating heaven. NELL and
AUNTIE HUSH lock to the ceiling.)*
NELL: Plucking on harps, huh?
LOTTA: Father was a ratter. Mother was a lady.
NELL: Shouldn’t talk about your pa that way.
LOTTA: No, no, you don’t understand. In England being a ‘ratter’ is a perfectly respectable occupation. A ratter is a man who traps rats.

NELL: That’s the most revolting thing I’ve ever heard. (To Audience.) Next to Auntie Hush mush.

LOTTA: One day he left the house with his new invention. A king-sized rat trap. In setting it out it snapped before he was ready. Caught father before it caught a rodent. He died in his own trap.

NELL: (Dramatically.) Them who live by the trap die by the trap.

AUNTIE HUSH: That’s a mighty sad story, Miss Lotta.

LOTTA: (Sings: Tune/’Wait ’Till The Sun Shines, Nellie’, Page 29.) Mother was a real fine lady, blue blood, yes, and gentle born. Father was a bloody ratter, dusk ‘till dawn. Mom always had high station, tea and picture hats. Dad earned his daily bread a-killing rats.

(ALL sing refrain, very deep and serious.)

Dad earned his daily bread a-killing rats.

FEATHERTOP: (An Indian wearing a big blanket, a headband with one large feather sticking straight up, ENTERS from LEFT. If possible, actor portraying this role should create an eccentric walk . . . maybe moving quickly in a stopped position.) How!

LOTTA: Do let me answer him since I speak the tongue. (NELL and AUNTIE HUSH lean forward curious to hear LOTTA converse. LOTTA takes a deep breath, smiles to FEATHERTOP, speaks.) How! (NELL and AUNTIE HUSH remain leaning forward. Long pause.)

NELL: That’s it?

AUNTIE HUSH: She ain’t much with adjectives and verbs. I thought we was going to hear a regular conversation. Not that Feathertop says much.

WHIPLASH’S VOICE: (From OFF LEFT.) Gad! What a dismal spot!

NELL: Who can that be? (ALL look LEFT as WHIPLASH SNIVEL, a city slicker and scoundrel, sweeps in. His costume is in traditional villain fashion . . . black suit, oily moustache, flowing cape. Top hat optional. He carries a walking stick or cane, uses it to emphasize various points he wishes to make. One other item . . . sunglasses.)

WHIPLASH: (MOVES CENTER. To Audience, an announcement.) Death Valley is no San Francisco and you can quote me.

NELL: Who might you be, stranger?

WHIPLASH: All in good time. (He hands FEATHERTOP his walking stick, takes a pack of cards from some pocket, fans them, steps to NELL.) Take a card. Any card at all.
(NELL picks a card. WHIPLASH puts deck on table, steps back to FEATHERTOP, takes out a coin.) Here you are, my good man. A little something for your trouble. (To AUNTIE HUSH.) He probably doesn’t know what money is.

FEATHERTOP: (Bites the coin, checks, hands it back to WHIPLASH.) Coin bend.

WHIPLASH: (Pretends to be shocked.) Bend? (Studies coin.) You can’t trust government money. (Tosses coin over his shoulder, pulls back his walking stick. NOTE: As actor works with the walking stick, he may find it convenient to put it aside from time to time; on the floor, atop a table, etc.)

AUNTIE HUSH: Here you are, Feathertop. Nice bowl of mush. (She hands him a bowl. FEATHERTOP looks at it, makes a terrible face to Audience.) Go ahead. Enjoy. Enjoy. (His cheeks puff out as if he might be ill at any moment. FEATHERTOP EXITS RIGHT.)

NELL: (Has been studying the card.) I don’t see nothing special about this hyar card. Ain’t got nothing on it but an advertisement for Cincinnati Snake Oil.

WHIPLASH: Use your brain. It’s the small things in life that count. (Snarls.) Turn it over. (NELL turns it over.)

AUNTIE HUSH: What’s it say?

NELL: Well . . . I’ll be.

WHIPLASH: Doesn’t say that at all.

NELL: (Reads:) “Whiplash Snivel, E Squirrel.”

WHIPLASH: Not “E” Squirrel . . . ESQUIRE. Can’t you read correctly?

AUNTIE HUSH: Death Valley Nell is a high school graduate.

WHIPLASH: Ignorance is no excuse.

NELL: (Stands.) Maybe I don’t read so good and maybe I don’t spell so good, but I don’t have to.

WHIPLASH: Why not?

NELL: (Arms akimbo.) ‘Cause I’m the sheriff.

AUNTIE HUSH: Not only that, she’s the fastest gun in these parts. Do your stuff, Nell.

LOTTA: How thrilling! A page from the Old West.

NELL: (Struggles to get the pistols from holsters. They’re stuck. She tugs and pulls, making grunting sounds.) Give me a minute . . . I’ll get ’em . . . they don’t call me the fastest gun in Death Valley for nothing . . . watch this . . . I can shoot the needle off a porcupine’s back . . . reckon the heat has swollen the leather . . .

WHIPLASH: (To Audience.) And her head as well.

NELL: Almost got ’em . . . here we go! (With a final yank she pulls out the pistols, staggers back from the force of the yank.)
OPTIONAL BUSINESS: If practical, one of the pistols can actually discharge blanks. NELL, in freeing the pistol, holds it directly upward and it FIRES! Or . . . a gun-master can fire a prop weapon from OFFSTAGE to achieve effect. Or . . . it can be eliminated altogether . . . substituting NELL staggering backward to get a laugh.)

AUNTIE HUSH: Twirl them six-shooters, Nell. (NELL begins to “twirl” the pistols . . . only she can’t do it. She’s dreadful. One drops. She picks it up, tries again. In desperation, she returns one pistol to its holster, concentrates on twirling or spinning the other. It’s worse than before. The OTHERS stare, fascinated by the ineptness of her performance. Finally, the pistol gets stuck on her finger and she can’t get it off.)

WHIPLASH: Allow me. (Delicately, WHIPLASH frees the pistol, hands it back to NELL, who returns it to the holster.)

NELL: I could have done even better only I had the flu last week.

LOTTA: (Applauds.) Bravo, bravo, Sheriff. That was wonderful. NELL: (Embarrassed.) Shucks. ’Tweren’t much.

WHIPLASH: (To Audience.) It was less than that.

NELL: (Referring to the card.) What’s this mean under your name . . . “Opera Tunes.”

WHIPLASH: Not “opera tunes” . . . opportunities. Now, Sheriff, if you’ll be kind enough to tell me where I might find a female calling herself Auntie Hush.

LOTTA: (Gestures to AUNTIE HUSH.) That is she.

WHIPLASH: Madam, you leased this wretched structure from one Silas Whimper of San Francisco.

AUNTIE HUSH: (Distracted.) I knew it would come to this sooner or later! I haven’t paid rent in over a year. (Emotionally, she clutches at WHIPLASH. Her appeal is overwrought and tearful.) I’ll get the money somehow! Every cent I get I use to buy food for the orphans! The poor, poor orphans! Have pity! (Appalled by this outburst, WHIPLASH steps back, but AUNTIE HUSH clings to him like wallpaper.) Tell Mr. Whimper he’ll get his money! Tell him I need more time! Tell him about the work I do here! Tell him about the orphans! (WHIPLASH bops her on the head with his cane.) Ow!

WHIPLASH: Tell him yourself. I’m not a rent collector. (Her hand on her head, softly moaning, AUNTIE HUSH MOVES to LOTTA, who comforts her. THEY sit on bench.)

NELL: If you ain’t collecting rent what are you doing?

WHIPLASH: I am serving notice that I own this building. I intend to have it torn down first thing in the morning.
(AUNTIE HUSH wails.)
NELL: You saying you own this building ain't proof.
WHIPLASH: You want proof, you shall have proof.
NELL: Let me see proof.
WHIPLASH: (Takes out some legal-looking paper.) Mr. Whimper
has sold the property to me. It's all here. Proper and legal.
(Hands the paper to NELL, who studies it, eyes squinting.
Exasperated, WHIPLASH steps to the sheriff and turns the paper
around. NELL has been reading it upside down.)
AUNTIE HUSH: Why do you want this property?
WHIPLASH: I intend to erect a gambling casino.
NELL, AUNTIE HUSH: Gambling casino!
WHIPLASH: And saloon.
NELL, AUNTIE HUSH: Saloon!
WHIPLASH: (Looks around.) Must be an echo.
NELL: You don't know much about business, Whiplash Snivel.
This hya town is stuck out in the middle of nowhere. Once in
a while a burro wanders in, or some character like Sweet Lotta
Bliss who's a mite peculiar. Or someone like Feathertop . . .
but that's all.
WHIPLASH: (Takes back document, pockets it.) You forgot what
my business card reads.
LOTTA: Cincinnati Snake Oil?
WHIPLASH: Opportunities. I happen to know that the railroad
is building a spur line to this wretched dust pit. The army
plans to build several military installations. The soldier boys
will need a place to relax.
LOTTA: But what about the orphans?
WHIPLASH: Are they old enough to gamble? (A terrible cry of
agony, from FEATHERTOP, OFF RIGHT.)
LOTTA: (Jumps to her feet.) What’s that?
NELL: It's only Feathertop.
WHIPLASH: What’s the matter with the fellow?
NELL: Reckon he tasted the mush.
LOTTA: (Steps to WHIPLASH.) Surely, out of charity, you will
not press your demand. Although I am a stranger in your
country, I have come to admire the male element. Kind,
courteous, courageous. (LOTTA steps to Audience.) My heart
belongs to one such. I met him hiking across the Mohave
Desert. He swore he loved me. We were to be married in
the little town of Garlic. I waited at the church all day . . .
all night . . . the next day . . . the next night. When the
sun came up on the third day my bouquet wilted and drooped.
(Bravely.) Onions make me weep, but Garlic has broken my
heart.
WHIPLASH: Who's she talking to?
(During LOTTAS speech, NELL and AUNTIE HUSH eavesdrop. When the speech is over THEY sob, blow noses loudly. AUNTIE HUSH uses corner of her apron. NELL wipes her nose with the back of her sleeve.)

LOTTA: (Steps back to WHIPLASH.) Auntie Hush will need to get her affairs in order.

WHIPLASH: You heard me . . . first thing in the morning this building comes down! (Another wail from AUNTIE HUSH.)

LOTTA: Sir, you are blind.

WHIPLASH: Nonsense. (Plucks off sunglasses.) I only wear these spectacles to dim the suns glare. (Gets a good look at LOTTAs.)

Hmmmm. My, my, aren’t you a pretty little thing. I must never look at you while wearing dark glasses. They dim your radiance. Permit me. (He gestures to the table and LOTTAs sits. As she CROSSES, WHIPLASH speaks to Audience, twirls his moustache.)

A rare beauty. Theres life in old Death Valley after all. Ill make myself irresistible. (He sits beside LOTTAs, takes out a breathing freshener, squirts a few drops into his mouth, presses his dentures with his thumbs, flexes his lips, gives LOTTAs a wide false grin. NELL MOVES to UPSTAGE table, watches with avid interest. AUNTIE HUSH, too.) Tell me, my cactus blossom, what is your name?

LOTTA: Sweet Lotta Bliss from London.

WHIPLASH: What do they call you for short?

LOTTA: Lotta.

WHIPLASH: (To Audience.) Lotta Bliss is a lot of woman.

LOTTA: Say you will not turn Auntie Hush and her orphans into the street.

WHIPLASH: Dine with me this evening. In my buckboard. We will discuss the matter. Hee, hee, hee. (He goes to kiss her hand, but she pulls it back quickly and WHIPLASHS head bangs to the table.)

ORPHANS VOICES: (From OFFSTAGE.)

When do we eat?
I’m hungry!
Food!
Etc.

WHIPLASH: (Alarmed.) Are we being attacked by hostiles?

NELL: Naw, its just them orphans.

LOTTA: Poor things. Poor, sweet, adorable things.

AUNTIE HUSH: I plumb forgot about them. (AUNTIE HUSH goes behind table, picks up a dinner bell, rings it.) Come and get it!

LOTTA: (Looking OFF RIGHT.) What precious children!
(Pause for dramatic effect and the ORPHANS ENTER. There
should be at least three, two female, one male, although two will suffice by simply dividing the lines. The male actor is JANUARY. What a miserable group! Their garments are mostly rags, dark shadows ring their forlorn eyes. Their hair is uncombed and they amble in like forgotten waifs one might expect to find in a novel by Charles Dickens. NOTE: The humor comes from the fact the "children" are played by full-sized actors. Also, director may add as many as he likes.

AUNTIE HUSH: Line up, children. Dinner time. (ORPHANS cheer three times . . . very faintly.)

WHIPLASH: Aren't they rather large for orphans?

AUNTIE HUSH: They've grown big and strong on Auntie Hush mush.

LOTTA: What are their names?

AUNTIE HUSH: I can't keep track so I name them like the months of the year. (Points them out.) That's January, that's February, that's March. (As each name is called the ORPHAN curtsies . . . even the male. If EXTRA ORPHANS are employed, simply add more months: APRIL, MAY, JUNE, etc.)

LOTTA: How long have they been here?

AUNTIE HUSH: Don't recollect. (To ORPHANS.) Pick up a bowl. Mush.

WHIPLASH: Is she talking to Eskimo dogs or orphans?

(ORPHANS line up at RIGHT of table. Each takes a bowl and spoon and CROSSES to bench, sits.)

NELL: Auntie Hush is a wonderful woman.

WHIPLASH: So is the Statue of Liberty, but I wouldn't want to eat her cooking. (ORPHANS aren't eating. THEY stare down into the bowls.)

AUNTIE HUSH: I'm famous for my mush.

NELL: That's why they ain't eating. (As one, the ORPHANS dip into the mush, taste it. THEY make faces, groan.)

AUNTIE HUSH: (Dabs at her eyes with the corner of her apron.)

I do the best I can on the little I have.

JANUARY: My mush is too hot.

FEBRUARY: My mush is too cold.

MARCH: My mush is too lumpy.

JANUARY: I'd rather eat what we had last night.

FEBRUARY: What did we have last night?

MARCH: Nothing.

CUSPIDOR: (A dusty old prospector, jumps into the room from RIGHT, waving his hat, shouting excitedly.) Eureka! Eureka! (Leaping and jumping happily he CROSSES stage, EXITS LEFT. ALL watch. In a second or two he returns.) Eureka! Eureka!

NELL: Hold on, Cuspidor. What's all this eureka?

CUSPIDOR: I found a gold vein! I finally struck it rich!
ALL: Rich?
CUSPIDOR: After all these years! Come on outside and lookee.
I got a wheelbarrow full of nuggets. Eureka! *(He runs OUT
RIGHT. Immediately, ORPHANS, with their bowls and spoons,
LOTTA, NELL run out after CUSPIDOR.)*
AD LIBS: Gold?
Wheelbarrow full of nuggets?
I want to see this!
Etc.
WHIPLASH: *(Jumps up, starts to join the crowd, but AUNTIE
HUSH runs from behind the UP CENTER table and pulls him
back by his cape so she can get in front of him. He's thrown
off balance and with a wail does a pratfall as AUNTIE HUSH
runs OFF.)* How rude!
LADY PILFER: *(A theatrically gowned menace, carrying a hand-
bag, ENTERS LEFT, reacts.)* Whiplash Snivel!
WHIPLASH: At your service, madam. *(He gets up, brushes off
the dust.)* Whom do I have the honor of addressing?
*(Recognizes her, reacts.)* Zounds! Barbary Coast Barbara. I
haven't seen you in years. Not since they drove you out of
town for stealing ponies from the Pony Express.
LADY PILFER: Barbary Coast Barbara died years ago.
WHIPLASH: She did?
LADY PILFER: I mean I went abroad. I married Lord Pilfer,
an English aristocrat. I'm a widow now. LADY Pilfer.
WHIPLASH: What are you doing here?
LADY PILFER: I might ask the same of you.
WHIPLASH: I got bored selling phony stocks and bonds. I'm
going to open a gambling casino.
LADY PILFER: *(Sits at table.)* In Death Valley! Ha! *(Pause.)*
Ha! *(Pause.)* Ha!
WHIPLASH: There's money to be made.
LADY PILFER: Money is a great comfort. Unfortunately my
late husband died penniless. His brother has a London law firm,
and I work for him.
WHIPLASH: Doing what, may I inquire?
LADY PILFER: At the moment I am searching for a girl named
Sweet Lotta Bliss.
WHIPLASH: She's here!
LADY PILFER: So they told me at the train depot. I've
followed her across the country. She's an heiress.
WHIPLASH: An heiress! How interesting. *(Slinks into chair
beside LADY PILFER.)* Tell me everything.
LADY PILFER: Why should I?
WHIPLASH: For old times' sake.
LADY PILFER: (Takes a deep breath and speaks each line non-stop. WHIPLASH'S head bobs up and down as he tries to follow the fast monologue.) Lotta's grandfather was a Russian nobleman. (Breath.) When his son married Lotta's mother the old man dis inherited him. (Breath.) The son never told his wife of his background. (Breath.) She assumed he was an honest but poor ratter. (At the end of each following line both take a deep audible breath.) The old Russian passed on some time ago but not before repenting. (Breath.) He willed everything to his son. (Breath.) Since Lotta's father and mother are deceased everything goes to her. (Breath.) Understand?

WHIPLASH: (His head is still bobbing. He takes another breath. LADY PILFER stares at him as if he were an idiot. Suddenly he realizes she's stopped talking, tightens his dentures with his thumbs, smiles.) Excellent, excellent.

LADY PILFER: You're smiling.

WHIPLASH: Living abroad has dimmed your wits. (Rubs his hands gleefully.) Why should a mere girl get all that money? It would be wasted on her. We ought to relieve her of that burden. (To Audience.) I'll get richer by degrees... marriage degrees. Hee, hee, hee.

LADY PILFER: I don't want any trouble with the law. I'm a lady now.

WHIPLASH: A leopard can't change its spots. I tell you it'll be like taking candy from a baby. (To Audience.) Which I rather enjoy. (To LADY PILFER.) I'll get her to marry me.

LADY PILFER: You? Ha, ha, ha.

WHIPLASH: What's so funny? I'm the picture of manly grace and beauty.

LADY PILFER: If the girl is near-sighted. (Greedily.) What's in it for me?

WHIPLASH: Keep your mouth shut about her inheritance and we'll split fifty-fifty. As Lotta's husband I'll control her fortune.

LADY PILFER: How do I know I can trust you? You'd steal the pennies from a dead man's eyes and then come back for the eyeballs.

LAVINA: (LAVINIA LAGOON, a determined woman dedicated to stamping out the evils of demon rum and rotgut whiskey, ENTERS LEFT. She carries a sign which reads: DOWN WITH DEMON RUM. LAVINIA marches DOWN CENTER, singing forcefully. Tune/"Ta-Ra-Ra Boom-De Ay!, Page 30.)

Down, down with demon rum, beer, gin, and whiskey, too.
Up, up, with temperance, that is the thing to do.
Burn the gin mills and stills, liquor is bad for you.
Up, up with temperance, and we will start a-new.
(Repeat.)
 Burn the gin mills and stills,
 Liquor is bad for you.
 Up, up with temperance,
 And we will start a-new . . .

LADY PILFER: She holds a note longer than a bank.
LAVINIA: I've been singing ever since I was two.
WHIPLASH: No wonder your voice is hoarse.
LAVINIA: (Dramatically.) A terrible rumor is spreading like
 prairie fire. Someone plans to build a saloon in Death Valley.
(WHIPLASH and LADY PILFER express horror.) There is no
 evil that can compare with the consumption of alcoholic bever-
 ages. Oh, I can hear the little voices of future orphans as
 they stand outside the swinging doors of foul saloons. (A
 babyish voice, very exaggerated.) "Father, dear father, come
 home with me now. There's no food on the table and mother
 is weeping." (Shift in mood.) John Barleycorn and Demon
 Rum have destroyed many a happy family. When you spill
 beer on a stove what do you get?
WHIPLASH: Foam on the range.
LAVINIA: Who are you?
WHIPLASH: Pick a card, any card. (He picks up deck from
 table, fans it.)
LAVINIA: (Takes a card, reads:) "Whiplash Snivel . . . E
 Squirrel."
WHIPLASH: That's "Esquire"! ESQUIRE!
LAVINIA: (Reads.) "Opera Tunes". (WHIPLASH sighs, gives up.)
LADY PILFER: What is your name, madam?
LAVINIA: I am Lavinia Lagoon. I head the Temperance League.
 Who are you?
LADY PILFER: I am Lady Pilfer.
LAVINIA: Lady? You mean like in nobility? Kings and queens
 and such?
LADY PILFER: Precisely. My late husband was Lord Pilfer.
LAVINIA: (Impressed, overcome with admiration, LAVINIA goes
 into an absurd bow . . . dropping to one knee, gushing.)
LAVINIA: Your Highship!
WHIPLASH: Doesn't take much to impress the local yokels.
 Lotta's money is as good as mine. (To Audience.) Probably
 better. (LOTTA ENTERS RIGHT, fanning herself with a
 handkerchief.) Ah, Sweet Lotta Bliss.
LAVINIA: (Gets to her feet.) Royalty! In Death Valley! I
 must spread the news!
WHIPLASH: Do.
LADY PILFER: I'll leave you to your work, Whiplash. Come, Miss Lagoon. I will walk with you. (LADY PILFER EXITS LEFT. LAVINIA remains awed by the presence of "nobility", follows after LADY PILFER.)

LAVINIA: I feel like such a peasant.

WHIPLASH: You said it, I didn't. (LAVINIA is OUT.)

LOTTA: Suddenly the heat proved too much.

WHIPLASH: (Springs to his feet and embraces LOTTA.) Poor, poor Lotta. Young and alone. I cannot bear the thought of you facing life's travails with no husband to guide you. Marry me.

LOTTA: (Manages to pull away.) Sir, you forget yourself.

WHIPLASH: Rubbish. I have the memory of an elephant. (To Audience.) And a trunk waiting to be stuffed with money. Hee, hee, hee. (To LOTTA, trying to sound sincere.) My proposal is in your best interest. The American West can be a cruel place, and you are not yet a citizen.

LOTTA: If I mistook your motives, I apologize. But I am in love with another.

WHIPLASH: I am a man of the world. If you won't marry me for love, marry me for convenience.

LOTTA: Whatever are you talking about?

WHIPLASH: If you marry me I won't throw Auntie Hush and her miserable orphans into the street. The choice is yours.

You alone will be responsible for their fate.

LOTTA: (Overcome by the problem, her hand goes to her forehead as she ponders her dilemma. Speaks to Audience.) Alas, what am I to do?

WHIPLASH: (Once again, seizes LOTTA in his arms. To resist him she bends backwards as far as possible, breathing heavily in despair.) Marry me and save the orphans.

LOTTA: No, no, no.

WHIPLASH: Hee, hee, hee. (THEY continue to struggle.)

JACK: (JACK SUNSHINE ENTERS LEFT.) Unhand that young woman. (JACK SUNSHINE is a handsome young fellow. Strong, sturdy, noble. He carries a suitcase and if the costume crew can come up with it . . . a fur coat.)

WHIPLASH: (Startled by the interruption, WHIPLASH releases LOTTA and she drops to the floor with a thud.) Who are you?

JACK: Who are you?

WHIPLASH: I asked you first.

JACK: (Chest out.) My name is John Sunshine. Most folks call me Jack. Jack Sunshine. (As dialogue is exchanged, LOTTA picks herself up from the floor.) I am a travelling salesman.

LOTTA: (To Audience, recognizing JACK.) Garlic! (Hearing this, WHIPLASH takes out his mouth freshener, squirts.)
JACK: I sell wash-and-wear furs.
WHIPLASH: How's business?
JACK: Terrible.
WHIPLASH: Death Valley in August is not the best market for furs. It's too hot.
JACK: Do you think that's why I haven't sold any?
WHIPLASH: (To Audience.) What a pinhead! He'd look for eggs in a cuckoo clock.
LOTTA: Jack!
JACK: (Shocked to see her, he drops the suitcase, opens his arms for an embrace.) LOTTA!
LOTTA: Jack Jack!
JACK: Lotta! Lotta!
WHIPLASH: I can see you two wish to be alone. If you'll excuse me. (WHIPLASH starts to EXIT RIGHT, stops UPSTAGE by table. Turns his back to Audience, holds his cape wide like a giant bat and drops. So much for "camouflaging his presence".)
LOTTA: I never expected to see you again.
JACK: (Gives a loud wounded cry and throws himself into a chair at the table.) I left you waiting at the church. I am a despicable cad. What must you think of me? (Sobbing, he bangs his head to the table.)
LOTTA: Why, Jack, why?
JACK: (Bawling.) Why, Jack, why!
LOTTA: Why did you say you loved me and then desert me?
(NOTE: She pronounces "desert" like the sandy wilderness. She then corrects herself.) I mean desert me?
JACK: I'm no good.
LOTTA: Allow me to be the judge of that.
JACK: (Lifts his head.) O.K. (As LADY PILFER did with her recital, he speaks rapidly, taking a deep breath between each line.) Some other salesmen at the Garlic Hotel wished to celebrate the occasion of my coming marriage. (Breath.) They produced a bottle. (Breath.) I protested that I never allowed alcohol to pass my lips. (Breath.) Alas, when the bottle was opened I smelled that wicked, yet tempting, aroma. I was . . . attracted! (Breath.) I took a sip.
LOTTA: (Horrified.) Enough, Jack, enough!
JACK: Another sip. (Breath.) Another! (Breath.) Yet another! (To each revelation LOTTA reacts emotionally with appropriate tragic gestures.) I awoke three days later . . . broken, ashamed, disgusted. (Breath.) I dared not face you. I was unworthy. (Breath.) That demon in the bottle was too strong for me. (He begins to sob and wail outrageously.)
LOTTA: (Hurries to him, drops to one knee.) Poor, poor Jack. If I had but known! Although you are weak, I am strong.
I would have saved you.

JACK: Too late! Too late!

LOTTA: Trust me, Jack. I am stronger than any demon in a bottle. (Again, JACK sobs and wails. LOTTA, still on her knees, embraces him. He continues to sob silently as he and LOTTA freeze in position. LADY PILFER ENTERS LEFT. WHIPLASH stands.)

WHIPLASH: This is better than I hoped for. (He waves LADY PILFER to his side.)

LADY PILFER: I came back to tell you I don’t like your idea.

WHIPLASH: Don’t be stupid.

LADY PILFER: She’ll never marry you.

WHIPLASH: I agree. She prefers to marry a salesman. (Points to JACK.) That idiot sells fur coats... in August... in Death Valley! He should send his wits out to be sharpened.

LADY PILFER: I’d like a fur coat.

WHIPLASH: I’ll get you a rifle and a trap. Lotta doesn’t have to marry me because I’ve got a better idea.

LADY PILFER: What?

WHIPLASH: Watch? (HE MOVES CENTER, cups his ear, leans RIGHT.) Hark, someone is calling Sweet Lotta Bliss. Sounds like Auntie Hush.

LOTTA: (Stands.) Calling me?

WHIPLASH: Yes.

LOTTA: I go, Jack. But return I shall. (LOTTA hurries OFF, RIGHT.)

WHIPLASH: Good gracious, I’m thirsty. This heat!

JACK: (Stops sobbing, lifts his head.) You never did tell me your name.

WHIPLASH: (Steps to table, fans the cards.) Pick a card, any card.

JACK: (Picks card, reads.) “Whiplash Snivel. E Squirrel”.

WHIPLASH: (Exasperated, WHIPLASH looks at the card.) What do you know? It does say “E Squirrel”. That’s what I get for going out with a printer’s daughter. She wasn’t even my type. You will share a friendly drink with Lady Pilfer and myself.

JACK: NO!


JACK: I don’t drink in satchels. (LADY PILFER CROSSES to satchel, opens it, takes out a wine bottle.)

WHIPLASH: It’s only wine.

JACK: It’s the same as demon rum and rotgut whiskey.

LADY PILFER: Certainly not. Wine is completely different. (She sets the bottle in front of JACK.)
WHIPLASH: Demon rum might be demon rum and rotgut whiskey might be rotgut whiskey, but wine is sublime. (He uncorks the bottle.) Inhale the delicate aroma.

JACK: NO! (JACK’S body tenses, his eyes bulge as he stares uncontrollably at the bottle.)

WHIPLASH: Come, Lady Pilfer. Romance is in the air.
LADY PILFER: (Sniffs.) I don’t smell anything.

WHIPLASH: (Snarls.) We will DANCE.
LADY PILFER: Dee-lighted. (THEY dance, waltzing about as THEY sing the lyrics to create a lighthearted mood that will induce JACK to take that fatal sip. Round and round THEY go. Tune/“The Band Played On“, Page 31.)

Liquid so bright, it’s so heady, so light,
And so drink, drink, drink.
A man’s true delight for the day or the night
And so drink, drink, drink.
Oh, just take one small drink, oh, yes, just one small
drink, Jack, and there will be nothing you lack.
For wine will bring zest, Jack,
The best, yes, the best,
For all your day.

(JACK can resist no longer! With a spiralling wail of despair he seizes the bottle and with gurgling sounds he . . . GULPS! VILLAINS laugh wickedly at his downfall. OTHERS, except for LOTTA, run in from RIGHT. [NOTE: If the playing area is small, DIRECTOR need not bring everyone on stage. Simply bring in two or three and divide lines accordingly.] LAVINIA, still carrying her sign, runs in from LEFT. CAST positions itself for the best stage picture, meaning . . . uncluttered.)

JANUARY: What was that terrible wail?

FEBRUARY: Sounded like a coyote down in a well.

MARCH: Or someone who ate mush! (Poor JACK is in a terrible state. His eyes roll, he chuckles, he hiccups, he gulps from the bottle.)

WHIPLASH: Only some poor drunken sot, screaming out in agony for the dubious pleasures of the bottle. I pity him. (ALL react with a gesture of distaste.)

LAVINIA: Another victim!

LOTTA: (Pushes her way in, RIGHT.) What is it, what’s happening?

LADY PILFER: (Points to JACK.) See for yourself.

JACK: (Grins stupidly, his speech slurred.) ‘Allo, Sweet Lotta.

LOTTA: Jack!

LADY PILFER: A drunken beast.
LOTTA: This is the man I was to marry. (General reaction.)
AD LIBS: Marry?
     Him?
     Poor thing.
     Etc.
FEBRUARY: I had an uncle once who drank a whole bottle of varnish.
LAVINIA: That's too bad.
FEBRUARY: No, he had a lovely finish.
WHIPLASH: They do say that the love of a good woman will save a man who is lost to the lure of the bottle.
LAVINIA: This is very true.
WHIPLASH: (Speaks fast to LADY PILFER, sotto.) If I can't control the wife I'll control her husband. Either way I'll get that fortune.
LADY PILFER: (Already knowing the answer. Aloud.) But where would you find such a self-sacrificing girl?
NELL: Might try the Sears Roebuck catalog.
LADY PILFER: No girl could be so noble.
LOTTA: Wait! (She CROSSES to JACK who is in a drunken stupor, a foolish grin on his handsome and noble face.) The love of a good woman WILL save Jack Sunshine! I am that woman.
FEATHERTOP: Sweet Lotta Bliss too good to be true.
LOTTA: (Eyes lowered.) I know. (ALL cheer, applaud.) Let's go to the church at once.
AUNTIE HUSH: We'll have a party to celebrate. (ORPHANS cheer.) Mush is on the house. (ORPHANS groan.)
NELL: Good place for it.
LOTTA: Come, Jack. To the nuptials! (ALL cheer. CUSPIDOR and NELL help JACK to his feet. He still clutches the wine bottle, that idiotic grin still beaming. THEY drag him OFF.)
WHIPLASH: (Pulls LADY PILFER DOWNSTAGE as MOB begins to EXIT LEFT.) Liquor will be his downfall. He'll do anything to get it.
LADY PILFER: And we'll be there to get what he's got.
WHIPLASH: And he's got Sweet Lotta's fortune. (Triumphant, THEY shake hands and follow OTHERS. ALL sing . . .)
     Down, down with demon rum, beer, gin, and whiskey, too.
     Up, up with temperance, that is the thing to do.
     Burn the gin mills and stills, liquor is bad for you.
     Up, up with temperance, and we will start a-new.

END OF ACT ONE

End of Script Sample
PRODUCTION NOTES

ON STAGE: Table and chairs, bench, another table, bowls, spoons, dinner bell. Additional "atmospheric" props as desired.

BROUGHT ON, ACT ONE: Kettle, large spoon or ladle (AUNTIE HUSH), pistols (NELL), parasol (LOTTA), satchel containing wine bottle; sunglasses, pen, walking stick, coin, playing cards, legal document (WHIPLASH), sign reading: "Down With Demon Rum" (LAVINIA), suitcase containing a fur piece (JACK), optional fur coat (JACK).

BROUGHT ON, ACT TWO: Marriage agreement, sheet of paper (LADY PILFER), dusty bridal bouquet (AUNTIE HUSH - placed behind UPSTAGE table), policeman's badge (FEATHERTOP).

COSTUMES: The usual "mellerdrammer" odds and ends. Anything requiring special attention is described in text as character makes an appearance.

PIANO SUGGESTIONS: Director may wish to introduce characters by some musical theme (Entrance of LOTTA, FEATHERTOP, WHIPLASH, JACK, etc.) A piano "overture" of old time melodies is always a great "mood setter".

FLEXIBLE CASTING: Don't be afraid to switch characters to fit the needs of your individual production. Many roles can be played either male or female: NELL can be played by a male performer (name change to ED, etc.) CUSPIDOR by a female, the ORPHANS can be played as all-female, etc. If extra orphans are used some might even be small children.

ADDED BUSINESS: If there's an intermission break, ORPHANS might circulate through the audience with tin cups, muttering: "Something for the orphans" . . . "Help save Death Valley Orphanage", etc.

If refreshments are served, the punch bowl might be labelled "Auntie Hush Mush". A tray of cupcakes or doughnuts can be labelled "Buzzard Croquettes" or "Death Valley Delights".
MOTHER WAS A REAL FINE LADY
(To the tune of "Wait For The Sun Shines, Nellie")

LOTTA:

MOTHER WAS A REAL FINE LADY, BLUE BLOOD, YES, AND
GENTLE BORN. FATHER WAS A BLOODY RATTER,
DUSK 'TILL DAWN —. MOM ALWAYS HAD HIGH
STATION, TEA AND PICTURE HATS. DAD EARNED HIS
DAILY BREAD A-KILLING RATS.

DOWN WITH DEMON RUM
(To the tune of "Ta-Ra-Ra Boom-De Ay!")

LAVINIA:

DOWN, DOWN WITH DEMON RUM, BEER, GIN, AND WHISKEY, TOO.
UP, UP WITH TEMPERANCE, THAT IS THE THING TO DO.
BURN THE GIN MILLS AND STILLS, LIQUOR IS BAD FOR YOU.
UP, UP WITH TEMPERANCE, AND WE WILL START AGAIN.
LIQUID SO BRIGHT
(To the tune of "The Band Played On")

LADY PILFER: (1)
LADY PILFER + WHIPLASH(2)

LIQUID SO BRIGHT, IT'S SO HEAVY, SO LIGHT, AND SO DRINK, DRINK,

DRINK — A MAN'S TRUE DELIGHT FOR THE DAY OR THE NIGHT AND SO

DRINK DRINK DRINK — OH JUST TAKE ONE SMALL DRINK, OH YES, JUST ONE SMALL

DRINK, JACK, AND THERE WILL BE NOTHING YOU LACK FOR WINE WILL BRING

DRINK, JACK, OR THERE WILL BE NO TURNING BACK FOR WINE WOULDN'T BRING

ZEST, JACK, THE BEST, YES, THE BEST, FOR ALL YOUR DAY

ZEST, JACK, BUT WOE TO YOU, YES, FOR ALL YOUR DAYS
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