

The Flutter Of The Goldleaf

BY Olive Tilford Dargan
and Frederick Peterson

A PLAY IN ONE ACT

CHARACTERS

PHILO WARNER, *a student*

HIRAM WARNER, *his father, the village grocer*

MARY ANN WARNER, *his mother*

DR. BELLOWS, *the village physician*

DR. SEYMOUR, *a city specialist*

REBA SLOAN, *a neighbor's daughter*

THE FLUTTER OF THE GOLDLEAF

SCENE: Laboratory in the attic of the Warner cottage. At right, toward rear, entrance from down-stairs. A rude partition, left, with door in centre. Window centre rear. Large kitchen table loaded with apparatus. Shelves, similarly loaded, against wall near table, right. Wires strung about. A rude couch, bench, and several wooden chairs.

Time, about 8 p.m. Lamp burns on table. MRS. WARNER comes up-stairs, puts her head inside the room nervously, then enters and looks about.

Mrs. W.

Such a mess! And the doctors will be here in half an hour! (Tries to get busy but seems bothered. Crosses to table and looks at a little machine that stands upon it.) That's what's driving my boy crazy! If I only dared to smash it! The right sort of a mother would do just that! (Looks at machine with dire meditation.)

Warner (without, roaring up the stairs)

Mary Ann!

Mrs. W. (jumps)

Yes, Hiram!

Warner (entering)

Where's Philo?

Mrs. W.

In the orchard. I watched my chance, and thought I'd redd up a little. He won't let me touch anything when he's here.

Warner

Just about lives up here, don't he?

Mrs. W.

Day and night now, since he's been too sick to go to the store. And I can't have Dr. Bellows bring in that specialist from New York with things lookin' as if a woman had never come up the stairs. (*Dusting and rattling.*)

Warner

Philo's not onto what the doctors are after, is he?

Mrs. W.

He thinks they're coming to look at his machine mostly--and see what's keepin' him awake nights. But maybe he knows. He's awful sharp.

Warner

Sharp? Wish he knew enough to sell eggs and bacon. He's ruinin' my business. Weighs a pound of coffee as if he was asleep. I can see

customers watchin' him out o' the tail o' their eye. They're gettin' *afraid* of him! Mary Ann, the boy's going to be a shame to us. He's crazy!

Mrs. W.

Don't you call *my* boy crazy. I won't hear it, Hiram.

Warner

No, you'll wait till the whole village tells you! They're all talkin' now!

Mrs. W.

It's none o' their business!

Warner

It'll be their business if he flies up and hurts somebody.

Mrs. W.

Philo wouldn't hurt anything alive. He got mad at me once for killin' a spider.

Warner (scornfully)

Showed his sense there, didn't he?

Mrs. W.

If Philo's queer it's not from my side of the house. You know what your mother was like--wanderin' round nights starin' at the stars with that old spy-glass Captain Barker gave her.

Warner

She was a good mother, all the same.

Mrs. W.

Couldn't cook at all. Your father only kept alive by eating at the neighbors occasionally--and as for sewing and mending, you children went in rags till your Aunt Sary came to live with you.

Warner

Mother thought a heap of us, though. I remember how she cried because I wouldn't go to school and went into the grocery business. And she cried a lot more when I married you. I couldn't understand her--*then....*

Mrs. W.

Humph! She'd been shut up fast enough if your father hadn't been the softest-hearted man alive.

Warner

Maybe the boy does take after her, but he's worse'n she ever was.

Mrs. W.

She didn't have any books--or college education--to turn her head.

Warner

Nothing to read but the *Weekly Mirror*. It was a good paper, though, all about crops and stock, and what the country people were doing, and a love story on the inside page. Father subscribed on her account. She told him her mind had to have *something* to work on. But she didn't take to the paper, and he had to read it himself to get his money's worth.

Mrs. W.

A good thing she didn't have a library to get at like Philo. All those books he brought home didn't do him any good. He began to get queer about the time he was reading that set of Sir Humphry Davy's Complete Works, with so much about electrics and the stars, and that

sort of stuff. If we could only get him to quit this studyin' and stay out-o'-doors....

Warner

S'pose we clear out this hole--burn the books, and get rid of all these confounded wires and jars and fixings. I don't believe he saves a penny of the wages I give him for helpin' to ruin me. All he makes goes for this truck. We'll clear it out.

Mrs. W.

I've thought of that, but we oughtn't to go too far. They're his anyhow, and I'm afraid----

Warner

Well, I'm not afraid! And I'll begin with this devil! (*Pauses over machine. Starts suddenly.*) What's that? He's coming!

Mrs. W. (listening)

It's only Alice going to her room.

Warner

Perhaps we'd better see what the specialist says first.

Mrs. W.

I know Dr. Bellows wants us to send Philo away. But I'm against that, first and last.

Warner

You wouldn't be if you'd listen to Bellows awhile. You know what he told me when I met him this morning? "Why, Warner," he says, "I never go to see the boy without taking a pair of handcuffs in my pocket. It's the quiet ones that go the wildest when they do break out."

Mrs. W.

Oh, Hiram, it's not going to be so bad as that. Don't let him set you against your own flesh and blood. Just let me manage awhile. He needs to get stirred up about something--get his mind off this. I wish I hadn't stopped those letters he was getting from Reba Sloan when she went off to school two years ago.

Warner

But you said you'd rather see him dead than married to Sloan's girl.

Mrs. W.

I meant it, too! But seeing your child dead is not so bad as seeing him crazy--and if Reba can save him----

Warner

How in thunder----

Mrs. W.

She's a taking girl, Hiram--since she got back. If Philo gets his mind fixed on *her*, she'll soon have him forgettin' this. Why,--you remember for three months before we were married you couldn't think o' nothing but me.

Warner

Good Lord! Is that so, Mary Ann?

Mrs. W.

I had to hurry up the weddin' to save your business. You were letting Jabe McKenny take all your trade right under your nose.

Warner

Sakes 'a' mighty! If I could come out of a spell like that, there's some hope for our poor chap.

Mrs. W.

That's what I'm telling you!

Warner

But Reba's father--you going to have old fiddler Sloan in the family?

Mrs. W.

He's come into some money now, and any gentleman can take an interest in music.

Warner

And the mother was that foreign woman.

Mrs. W.

But she's dead. It's just as well Philo won't have a mother-in-law.

Warner

Reba'll have one, all right. If Philo stays queer it'll be hard on the girl, won't it?

Mrs. W.

He'll not stay queer. If he gets that girl in his head there won't be room for anything else--for a while anyway. He'll be worse'n you ever was. You let me manage it, Hiram.

(PHILO is heard coming up the stairs. They listen in silence until he enters. He is talking, not quite audibly, to himself, and doesn't see them. Goes to table and stands by machine.)

Philo

Here--at last--I have caught the word ... the word of the stars.

Mrs. W.

Philo!

Philo (looking up)

Mother!... Father!... (*In alarm.*) You haven't touched anything here?

Mrs. W.

No, my son. I've just put the place to rights a bit. Dr. Seymour is coming, you know.

Philo

Yes. (*Walks the floor, meditating.*)

Warner

You must come out of this dream, Philo.

Philo

It is not a dream! I am the only being in the world who is awake!

Mrs. W.

My son!

Philo

Man sleeps--like the rocks, trees, hills--while all around him, out of the unseen, beating on blind eyes, deaf ears, numbed brain, sweep the winds of eternity, the ether waves, the signals from the deeps of space!

Warner

Hey, diddle, diddle!

Philo

Sleep-walkers all--the people in the streets, the shops--the mad people with their heaps of gold!

Mrs. W.

Now don't work yourself up, Philo, with the doctor coming. You want to tell him about your machine.

Philo

Yes. He is a great man. He has studied these things. I will talk to him. He will not laugh.

Warner

Mary Ann, don't you think we'd better bring up some cider? It'll look more hospitable like.

Mrs. W.

That city doctor won't care anything about cider.

Warner

My cider's good enough for anybody! And Dr. Bellows'll be sure to ask for it.

Mrs. W.

Well, wait till he does. (*Looks uneasily about room.*) Don't you think, son, that if you're going to take to having visitors here I'd better move some furniture up? You could have the haircloth sofa--the springs are broke anyway--and Alice says she don't want the wax flowers in the parlor any more. They're turnin' yellow, but you wouldn't notice it up here.

Philo (clutching his hands)

Do what you like, mother, only don't take anything *out*. If anything happened to my work I believe I'd go crazy!

(The parents look at each other.)

Warner

Thought your work was tendin' the store.

Philo

Brother Will is more help there than I am, father.

Warner

You're right about that. Will's got a head on.

Mrs. W.

You'd better go down, Hiram, and meet the doctors.

Warner

Alice'll show them up.

Mrs. W.

Where's that strange smell comin' from? Do you work in the other room, too, Philo? *(Goes in, left.)*

Philo

Father ... I'm sorry about the store ... I wish I could tell you ... but what's the use? You won't believe!

(Re-enter MRS. W.)

Mrs. W.

Gracious! I couldn't breathe in there! Got to clear *something* out before Reba comes up here. She'd have no respect for my housekeeping.

Philo

Reba?

Mrs. W.

Reba Sloan. She's been asking if she couldn't come. She's just wild to see your machine.

Philo

Don't you ever let her up here, mother!

Mrs. W.

But she asked me, Philo--and a neighbor's daughter, you know----

Philo

I thought she was away from home.

Mrs. W.

Been back a month--walks all about right under your eyes. You ought to be *civil*, Philo.

Philo

I want to see Dr. Seymour. I should like to have him know what I'm doing. But if you're going to turn the whole village in here, I'll bar the door, that's all.

Mrs. W.

My son, if you'd only interest yourself a little----

Philo

I'm not interested in anything nearer than thirty-five million miles!

Warner

What did I tell you, Mary Ann?

Mrs. W.

I hear the doctors! Now, Philo, if you can't talk sense, don't say *anything*.

(Enter SEYMOUR and BELLOWS.)

Bellows

Good evening, Warner. How d' do, Mrs. Warner! My friend, Dr. Seymour.

Warner and Mrs. W.

How do you do, sir!

Bellows

Philo, I've brought Dr. Seymour around to have a talk with you. He's down from New York for a day or two. Been sleeping any better?

Philo

Too much. I need all my time. I'm very glad to see you, Dr. Seymour.

(All take seats.)

Mrs. W.

I hope you'll excuse the looks of the room, doctor.

Seymour

It looks very interesting indeed to me, Mrs. Warner. The workshop of a student, and a busy one. (*To PHILO.*) You've been working too hard, I see.

Philo

I'm tired, perhaps, but I am well. When a man makes a momentous discovery he is apt to be overwrought. He may not eat or sleep well for a time. He may even appear to be strange or mad.

(*MRS. W. coughs suddenly.*)

Mrs. W.

I'm afraid that's not a comfortable chair, Dr. Seymour.

Seymour

Quite comfortable, Mrs. Warner.

Mrs. W. (rapidly)

Philo is my oldest boy, and I never could keep him away from books. Will, my second son, is as steady in the store as his father himself, and Johnny is just fine on the wagon. As for Alice, there's not a neater all-round girl to be found anywhere. They're healthy, sensible children, every one of 'em, and don't care what's inside any book in the world-- but Philo was just bent on going to college----

Seymour

A very natural bent for an ambitious boy.

Bellows

Tell us about the discovery, Philo, my lad.

Philo (rising and walking slowly up and down the room)

I think I will. It will be another experiment. I know what the effect will be on Dr. Bellows. He is an old friend of mine--but you, sir, are a stranger. I should like to try your mind and see if you are awake or asleep.

(BELLOWS winks toward SEYMOUR, who takes no notice, but gives PHILO careful attention.)

Seymour

I hope I shall not disappoint you.

Philo

I believe we have some points of view in common, for your profession needs to take note of many problems connected with both evolution and electricity. I have been a reader of general science for many years. The fact that on the earth we have had a slow evolution from a monad to a man contains a promise of further development of man into--let us say an angel.

Bellows

Not very soon, I guess.

Philo (sharply)

Hardly in your day, doctor. You needn't worry about the fashion in wing-feathers.

Seymour

Go on, Mr. Warner.

Philo

In others of the many millions of globes about us in space, a similar evolution is going on, and in some the evolution is less advanced than in ours, in others incomparably more advanced.

Seymour

We may admit that.

(BELLOWS looks to WARNER for sympathy, and shakes his head.)

Philo

We have reached a stage when we have begun to peer out into the stellar depths and question them. We are beginning to master the light and the lightning, to measure the vastness of space, to weigh the suns, to determine the elements that comprise them, to talk and send messages thousands of miles without wires. Each year uncovers new wonders, infinitely minute, infinitely great.

Seymour

True,--all true.

Philo (becoming more repressed and tensely excited as he goes on)

The dreams of the alchemists are being realized. That machine yonder detects the waves from a millionth of a millionth of a milligramme of radium.

Seymour

What!

Philo

I have invented a tuned electroscope that would be destroyed by such waves, so sensitive as to react only to waves from an inconceivable distance, beyond thirty-five million miles.

Seymour (trying to take it in)

Thirty-five million miles!

Philo (with great tension)

Three weeks ago I made this instrument, and ever since then, at regular intervals, there have been rhythmic flutterings of the goldleaf, regular repetitions, as if it were knocking at the door of earth from the eternal silences. I have watched it--the same measured fluttering--two beats--then three--then two--then four and a pause! It is a studied measure! It has meaning! When I first noticed it--the faint flutter of the goldleaf--and knew that any waves from a nearer point than thirty-five million miles would utterly destroy so delicate an instrument--my hair stood on end. I have watched it three weeks--alone--and you ask me why I do not sleep!... Look!

(The doctors spring up electrified, and stare at the instrument.)

Philo

There it is again! Two beats--then three--then two--then four--now it is over!

(SEYMOUR continues to stare at the instrument. BELLOWS subsides into a chair, looking foolish.)

Seymour (to himself)

Impossible!... *(To PHILO.)* What was it you were saying? What did you see?

Philo

I saw what you saw--signals from a distance farther than the distance of the nearest planet to our earth.

Seymour (shaken)

But I saw nothing. At least a slight movement in anything so sensitive might be due to many causes....

Philo

Yes! It is always the old story. Truths must be hammered into humanity! Branded in with flame, or driven in with sword and bullet!

Bellows (starting up alarmed)

Hadn't we better be going, doctor?

Philo

Oh, no! Wait till you've talked me over. Decide whether I'm mad or not! If I'm a menace to the community! If I must be locked up! My father and mother are waiting to know. Don't go! Finish your work!
(Rushes into room, left.)

Bellows (triumphantly to SEYMOUR)

Well?

(SEYMOUR hesitates, looks at the father and mother, then at BELLOWS, and takes out his match-case.)

Bellows (making a conquest of the obvious)

Warner, a little of that fine cider of yours would just finish off our chat.

Warner

Nothing better! *(Starting out, whispers to MRS. W.)* Where's grandma's silver pitcher?

Mrs. W.

I'll get *that*.

(They go down-stairs.)

Bellows (laughing)

She never lets him go to the cellar by himself.

Seymour

Not a drinker, is he?

Bellows

Oh, no! The pattern of a deacon. But she keeps her hand on.

(SEYMOUR *lights a cigar thoughtfully.*)

Bellows

No use to go over this case. It's clear enough. We'll have our cider--it's worth waiting for--then go to my office and fix up the commitment papers.

Seymour (rubbing his hand slowly over his forehead)

To talk with such a patient sometimes bewilders the brain. He seemed so clear in his utterance--so rational----

Bellows

Funny, wasn't he? I almost believed it myself for a minute.

Seymour

It might be true.

Bellows

Hey?

Seymour

Perhaps we are all somnambulists moving about in this dream-world we call practical life. Behind this tough matter that takes so many shapes and colors, what strange secrets are hidden, just beginning to reach our dull senses--X-rays, radium emanations, wireless waves.

Bellows

Oh, they're natural enough now. Common sense has adopted them.

Seymour

Yes, we are easily satisfied. Give a mystery a name and that's enough for the most of us. But here and there are minds that must explore further; and if they discover something beyond the comprehension of us who stay behind, we call them mad.

Bellows

Well, none of your mind-puzzles for me. Give me something clear cut, like typhoid, or measles, an amputation, or new babies, something I can fix my eyes on. You can take care of the madmen--except when they're in my own village. I'm not going to have a boy like Philo gibbering around ready to break out wild any time.

Seymour

It's true he may be led into frenzy, or even self-destruction, but it will be from overwork and loneliness. I must have a talk with the parents--
--

Bellows

What do you expect *them* to do? They're asking us for help. And *I'm* willing to give it to them.

(Re-enter WARNER and MRS. W. He carries pitcher, she carries tray with glasses.)

Seymour (to BELLOWS)

We'll see. As I say, the boy has been losing sleep, and giving his mind no rest.

Mrs. W. (holding tray while WARNER pours cider)

Just what I say, doctor. He's studied himself sick.

Seymour

You must get him out of here, Mrs. Warner. (*Sipping cider.*)
Excellent, indeed!

Mrs. W.

I'm doing my best.

Warner (to BELLOWS, who has drained his glass)

You're at home, doctor. Just help yourself.

(*He does.*)

Seymour

What is his age?

Mrs. W.

Twenty. He went early to college.

Seymour (musingly)

The usual age. Twenty. (*Sighs.*) The age of visions and enchantments.
"The thoughts of youth are long, long thoughts."

Bellows

What are you saying, doctor?

Seymour

Just thinking. It's a healthy family, isn't it?

Mrs. W.

I should say! Why, Will and Johnny and Alice----

Bellows

Best sort. The thoroughbreds of the town. Temperate, thriving, regular at church. Warner here was once county supervisor. (*Clapping him on shoulder.*) Never had a better one.

Seymour (to WARNER)

And your parents?

Warner

Father was a sound, practical man. Stood flat-footed, I may say.

Seymour

And your mother?

Mrs. W.

Law me, Hiram Warner thinks there was never anybody in the world like his mother. And there never *was*!

Seymour

That's good to build on. It is clear that your boy is ill, and the burden of his knowledge, whether truth or delusion, is far too great for him to bear. If you could interest him for even a brief time in ordinary life-- (*smiling*) miracles that are too common to be disturbing--throw him with young people----

Bellows

You don't mean you won't sign the commitment papers!

Seymour

Just that. I shall not sign them.

Mrs. W. (gratefully)

Oh, doctor!

Bellows

After what you saw here with your own eyes? He's completely gone off!

Seymour

The boy may be right. Under this tiny consciousness of ours lie vast fields of subconscious intelligence as yet unexplored. Beyond our earth are still greater mysteries, unimaginable, unthinkable.

Bellows (in disgust)

And I counted on your common sense!

Seymour

Common sense is itself too frail and uncertain a thing to be a criterion of sanity. The common sense of yesterday is to-day's folly, and our present common sense will be the madness of to-morrow.

Bellows

Well, I'll be--I'll wait for you down-stairs, doctor. (*Exit.*)

Seymour

The lad ought not to be in there alone. (*Goes to door.*) Philo, my boy!

(PHILO comes out. He is extremely pale, his black hair pushed from his forehead, and his eyes burning, but his manner is calm.)

Philo

Well, am I a free man?

Seymour

You are free, Philo.

Philo (perfunctorily)

Thank you, doctor.

Seymour

But you must have rest from this work. These subjects are too overwhelming for a sane brain to carry without harm. This attic is gloomy and the atmosphere unhealthy. You must have a complete change.

Philo

I see. That is your answer to my discovery. *(Turns suddenly to WARNER.)* And what do you think of it, father?

Warner

I don't seem to get hold of it, somehow, Philo. *(Crosses to machine and stares at it.)* What's the good, anyhow? They're too far away. 'Twouldn't help business.

(PHILO gives a queer laugh. WARNER opens door.)

Warner

I'll see you down-stairs, doctor. *(Exit.)*

Philo (turning to MRS. W.)

And you, mother?

Mrs. W. (bustling up and gathering tray and glasses)

I've got to set my bread. (*Crosses to machine and stares at it, holding tray.*) What'll we come to if folks in the stars begin pesterin'? We've got enough to 'tend to right here. (*Goes out muttering.*) Got to set my bread.

(SEYMOUR and PHILO look at each other and smile.)

Seymour

Won't you come down, Philo?

Philo

No. It's livelier for me up here. More to think about. But don't worry about me, doctor. I know this is the end. If I can't convince you, then all the world must think it hallucination.

Seymour

I'm not unconvinced. I simply don't know. And I'm deeply interested. But you can't stand it, Philo. Get out of this. Be young. This is for older heads. You'll have plenty of time. Get out--do anything. Fall in love--fall in love--that will give you mysteries enough for a while. Yes, I mean it--and don't forget, my dear boy, that you've interested me.

(*Shakes hands with PHILO and goes down. PHILO listens until he has reached the foot of the stairs.*)

Philo

The heavens open--the suns speak--and he is--interested! (*Closes door.*) Alone!... Fall in love! Light the candle and put out the stars!... (*Returns to his instrument.*) ... It is still.

(Steps are heard on the stairs, then a knock at the door. He crosses softly to door and shoots the bolt.)

Voice (without)

It's Reba, Philo! Won't you let me in?

(He is silent, and steps retreat.)

Philo (crossing to centre)

Reba! That folly's done with, thank God!... *(Begins walking.)*
Seymour.... I didn't know how much I was hoping from him.... It is hard, hard to go on alone. But I *must!* I can't turn back from that call. When a child cries we turn, and listen, and help. And this--*this* is the voice of a world!

(A knock is heard at door.)

Voice of WARNER

Philo!

Philo

Buzz, buzz, old bee!

Voice

Come down, son!

Philo

Please leave me alone, father. I can't bear anything more to-night.

(A pause, and WARNER goes down.)

Philo (coming to table)

I will work--work--work! (*Busies his hands.*) Not a voice to help me--not a smile of hope--not a touch of sympathy. (*Sits still and despairing.*) ... Perhaps the time is not ripe for larger knowledge. Nature and the Divinity that guides her must protect their new evolving creatures. A too sudden revelation and they might perish from sheer wonder.... Yes, truth must come softened, as a dream, to the man child's brain. Its naked light would sere and blind him forever.... But to me it has been given to see--to hear--and keep sane in the light. Oh, from what planet is the call? From what one of the hundred million spheres? How many centuries has it been sent outward to the deaf, the dumb, and the blind? And what is the word? Is it Hail? Help? Hope?... Or is it an answer? An answer to some signal of mine? How shall I know?... How shall I know?

(There is a noise outside the window. PHILO does not look up. REBA appears and leaps lightly through the windows. Advances centre. Her dress is of clinging black, relieved by a floating scarf of cloudy white. She has a mass of blonde hair, and all the charms properly belonging to her age, which is eighteen.)

Reba

Philo!

Philo (turning)

Reba!

Reba

Don't be angry.

Philo

How did you get here?

Reba

The window. Don't you remember--you showed me how to climb up once--with a ladder--the tree--and the shed roof? Oh, the things you've forgotten, Philo!

(He goes to door and unbolts it.)

Philo

You must go down, Reba. *(She does not move.)* What will mother say?

Reba (laughing)

She held the ladder for me.

Philo

Mother?

Reba

You've frightened her so. You mustn't bolt the door again. She's afraid you'll do something dreadful.

Philo

You were not afraid to come.

Reba

I like to take risks. Life's dull in this village.

Philo

How you've changed, Reba!

Reba

It's taken you long enough to find it out. I've been back a month.

Philo

You'd better go down. I'm very busy, and I've had a long interruption this evening.

Reba

I'm going to interrupt some more. Dr. Seymour says it's good for you.

Philo (angrily)

Dr. Seymour knows you've come?

Reba

Yes. He said you might like the surprise. Don't you like it, Philo?

(Comes near him. PHILO turns away and busies himself about the table and shelves as if he meant to ignore her utterly. REBA watches him, then goes to window and takes a large apple from the ledge. Comes back.)

Reba

I brought you an apple--such a love of an apple. There's a whole summer of sunsets in it. I climbed the tree myself.

Philo (not looking)

Thank you; I don't eat.

Reba

Don't eat! Well, there it is! *(Throws it on the table. He jumps to protect his instrument.)* You can lick it when you're hungry!

(He sits down and begins to work. She walks to other side of table and picks up a book.)

Reba

Oh! Our old "Swiss Family Robinson"! The very one we read together! With our names in it! You've kept it all the time! (*Hugging it.*) Dear old book! (*Turns the leaves.*) Why--the leaves are half gone!

Philo

They're handy for cleaning my wires.

(She throws the book down, and stands uncertain.)

Philo

Going, Reba? Good night!

Reba

No, I'm not going. This is my last chance. You'll bar the window tomorrow.

Philo (determinedly)

Yes, I will.

(He bends closely over his work. She lies across the table opposite, watching his movements intently. He fumbles for a tool.)

Reba

The little one? Here it is!

(Hands him a small wire tool. He stares at her face so near his own, then takes the instrument and works confusedly. Jumps up and tries to reach a jar on one of the shelves. REBA leaps onto a chair, takes the jar and hands it down. He stares, and takes jar.)

Reba (as he returns to table)

Ugh! These jars are so dirty, Philo. May I wash them for you?

Philo

Heavens, no!

Reba

Oh, *that* makes you sit up! (*Hums a little, leaps down and begins to move the things on the table.*) I'll make the table tidy for you, Philo.

Philo (grabbing her hands)

Stop!

Reba (sings, swinging his hands across the table)

"All around the mulberry bush-----"

Philo

Let go!

Reba

Why, you're holding *me*!

(*He drops her hands and goes to window, as if intending flight. She becomes subtle.*)

Reba

Dr. Seymour says you've done something wonderful, Philo. Won't you show me your machine?

Philo

No.

Reba

But I *care*! I care more than anybody! I *want* you to be great. I could sit by you all my life just watching you being great. (PHILO *smiles*. *She twirls over to him.*) And I don't *like* to be still, either.

Philo

But suppose people began to laugh at you as they do at me?

Reba

I wouldn't care. Show me the machine, Philo.

(Takes his arm and they move back to table.)

Philo

There it is.

Reba (hovering over it)

This is it. *(Throwing her head back.)* Tell me about it.

Philo

Reba--your throat is--so white.

Reba (bending suddenly over machine)

There's something moving.

Philo

So white.

Reba

Two--one--two, three----

(PHILO goes to door and flings it open.)

Philo

Reba, go down!

(She crosses to door, shuts it, and stands with her back against it.)

Reba

Not till we've had a talk, Philo. I've a right to it after what you said two years ago--when I went away to school. Have you forgotten it? Shall I tell you what you said?

Philo

No!

Reba

You said you loved me, Philo. And I believed it for two years. When I came back you were silent. I've tried to make you speak--I've got in your way--I've done everything nice girls don't do--because--I love you as much as you love *that!* *(Waves her hand toward the machine.)*

Philo

Don't say it. It can't be true. No woman could love so much as that. *(Goes back to table.)*

Reba (following him)

I don't ask you to love me. But let me come here and sit by you sometimes. I could be happy then--though I don't *like* to be still. I was going to a dance to-night.

Philo

A dance!

Reba

But I knew you were up here alone--and I had heard--oh, my dear!--that they were going to send you away. I couldn't bear it. I *had* to come. Oh, Philo, they shall not send you away! Dr. Seymour says all you need is a new interest.

Philo

To dance, perhaps!

Reba

Well--why not? It is fun. We were to be in fancy dress, and I was going as Night. See--(*waving her scarf*) this is my cloud--and my hair is the moon! I washed it to-day so it would be fluffy. Just see how soft it is!

Philo (touching her hair)

How fine! Will you give me a lock, Reba?

Reba

Oh, yes! Where are your scissors? Here! (*Takes scissors from table.*) You cut it, Philo. (*He takes scissors.*) Anywhere. It's curly at the neck and temples.

Philo (cutting lock)

I don't want a curl. (*Puts hair carefully in table drawer.*) I'm making a new machine and I need long hairs for some of the parts.

Reba (raging)

You sha'n't have it! You sha'n't!

(*Tries to open drawer. They struggle. She gets her arms about his neck.*)

Philo (pushing her off)

Your throat----

(Kisses it. She clings to him, and he sits down, holding her on his knee.)

Reba

I knew! I knew! Oh, Philo, you *haven't* forgotten! You remember-- everything!

Philo

Everything!

Reba

That day we went fishing and----

Philo (laughing)

Forgot the tackle!

Reba

And that last evening in the orchard, when you said----

Philo

I love you!

Reba

Oh, you look just as you did then--so happy! I nearly died when I came home and saw the change in your face. It seemed to shut me out, like a great iron door. Philo.... You won't forget again?

Philo

Never!

Reba

And I may come every day?

Philo

Every day!

Reba

I'll help you, Philo. I'll give you all my hair. (*Lays her head on his shoulder.*) And I'll let you work and not think of me at all. You can live with your stars-----

Philo (kissing her)

There are no stars!

Reba (laughing)

I'll never be jealous again! (*Gets up.*) Come! Let's see what the dinky thing is doing!

(*Goes to table. PHILO watches her, slowly repeating her name.*)

Reba

What a little thing it is! And--there *is* something fluttering!

(*PHILO crosses, still seeing nothing but the girl.*)

Reba

See--I'm trying to count--two--three-----

(*He looks down, and becomes transfixed.*)

Philo

Oh, my God! They've changed the signal!... Look, Reba! Count the beats! Count for me! Count!

Reba (confused)

Two--three--no, four----

Philo

Can't you *count*? Get away! (*Pushes her aside.*) Two--three--four--three-- They have *changed* it! Oh, I must answer!

Reba

Philo----

Philo

Go down!

Reba (clinging to him)

I won't--I won't----

Philo (putting her in a chair)

Sit there, then. And for God's sake be still! (*Returns to machine and counts under his breath.*) It is true--it is true--and I am not ready! I am dumb, like all the world! I cannot let them know! (*Walks the floor, muttering*) But I will--I must. (*Crosses to window.*) I must do it!--think of nothing else--nothing! I shall not sleep till it is done!... But they will call me mad--lock me up before I have finished, God, before I have finished!

Reba

Philo, listen!

Philo

It's the world's way ... to beat the spirit down ... the eager spirit,
superbly sane, daring to pierce the barriers between heaven and earth!

Reba

I'll not sit here! (*She sits nevertheless.*)

Philo

Oh, Truth-driven martyrs, seers of visions, prophets of the old world
and the new, born out of your time to suffer by fire, by sword, and
prison bars!

Reba (cooingly)

Dear Philo!

Philo

I too shall join you! Forerunners of the waking spirit of the world!

(REBA gets before him as he walks. Completely absorbed, he puts her
aside, absently but gently, as if she were a kitten he did not wish to
hurt.)

Philo

I must finish it--I must--before they beat me down! (*Pauses by
machine.*) There is no one but me to do it. If I fail they may have to
wait another million years--out there--working, waiting. (*Resumes
walk.*) I shall not fail. I have gone too far. God will take my part now.
Be it His own eternal sign, I will answer it!

Reba

I'll make you see me!

(*Runs to table, leaps upon it and begins a dance among the wires and
bottles. He is stunned for a moment, then rushes to her, seizes her
waist with both hands, lifts her up, and flings her to a chair.*)

Philo

Sit there, you dragon-fly! Or I'll crush you! (*Goes to window, as if for breath and air. Recovers poise.*) Let them think me mad. Up here I shall work it out. And I shall not be alone. Earth will not hear me, but the heavens will listen. (*Holds his hands toward the stars.*) My only friends!

Reba

Crush me! (*She steals up to the table, seizes a large book, and brings it down with utter destruction upon his machine. PHILO turns and sees. They face each other. She shrinks, terrified.*) Don't, Philo! (*Kneels, throwing back her head, showing the long line of her throat.*) Forgive me! It was driving you mad! I wanted to save you! Don't look like that! Forgive me, Philo!

Philo

Your throat--is--so white!

(*Seizes and chokes her. As he seizes her she gives a cry of terror. WARNER, MRS. W., SEYMOUR, and BELLOWS rush up the stairs and enter. PHILO takes his hands from the girl's throat and stands apart. She lies motionless.*)

Warner (roaring)

You've managed, Mary Ann!

Bellows (excitedly)

Who's right, now, Seymour?

(*SEYMOUR bends over REBA, listening for her heart-beat.*)

Warner (choking)

A hanging in the family!

Mrs. W.

Is she--dead?

Seymour

No. It is chiefly fear. (*Works over her body.*)

Philo (to himself)

Poor little bird! Poor little bird!

Bellows (taking a pair of handcuffs from his pocket and offering them to WARNER)

Better clap these on him. We're none of us safe.

Philo

Handcuffs, doctor? I'll make no trouble.

(*Holds out his hands and BELLOWS fastens handcuffs.*)

Bellows

It's for your own good, Philo.

Seymour

Our mistake--our mistake! Poor boy!

Bellows

Poor *girl*, I should say!

Seymour (lifting REBA)

I'll take her down-stairs. (*Carries her to door.*) I shall need you, Mrs. Warner.

(MRS. W. follows, weeping and looking back at PHILO.)

Philo

I'm all right, mother.

Mrs. W.

All right. Oh, God help him! (Exit.)

Bellows

Clean mad!

Philo (crosses, and looks down on the wreck of his machine)

Silent ... but I have heard! The divine whisper has reached me!

Bellows

That's still on his mind, you see. Better leave him up here till morning. Seymour and I will fix up the papers and take him off to-morrow. I'm sorry, Philo, but you know it's for the best.

Philo

I'll make no trouble. Don't worry, doctor.

Bellows (to himself, going)

Lord, he's cool! (*Advising WARNER, in cautiously lowered tone.*)
That's the way with the worst of them. (*Exit.*)

Warner

Want me to stay with you, Philo?

Philo

No, father.

Warner (relieved)

Good night, son. (*At door.*) Mother'll send up some blankets. (*Exit.*)

Philo

Blankets!...

(CURTAIN)