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Dramatic Publishing



LEVEE JAMES

An original full-length folk play
by
S.M. SHEPHARD-MASSAT



Dramatic Publishing

Woodstock, Illinois • England • Australia • New Zealand

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For Mr. Curtis Hicks and all the rest of the survivors.

...And for my mother.

IMPORTANT BILLING AND CREDIT REQUIREMENTS

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“LEVEE JAMES was originally produced at the
American Conservatory Theatre/San Francisco,
Carey Perloff, Artistic Director,
James Haire, Producing Director.”

LEVEE JAMES

A Play in Two Acts
For 2 Men and 1 Woman

CHARACTERS

WESLEY SLATON (“Wes”) . . . a farmer, early to mid-40s

LILY GRACE HOTERFIELD (“Lil”) . . Wes’ sister-in-law,
a ladies’ maid, early to mid-30s

FITZHUGH MARVIN Wes’ best friend, early 30s

TIME: Spring 1923.

PLACE: Senoia, Georgia.

DESCRIPTION OF INTERIOR

Furnished with the feeling of turn-of-the-century progress, i.e., a gramophone, jazz records, a radio, electricity. Indicates a fairly successful, but modest, rural family lives here. The kitchen is big enough for a good-sized family. It contains a large wooden table, matching chairs and modern appliances of that period: a new refrigerator (“icebox”), an up-to-date cookstove, running water from the sink.

NOTE: GLOSSARY AT END OF PLAY

ACT ONE

SCENE ONE

SETTING: *Friday morning. LIL HOTERFIELD and WESLEY SLATON crossing stage arm in arm. WESLEY is carrying a huge carpetbag. They stop in front yard of a prosperous farmhouse. LIL freezes; gazes at the house.*

LIL. Wait a minute. Ooh, goodness-calamity. How my sistah Clareesa woulda bragged up somethin' on this 'ere.

WES. Awh, Clareesa wouldn'ta nevah dun' no braggin' on this ole place. *(Walks toward porch.)*

LIL. Nawh, she wouldn'ta had to do tha' much. Anybody wit' eyes can see fo' theyselves. Turned this lil' shotgun shack into a sacred sight to behold.

WES *(ascends the two or three porch steps)*. Ain't no church house nor nothin' near tha' important, Lily.

LIL. Jus' yo' home. Cain't git no mo' sacred, can ya? Look like you dun' turned one house into three-foe' from the outside show, Wes. He dun' tacked on half-a-castle, honey. Wha' is you all about these days, Wesley Slaton? Wha' is you tryin' to do?

WES. Jus' livin' prosperous as I can, Lily gal.

LIL. As you can.

WES. Jus' livin' prosperous.

LIL. Keepin' holt to it while you can.

WES. Sho' 'nuff. (*Sets carpetbag down on porch.*)

LIL (*laughs*). To thank I knew you when you was livin' off love, nibblin' on my big sistah.

WES. How 'bout a cool drink, Miss Lil?

LIL. Why, thank you, Mistah Wes. (*Moves slowly toward porch examining landscape.*) Much as I enjoyed tha' lil' stroll from the station, I am 'bout parched to the teeth, suh.

WES. Wouldn'ta let cha' walk tha' far you hadn' insisted so hard.

LIL. Wannit' ta' bend down an' smell the honeysuckle e'ry otha' step, close as I could. (*Bends down; inhales a flower.*)

WES. Well, come on in 'ere, then. (*Laughs.*)

LIL. Like when I was a lil' girl.

WES. All tha' bendin' 'n honey-suckin'.

LIL. But they sho' let cha' go the way a' the raisin on transpo'tation. (*WES moves into yard; politely assists LIL. LIL stands.*)

WES. Shame on 'im.

LIL. Tha's why I'm workin' up on gettin' me a motorcar, myself. Much goin' from ma'am to ma'am I do. (*LIL and WES move toward porch.*)

WES. A motorcar? Wha' chu' need a motorcar fo'? Good as you look, I know mens'll take you anywhere you wanna go, girl. I'm 'ere to tell you. Nevah hafta git behind a single wheel in life.

LIL. Is tha' right?

WES. Actual fact.

LIL. Well, my new ma'am... (*She moves up few steps onto porch. WES picks up carpetbag.*) She got one all to 'erself. She swear by 'im. She say, "Lily, perhaps a

woman's all 'roun' independence may very well be tied to havin' a motorcar these days."

(WES opens door to living room. They enter. WES closes door behind them. LIL stands gazing at room. WES takes off hat, hangs it on coatrack near door.)

WES. Yeah. Ole Cockeyed Fitzhugh Marvin, he got a motorcar. *(Sets carpetbag down next to coatrack; enters kitchen area. LIL follows.)*

LIL. Fitzhugh Marvin.

WES. Yeah, ole Fitzhugh. 'Member him? *(Takes pistol off, puts in kitchen drawer; unbuttons cuffs, rolls up shirt sleeves.)*

LIL. Uh-huh. Cockeyed Fitzhugh.

WES. He be 'ere tomorrow lookin' ovah the lay a' the land, so to speak.

LIL. Well, I'd be glad to see 'im. Say 'e sporty?

WES. Lorr, tryin' leastways. Cockeye 'n all. We fishes on Sat'day mornins down at the creek. Afterwards, he gon' come by fo' a lil' fish fry an' say hey. How 'bout tha'? *(LIL nods and smiles.)* Good. Take yo' hat off, Lily gal. Stay awhile. *(LIL takes off hat.)* Yeah, he sho' cock-eyed, ole Fitzhugh... *(Reaches for hat.)*

LIL. Still cockeyed. *(Hands WES her hat.)*

WES. But, he got a brand new motorcar he drivin', tho'. Yes, suh. *(Takes hat.)* Preacher tells folks to keep loved ones an' they livestock off the road when you see 'im comin'. Said he gon' be dun' knocked a hole in 'is own head or somebody elses' one, but he drivin'. Yes, ma'am, he sho' drivin'. My ole truck suit me jam up, tho'.

LIL. If the tire ain't flat, don' fix it.

WES. Tha's right. Have a seat there, Miss Lil. (*LIL continues looking around kitchen. WES moves toward coat-rack.*) Now, Mamie Jane Brown, she got 'erself a motor-car, too, but she needed one 'cause 'er pie 'n cookin' bi'niss had jus' growed, an' growed an' a bi'niss woman's gots ta be able to git 'erself to 'n fro, I tole 'er. (*Hangs LIL's hat next to his.*) Like a professional. Started a real good caterin' bi'niss but carryin' aroun' all tha' hot food by hand wann't the answer. (*Goes to sink area.*) Gon' put scars all up 'n down yo' arm, Mamie, I said. An' a horse 'n buggy ain't none too up-to-date 'n prosperous in itself. Excuse me. (*Washes his hands.*) You 'member Mamie? She had a nice rest'rant in town 'foe she left.

LIL. 'Foe' she left? Where she go?

WES (*gets two glasses from cupboard next to sink*). Spivey Kaye, I suspec'. Tha's where all 'er peoples at now. (*Wipes glasses out with nearby dishtowel.*)

LIL. How long she been gone?

WES. Not long. Week.

LIL. Oh.

WES. Ten days.

LIL. Wha' about the rest'rant doin' so good you said?

WES. Well, you know. Thangs, personal sit'ations wann't workin' out. Didn' have nothin' to do wit' 'er bi'niss. Oh, 'er bi'niss was boomin'. Matter a fact, Fitzhugh dun' bought most a' 'er stuff off of 'er on time. He gon' try to open up a fish 'n chicken shack or some such. First, he got tha' car. Now, he interprisin' all ovah the place. She gon' hate she missed chu'.

LIL. Me too. (*WES goes to table with glasses; puts on overhead lamp. LIL pauses, notices kitchen table.*) You kept it. (*Moves to table, touches it; bows her head slightly.*) God bless this holy table an' all whose names are upon it. Who have come 'n gone befoe' us. In Jesus name. A-man. (*Runs her fingers along the edge.*) We started e'ry meal wit' tha' blessin'. There's Mama's name, the date she was born an' the date she died. (*Kisses her hand; lays it upon the table over spot.*) Daddy's...Clareesa's... (*Continues running fingers along edge of table.*) The date I was born... Yo' girls... (*Turns away from table full of emotion; toward icebox.*) Ooh, look at tha' icebox! Wha' kinda thang is...

WES. Top a' the line...

LIL (*opens icebox, closes it*). Baby! A sacred sight to behold.

WES. Awh, I was jus' teasin'. Bet chu' seen much fancier than tha' up in Atlanta.

LIL. Well, this 'ere is mighty big time indeed fo' these parts.

WES. Tha's the big city, tho'. E'rythang's bigger 'n better there.

LIL. You thank so?

WES. Stands to reason. Bet e'rybody 'n they stepdaddy got a new iceberg in Atlanta. Bet chu' even got one

LIL (*goes to table*). Don' bet too much upon it, Wesley.

WES (*gets pitcher from icebox*). Here, down this cool drank, then. (*WES pours water into a glass.*) Tha's wha' chu' need, city gal. A dose a' good ole spring water. (*Sets glass on table; pours one for himself.*)

LIL. You jus' said the word, brain chile. I may have arrived by train but my back would swear to ya I come by

covered wagon the whole eighty-somethin' miles.
(*Grabs her back; sits.*) Sis-in-law got a pain won' wait
fo' man nor beast. Hand me my bag, would ya, please?

WES. Sho', Lil. (*Exits. LIL exhales. WES calls from off-stage.*) You awright, gal? I got some horse liniment out
in the barn.

LIL (*laughs*). Not the horse liniment now. I b'lieve I'll
pass.

(*WES reenters with bag; hands it to LIL.*)

LIL. Thank you kindly. (*Goes into bag.*) Here I am in the
flesh, y'all. (*Pulls out a flask, pours contents into glass.*)
Ooh, good ole spring water. (*WES sits opposite LIL at
table with his glass.*)

WES. You sho' you awright, Lil?

LIL. As right as the blue in the deep blue sea, brotha'-in-
law. (*Takes a huge sip.*) Ooh, baby! You sho' 'nuff said
the word. (*WES sips from his glass.*)

WES. Been foe' years, Lil. We thought you'd 'bout fo'got
us. Matter a' fact, Eunice, she said soon as she gradu-
ated next year, she was gon' spend a lil' time, go find
'er auntie.

LIL (*goes back into carpetbag*). Did? (*Takes out a small
ashtray, cigarettes and lights up.*)

WES. Make sho' you still wit' the livin'.

LIL. Somebody woulda let cha' know if I wann't. (*WES
watches her expertise. LIL blows out smoke ring.*) Yo'
girls awright?

WES. Yeah, they awright. (*Watches the smoke ring disap-
pear.*)

LIL. Ain't nothin' wrong wit' cho' girls down 'ere?

WES. I teach 'em how to talk back; protect theyselves.

Why you askt?

LIL. Cain't nobody tell yo' girls wha' to do, can they?

WES. My girls know how to knock a man's teeth out, Lil.

Tha's wha' chu' wanna know?

LIL. Yeah, they rock-chunkin', an' ball-playin' up a storm, I hear.

WES (*smiles*). Yeah. How 'bout it? (*Sips; leans back in chair.*)

LIL. Well, them boys' games, Wes. You cain't git no decent, grown man husband knockin' hell out of 'em wit' no rocks an' no baseballs. (*Flicks ashes into fray.*) I know you don' expect 'em to hang in 'ere wit' chu' fo'evah now, do ya?

WES. Nawh, I don'.

LIL. Good 'cause folks gits ta' thankin' 'n talkin' too damn much. (*Takes a puff.*) An' speakin a' which, bet chu' an' Mizz Mamie Jane Brown was makin' a pretty successful coupla somethin's 'roun' 'ere fo' a minute, huh? You wit' the castle. Her wit' the new motorcar.

WES. How you know 'bout me an' Mamie?

LIL. Same way I know 'bout tha' baseball an' them rocks. I ain't s'pose to?

WES. You sho' got a mouth full a' the hap'nin's fo' somebody been gone, tha's all.

LIL. The hap'nin's? Three years, nevah even askt tha' woman to marry you. Nothin' hap'nin' 'roun' 'ere 'ceptin' root-rot. Say the railroad oughta be shame. Oughta be shamed a' YO'self.

WES (*stands*). Lil, git tha' cigarette smoke out this house stinkin'. (*Fans the air. LIL puts cigarette out in ash-tray.*)

LIL. I suppose all y'all did fo' three whole years is listen to the radio on Sundays an' read the Sears Roebuck Bible. (*WES coughs, goes to window; opens it, looks out.*) You hear me, Wesley. Wha' was you waitin' on? The second comin'? Quit tha' bobbins, 'n weavin', 'n play coughin'.

WES. Now look now, I can bring a pig in 'ere, sit 'im down at tha' table an' dare 'im to smoke his own poke. Tha's wha' I can do where I put the roof up at.

LIL. I know who pay these bills, boy. Why didn' you marry Mamie Jane, I say. (*WES moves back toward LIL.*)

WES. How you know I ain't askt 'er? How you know all this stuff?

LIL. 'Cause I'm a genius, tha's how. I read the dawggone tea leaves, honey. I got a crystal ball in this bag 'ere.

WES. Or is the lil' ole nosy grapevine dun' put a bug in yo' ear? Huh? Or maybe found chu' up in Atlanta an' writ chu' a letter or two sometime.

LIL. Nobody writ me nothin'. Listen, nevah mind. (*WES laughs.*) Humph. Pretty as she is...

WES. Now, how you know how pretty she is if you ain't seent 'er? Ain't heard from 'er?

LIL. Heck, she was always pretty, man. Foe' years ain't no time. Her kinda pretty don' go nowhere. She still a young woman. Shoot, I went to school wit' 'er. Boys 'n mens flockin' all ovah her an' Clareesa.

WES (*continues to laugh*). An' you too as I recall.

LIL. Anyway, pretty an' successful, she'da been a fool waitin' aroun' fo'evah on you to stop plowin' an' take a bath. (*WES laughs harder.*) Glad to see she beat it 'way from 'ere. Hard as you laughin'. You wann't the only

one had cho' eye on 'er neitha'; guarantee. I could be gone twenty-foe' years an' know tha'. Fitzhugh Marvin prob'ly had a cockeye on 'er. Only thang, most a' her good play dun' seent big-time, Wesley Slaton in the way, takin' up all the space an' moved on. Three years. Hmph.

WES. You drunk, Lil.

LIL. Ain't tha' drunk, tho'. Shoot, I know mens. You better quit fanger-poppin' 'n take heed.

WES. Ain't nobody poppin' no fangers.

LIL. You ain't poppin' no fangers, then prove it. Git on down to Spivey Kaye an' marry Mamie. Go tell 'er you love 'er. Did chu' tell 'er you love 'er?

WES. Ask yo' crystal ball.

LIL. You got to tell 'er you love 'er. Tell 'er it 'bout kills you not to talk to 'er once a day. It ain't got to be the truth. Jus' care enuff to try to lie. The girls is darn near grown, Wesley. I don' wanna see you up in this ole half-a-castle by yo'self.

WES. You ain't been 'ere five minutes, Lil. You got it all tied up in gold-plated Merry Christmas paper...

LIL. Wit' a big ole red bow big as yo' head, fool.

WES. How you gon' argue wit' me ovah who an' when I marry again, sis-in-law?

LIL. Ain't nobody arguin' wit' chu', Brotha' Wesley. Who arguin' wit' chu'? Jus' need to git cho' bi'niss in order.

WES. My bi'niss is in order.

LIL. In wha' way?

WES. I got enuff jobs 'roun' this place to keep me hoppin' like I say.

LIL. Meanwhile, you gon' work it 'til the bottom fall out of ya? Is tha' the plan? (*WES washes glasses out; rinses*

and dries them with dishcloth.) Well then, you ain't gon' need a woman. You gon' need a mama 'cause all a woman can do fo' you afta' the fact is change yo' diapers an' spoonfeed chu'. Tha' ain't fair to neitha' one of ya, Wes. Think about it. *(Stands.)*

WES. Look 'ere, you an' Mamie ain't gon' kill me wit' all this thinkin'.

LIL. My daddy workt chu' sunup to sun-damn-down on this place when he had it befoe' an' afta' you married my sistah an' tha' ain't kilt cha' not nayah' day.

WES. Twenty years ago.

LIL. An' made two babies wit' 'er then so, wha' chu' tryin' to say now? You beat up at fo'ty? You tired out? Chile, ain't no dumb bunnies 'roun' 'ere. E'rybody know there's always somethin' to do runnin' a farm. A cow to buy, to milk e'ry day, chickens to feed, a barn to raise, an' so fo'th. Tha' ain't news.

WES. Wasn' nobody tryin' to pull no fast one on Saint Mamie.

LIL. Don' git funny now. Tha' woman was runnin' 'er own bi'niss. She didn' need chu'. She wannit' chu'.

WES. I know she a good woman. *(Puts glasses back in cupboard.)* She steady, got a smart head on her shoulders...

LIL. But didn' nevah askt you fo' nothin' outright. Tha' there was the problem.

WES. Look at it this way...

LIL. A big, robust man an' a good-lookin' woman. Both of ya in yo' prime. I swan'. *(LIL goes back to table; sits.)*

WES. If I had married 'er, if I married 'er tomorrow, you wouldn' have no bi'niss down 'ere, would chu'? Gon' show my girls how to be wha'? How ta be ladies? I

knew wha' chu' was hintin' at. Wha' is tha' chu' drinkin', Mizz Lord 'n Lady Herself? Some kinda fanciness you dun' learnt up the street somewhere. (*Reaches for flask on table.*)

LIL. You mus' want a taste. (*Reaches flask first; stands. WES takes flask from her playfully. LIL laughs.*) Git out the way! (*Attempts to take flask from WES. WES grabs LIL around waist from the back.*)

WES (*laughs*). You worried 'bout us. You come back home, see to yo' fam'ly, love up on yo' nieces some, show 'em wha' they miss from they mama. I like tha'. (*LIL pulls away. They face each other. LIL goes to window; looks out.*)

LIL. I'm wonderin' where it is they runned off to wit' ma' good junk. (*WES goes to window beside LIL; looks out.*)

WES. They'll be along. (*LIL goes to table; sits.*)

LIL. Who was tha' biggun' again? Bless his heart. Tha' boy wha's helpin' wit' the luggage.

WES. Call 'im Big O fo' short.

LIL. Well, I sho' wouldn' know why 'cause ain't nothin' short about tha' big boy. Him 'n Opalee, they so cow-eyed ovah each otha', you'd hafta be a blind, crazy so-'n-so not to see tha'. Did chu' see 'im? Opalee, she nudged 'im fo'ward. He all nervous. He took in a deep breath an' he say... "Olysses Robenzene Pullman. Tha's my name, ma'am. Pleased to make yo' acquaintance." Then, he bowed at the waist like he been practicin'. (*Bows.*)

WES. Sho' 'nuff?

GLOSSARY

a' - of	holla' - holler; to yell or speak with
an' - and	hunnert - hundred
ain't - isn't	'im - him
anotha' - another	I'm mo' - I'm going to
befoe' - before	'imself - himself
bes' - best	innerested - interested
bet' - better	innit - isn't it
bi'niss - business	's - is / it's
bothen' - bothering	jus' - just
bruh' / brougham - brother	jus' ta - just a
cain't - can't	kep' - kept
cha' - you	know'd - knowed
cha'll - y'all / you all	Lawd - Lord
cho' - your	lil' - little
cho'self - yourself	lemme - let me
chu' - you	lookt - looked
cote' - court	ma' - my
'cross - across	main' - man
doe' - door	make 'miration - to admire
don' - don't	'membuh - remember
dun' - have	mem'ry - memory
enuff - enough	moe' - more
'ere - here	mus' - must
e'ry - every	'n' - and
e'ry time - every time	nawh - no
exercised - emotional	nayah' - not any / none
fiff - fifth	'nem - them
foe' - four	New Yawk - New York
'foe' - before	nothin' - nothing
forgimme - forgive me	offa' - off of
git - get	origin'lly - originally
gon' / gon' ta' - going to	plenny' - plenty
gran'chirrun' - grandchildren	read' / red' - ready
hisself - himself	remembuh' - remember

'round / 'roun' - around
sho' - sure
sit'ations - situations
smelt - smelled
spec'tacler - spectacular
s'posed - supposed
stoe' - store
sugah - sugar
swan' - swear
ta' - to
tha' - that
thang - thing
thankin' / thinkin' - thinking
tho' - though
thoat - throat
thoe' - throw
tho'd / thoe'd - throwed
thu' - through
toe' - torn
unbear'ble - unbearable
wann' / wann't - wasn't
wannit' - wanted
weatha' - weather
wha' - what
whetha' - whether
wit' - with
ya - you
yo' - your
yondah - over there
younges' - youngest