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Dramatic Publishing

THE THREAD THAT RUNS SO TRUE

**A PLAY IN THREE ACTS DRAMATIZED
BY REGINALD LAWRENCE FROM
THE BOOK BY JESSE STUART**



THE DRAMATIC PUBLISHING COMPANY

The Thread That Runs So True

Comedy. From the book by Jesse Stuart. Adapted by Reginald Lawrence. Cast: 12m., 16w. Jesse is still in his teens when he takes on the job of teacher in Lonesome Valley School. Many of his students are older than he, and certainly those in the clique led by the school bully are bigger and tougher. They are there to have a place to go while the work on the farm is slack, and they intend to have fun baiting the greenhorn teacher. Among the students are a few who respond to Jesse's enthusiasm for education; yet even with these he meets opposition. Their parents resent his encouraging their sons to seek further education, since this might deprive them of farmhands. The school bully becomes the leader of the opposition, and the enmity between him and Jesse is keener because both are interested in Naomi, the lovely girl who sings (for Jesse) the old ballad from which the title is taken: "The needle's eye that doth supply the thread that runs so true." Their problems interweave with others: the school board's fight about whether Jesse keeps his job or not; the box-supper auctions; the contest with the "city" school in a neighboring small town. It's a play full of wit, flavorful mountaineer characters, and true romance in all its youthful sweetness. *Unit set showing int./ext.*

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A PLAY IN THREE ACTS

The Thread That Runs So True

Dramatized by
REGINALD LAWRENCE

from the Book by
JESSE STUART



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The Thread That Runs So True

A Play in Three Acts

FOR TWELVE MEN AND SIXTEEN WOMEN

CHARACTERS

JESSE STUART.....*a teacher*
JOHN CONWAY.....*a school trustee*
DON CONWAY.....*his son*
BERTHA CONWAY.....*his wife*
VAIDA CONWAY.....*their daughter*
BURT EASTHAM.....*a coal-wagon man*
BILL COFFEE.....*a steel worker*

NAOMI DEANE NORRIS,
GUY HAWKINS, BUDGE WATERS,
BILLY LEONARD, SNOOKIE BAYLOR,
OVA SALYERS, PETER SNAGGERS,
ROBIN BAYLOR, SALLY WALDEN,
XENIA POTTERS, LEONORA MADDOX,
JENNY JARVIS, MINNIE FROME,
EDITH HANKS, GRANDMA BINION

}.....*students of
Lonesome Valley
Rural School*

AUNT EFFIE BATSON.....*a school trustee*
UNCLE AMOS BATSON.....*her husband*
MRS. WOODS.....*of Landsburgh School*

EVA
CELESTE.....*students of Landsburgh School*
ELEANOR
NANCY COCHRAN.....*offstage singer*

PLACE: *The Lonesome Valley Rural Schoolhouse in the Kentucky Mountains.*

TIME: 1925.

SYNOPSIS

ACT ONE: *July. Opening Day.*

ACT TWO: *September, harvest time, two months later. Friday afternoon.*

ACT THREE: *Scene One: January. Morning.*
Scene Two: Three days later. Evening.

NOTES ON CHARACTERS AND COSTUMES

JESSE: He is a husky, poorly-dressed young Kentucky farm boy of eighteen, with three years of high school under his belt, and a "call" to start teaching. He has hitched thirty miles from home to start his first job. We see in his eyes and manner a firm determination to succeed—and something more. Both he and Don speak with a faint Southern drawl, but not heavy accents. Throughout the play, he wears a well-worn suit, too small for him, and a tie. In the first scene of Act Three he is bundled up warmly in a worn coat, heavy scarf, and hat.

DON: Don is nineteen, the son of a School Trustee, a bright, willing boy.

JOHN CONWAY: He is chairman of the local School Board, a cane farmer of forty-five, with a large family and no education. He wears field clothes in Act One, and a hat. He wears overalls and a jacket in Act Two. In the final scene of Act Three he wears a dark suit, winter coat or jacket, and a hat.

VAIDA: She is sixteen, a plain girl in braids. Her speech has a distinct nasal whine.

BURT: He is a big man, about thirty, husky and always smiling. In Act One his overalls are black with dust from his coal-wagon, and his face is smeared. He wears an old hat. He has cleaned up for the meeting in Act Two, and wears a flannel shirt and tie. He dresses warmly in old clothes in Scene One of Act Three.

LEONORA and ROBIN: Leonora is fifteen, Robin sixteen. They are simple country girls, barefoot, their hair beribboned and braided,

SNOOKIE, PETER and BUDGE: Snookie is seventeen, and a close friend of Don's. Peter is about the same age, and his shadow. Budge is a tall, thin, pimply-faced boy of sixteen, with

big hands that get in his way. He never speaks unless spoken to; there is something touching about him.

XENIA and JENNY: Xenia is a plump, pleasant girl of seventeen. She is going steady with Snookie. Jenny is a wistful child of about eight. Her hair is beribboned and braided, like the older girls'.

MINNIE and EDITH: They are staunch, inseparable friends; Minnie is fifteen, Edith fourteen. They usually dress alike.

SALLY: She is a fresh-faced girl of sixteen.

BILLY: He is a small boy, about eleven. His clothes are nondescript. When he first appears he wears his brother's long pants—without shirt, or shoes. His shiny face is smudged with coal dust, but he has a grin which brightens a room when he enters. In Scene Two of Act Three he wears a long overcoat, and his feet are wrapped in burlap, tied with string.

GUY and OVA: Both are big fellows, but Guy is really impressive. He stands over six feet, and has shoulders used to moving stones; he is twenty years old. Only his jaws move slowly in his vacuous face as he chews tobacco. Guy is not trusted by the students, but they pay him a grudging respect. Ova is a year younger than Guy.

NAOMI DEANE: She is a serious, thoughtful girl of seventeen, very pretty, with an underlying sense of fun. She is the only student in the school who looks as if she would get to high school. She is very neat about her appearance, and always wears shoes or sneakers.

GRANDMA BINION: She is sixty-five, and spirited. In Act One she has just come from the barnyard. Her gray hair is knotted back; she wears a long worn apron over her dress. She wears glasses. In the first scene of Act Three she is well wrapped in a winter coat, boots, two sweaters, a scarf, and shawl. Underneath, she wears a flowered kitchen apron over her house dress. On her head is a man's old felt hat. In the final scene she wears a plain cotton dress, winter coat, and hat.

BILL COFFEE: He is a nice-looking country fellow of twenty-two. He speaks well enough, but his manner is rough. He wears a fancy sweater and a new jacket on his first appearance in Act

Two; he is dressed for a date in town. In the first scene of Act Three he is warmly dressed in a good-looking winter jacket and cap, with his fancy sweater underneath. In contrast to the other fellows, he is well-dressed.

BERTHA: She is a stout, aggressive woman of forty. She wears a shawl over a house dress in Act Two. In the final scene of the play she wears a winter coat and hat over a simple cotton dress.

AUNT EFFIE: She is an old lady of sixty, the postmistress, and something of a figure in Lonesome. She moves slowly, with dignity. She wears a simple dark dress and a hat in Act Two, and a similar type of dress with a winter coat and hat in the last scene.

UNCLE AMOS: He is a very old gentleman in his seventies, with white whiskers. He uses a cane, and wears winter clothes.

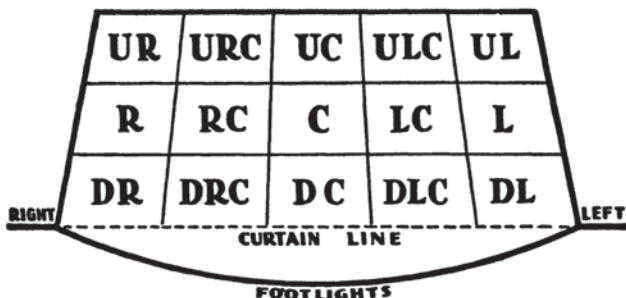
EVA, ELEANOR and CELESTE: All three girls are in their teens. They are the studious type, and wear eyeglasses. Celeste is tall and toothy. Eleanor is a rather small girl. Eva tends toward plumpness. They wear graduation dresses, and winter coats and scarves.

MRS. WOODS: She is a large woman in her sixties, with gray hair and a voice of authority. She wears glasses, and is dressed in a simple, conservative dress, with a winter coat and hat.

STUDENTS' COSTUMES: In Act One and Act Two, unless otherwise indicated, the boys and girls come to school bare-foot. The girls wear cheap cotton dresses. Jenny wears a pinafore. Their hair is beribboned and braided. Naomi Deane and some of the other girls wear jackets or sweaters in Act Two. The boys, unless otherwise indicated, wear overalls or cheap cotton wash pants and faded shirts. Some of the boys wear jackets in Act Two. In Act Three, the time is winter and the students wear shoes or boots. Some keep their boots on for

warmth. Under their winter coats or mackinaws they wear sweaters. Gloves, scarves, mittens, and ear-flaps are also worn. Budge wears an old Army coat, too big for him. In Act Three, Scene One, Vaida, especially, is well-wrapped; she is bundled up like a bundle of old clothes. In the final scene of Act Three, Jenny wears black pumps and her "best" dress.

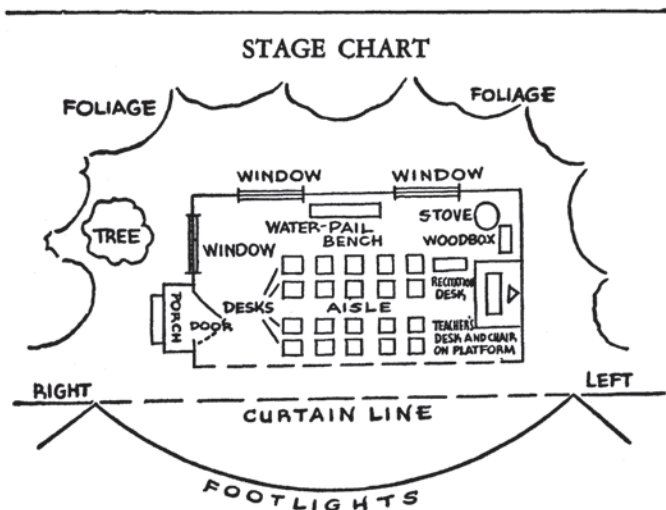
CHART OF STAGE POSITIONS



STAGE POSITIONS

Upstage means away from the footlights, *downstage* means toward the footlights, and *right* and *left* are used with reference to the actor as he faces the audience. R means *right*, L means *left*, U means *up*, D means *down*, C means *center*, and these abbreviations are used in combination, as: U R for *up right*, R C for *right center*, D L C for *down left center*, etc. One will note that a position designated on the stage refers to a general territory, rather than to a given point.

NOTE: Before starting rehearsals, chalk off your stage or rehearsal space as indicated above in the *Chart of Stage Positions*. Then teach your actors the meanings and positions of these fundamental terms of stage movement by having them walk from one position to another until they are familiar with them. The use of these abbreviated terms in directing the play saves time, speeds up rehearsals, and reduces the amount of explanation the director has to give to his actors.



PROPERTIES

GENERAL: Blackboard and old spelling charts; teacher's desk and chair on platform; recitation bench; desks; pot-bellied stove; woodbox; water-pail bench; pictures of Presidents Washington and Coolidge; worn bell-rope; erasers and chalk; pointer. **ACT ONE:** trash littered about schoolroom; empty pail and old dipper on water-pail bench; yardstick on teacher's desk; students: some carry books, pads and pencils; all carry lunches. **ACT TWO:** new charts on wall; shelf with books; shades on windows; water cooler and paper cups; stool upstage; on teacher's desk: books, papers, pencil, etc.; students: books, pads, pencils, lunch-baskets, etc. **ACT THREE, SCENE ONE:** left-over Christmas decorations; broom near door; cups for coffee; wood in woodbox; coal shovel; sacks of coal off R; students: books, pads, pencils, lunches, etc. **ACT THREE, SCENE TWO:** lanterns, banner reading "Landsburgh School Scholastic Champions"; several more benches and chairs, Rule Book on teacher's desk.

JESSE: Books, sickle, hatchet, lunchbox, key-ring, ruler, pencil, pad of paper, pocket-knife, more books, large battered suitcase filled with books, paper in one of his books (poem), paper for contest.

DON: Broom, mop, pail of water, Grandma's books.

JOHN: Large watch, hoe.

VAIDA: Pail of water, handkerchief.

JENNY: Picture-book, number cards, branches of fall leaves.

GUY: Plug of chewing tobacco, pail of water, armload of firewood, paper in pocket, books in mackinaw pocket, book in pants pocket (with slip of paper), two pencils.

NAOMI DEANE: Note, branches of fall leaves, pad and pencil to take notes, bright red scarf.

GRANDMA: Egg basket, sewing, paper and pencil, book.

BURT: Yardstick, wad of bills, new basketball, wooden barrel-hoop, sack of coal.

BERTHA: Knitting in knitting bag.

AUNT EFFIE: Large black purse.

BUDGE: Blanket.

BILL: Pack of cigarettes and matches, Naomi Deane's books.

OVA: Pail of water, Grandma's coffee-pot.

PETER: Grandma's lunch basket.

MRS. WOODS: Paper for contest, handkerchief, small silver cup in handbag.

PRODUCTION NOTE

Nothing adds more to the polish of a production than the quick picking up of cues. Unless there is a definite reason for a pause, train your actors to come in with their speeches "on the heels," so to speak, of the preceding speeches. When a production lags, audience interest likewise will lag.

It is always advisable during the last week of rehearsals to hold one or more sessions during which the actors merely sit around in a circle and go through lines only, with the express purpose of snapping up cues.

ACT ONE

SCENE: *The Lonesome Valley Rural School, in the Kentucky mountains. The schoolhouse is a small one-room building in a bad state of disrepair. The set reveals both the interior of the school and the approach to it. There is a small porch, with a step leading up to it, at stage R. A door from the porch opens into the schoolhouse itself. There is a window upstage of the door, as well as two other windows in the upstage wall. All have shutters, closed and off the hinges, and covered with vines. The place has not been used for years; nature has begun to take over. There is a small raised platform at the left side of the room, downstage. On the wall behind the platform is a small blackboard and some old spelling-charts, and on the platform are the teacher's desk and chair, facing right. In front of the platform, angled to face the audience, is a recitation bench. Facing the teacher's desk are rows of old-fashioned desks with seats attached, and shelves for books. An aisle down the middle divides the boys from the girls. A pot-bellied stove, not now in use, with stovepipe and woodbox beside it, is up left. There is a bench for the water pail upstage, between the two windows. On the walls are pictures of Presidents Washington and Coolidge. There are pegs on the wall upstage of the door for caps and coats. A worn bell-rope hangs from an unseen belfry below the door. The room is dirty and littered with trash. If desired, the base of a large sycamore tree can be seen slightly upstage of the porch, spreading its branches over the schoolhouse. Branches may be used to represent shrubs. It is also possible for this area to be bare of any ornamentation. A simple curtain background will serve. Entrances are made in the general direction of R stage, as if coming up a hill, as well as from the down left corner of the schoolhouse.]*

AT RISE OF CURTAIN: *It is a hot morning in July, 1925; we can feel the hum and buzz of summer in the Kentucky hills. Inside the schoolhouse it is dark and gloomy.*]

JESSE [*off R, calling*]. Get up here, Don. Don't spill the water.
DON [*off R*]. I'm a-comin'. . . .

[*JESSE STUART comes in R, loaded down with a bundle of books, a sickle, a hatchet, a lunch-box, and a big key ring, which he takes from his pocket.*]

JESSE [*pausing, staring at vine-tangled porch in wonder*]. Is this it?

DON [*off R*]. That's her, Jesse. Lonesome Valley Rural School.

[*DON CONWAY comes in R, weighted down with a broom, a mop, a bucket of water, and his own books. He sets them down, wipes his face with his cap; it is an uphill climb.*]

JESSE. She's rural, all right. [*Looks around.*] Looks like that place in the woods where they kept the Sleeping Beauty.

DON. You're more like to find bats. [*Takes hatchet, starts to chip away vines from door to schoolhouse.*] Well, give 'er a try. Got the key, ain't you?

JESSE [*joining him on porch*]. Right here. [*Shows it.*] Where are your pa and Vaida?

DON. Tetherin' the team, down to the creek. They're thirsty. [*Cups his hands and yells off R, loudly.*] Hey, Pa! Tell Vaida to fetch another bucket.

JOHN [*off R*]. You get 'er open. We'll come down when we're a-mind to. [*JESSE puts key in old door. It creaks open. He and DON go inside, in the gloom.*]

JESSE. Mighty dark, after the sunlight. Hot, too.

DON. Allers was hotter than the hinges, in July. Got to get the shutters open. [*Helps JESSE pry open a shutter upstage of door; it falls off.*] Needs fixin'.

JESSE [*opening another, upstage, on a view of sunlit valley, through vines*]. That's what I'm here for. We'll open this schoolhouse, if I have to hold it up myself.

DON [*laughing*]. Good trick if you can do it. [*Lights come up in schoolroom as shutters are opened.*]

JESSE. How long did you go here, Don—before they closed up shop?

DON [*as he and JESSE open remaining shutter*]. Four and a half year. But I figger on maybe makin' Eighth Grade by September. Gettin' married, after harvest.

JESSE. School term's not over till January.

DON. Sally's been waitin' since Sixth Grade. Pa says marryin' comes before schoolin'. [*Suddenly ducks his head, waves his cap around.*] Watch out! There's the whole bat fambly!

JESSE [*getting out of way*]. Get the broom—open the door wide!

DON [*dashing outside, getting broom*]. I'll git 'er. She's an old friend o' mine! [*Comes back in, swinging wildly with broom.*] Git out-a here, you ignorant cusses! School's startin' up again!

JESSE. Maybe I should have majored in bats.

DON. You're in for plenty of surprises.

JESSE. It looks like a Second Class Certificate is just the beginning. [*Goes to desk, looks at it proudly.*] But I'll tell you one thing. This is the teacher's desk—and this is the teacher's chair. I mean to fill 'em. [*Cleans desk off, carefully.*] Don't know whether your father told you—I asked for this school.

DON [*sweeping up trash and shoving it out door*]. He told me.

JESSE. Did he tell you why?

DON. I know why.

JESSE. Then I guess you know, I aim to stay.

DON [*looking at him, over broom, admiringly*]. I'm bettin' on you, Jesse. There's people here in the Valley that ain't, but I am. Your cousin, he was a real fine teacher, while he lasted. He taught me some arithmetic and how to spell. What happened to him here shouldn't a-happened. You can count on me. [*Continues to sweep.*]

JESSE. Thanks, Don. Don't know that I'd take this job on, without your two fists present. [*Starts undoing his books at desk, setting them by lunch-box.*] This Guy Hawkins, what's he like?

DON [*measuring with broom handle*]. Wouldn't top you by more'n a head, I'd say.

JESSE. Good fighter?

DON. Nobody tries, no more. He's licked 'bout everybody around. He just don't like nobody—'specially teachers.

JESSE. Well, I'm a teacher, Don, and I'm proud to be—from Chart Classes to Eighth Grade.

DON. That's right. [*Goes on sweeping.*] Jest remember, when y'all want he'p, you stomp. [*Stamps floor with his heel, twice.*] Like that. I'll be there.

JESSE. I hope I won't need help, thanks.

DON. No use to look around. Jest you stomp. [*Stamps again, twice.*] And I'll be there.

JESSE [*looking up from his books, in surmise*]. Like this? [*Stamps twice with his heel on desk platform.*]

DON. Us Conways never did take much to Hawkins folks. Especially one 'at spent eight years in the First Grade.

JESSE. Eight years!

[*JOHN CONWAY comes in R and up on the porch, followed by his daughter VAIDA. VAIDA carries her books, and a bucket.*]

JOHN [*looking in*]. Got to get back to the fields. Team won't wait. . . . [*Looks over schoolhouse.*] Still standin', ain't she?

JESSE [*crossing to door*]. Mr. Conway. About the shutters—

JOHN. I know what you're goin' to say. [*Sits on step outside.*]
Down Landsburgh High, where you been, they got ventilators, and teachers in every room. But we're Lonesome Valley School. Lucky we don't find squatters in it.

VAIDA [*on porch, a nasal whine*]. Where you want the water?

JOHN. Ask Mr. Stuart. He's Teacher.

JESSE. I guess we'll save that for the drinking-bench. They'll be dry by the time they get to school. Here—[*Starts to take it from her.*]

VAIDA. I know where it is. I been here before. [*Shakes her braids, goes inside and puts pail on bench. Then she crosses to desk and snoops in Jesse's books.*]

JESSE [*on porch*]. I don't find any well.

JOHN. Ain't any. Your cousin, he tried to git us to dig one. But diggin' a well costs time and labor. We got neither to spare.

JESSE. But, Mr. Conway, the state pays for students per capita. That's the law.

JOHN [*looking up at him*]. You're a great one for the law. Mr. Stuart, you teach your school, and let Aunt Effie Batson and Burt Eastham and me worry about the state. We're the Board. [*JESSE hesitates, then starts clearing vines outside door. DON and VAIDA are cleaning up inside.*] Maybe down Landsburgh, they can spare hands to go to school. But I can tell you this, feller. If it wasn't for my Vaida and Don havin' five brothers and sisters to work my cane fields, they wouldn't be here. [*Rises and goes inside. JESSE follows.*]

VAIDA [*whining*]. Mama promised I could come to school. . . .

JOHN. I never had no education you could notice, and I done all right. Just remember, the young-uns you get here is *every one* spared off some farm. Somebody else is workin' double for each of 'em. By rights, every minute they spend with you and your books—they ought to be out in the fields, hillin' corn, or suckerin' tobacco-bugs.

JESSE [*pausing, turning to DON*]. Is that the way you feel about it?

JOHN. Don don't matter. He's gettin' married in September, and settin' up a home.

JESSE. Then he'd better know how to build a cellar and measure a cane field, don't you think?

JOHN. I teached him all he needs.

BURT [*off R*]. Anybody got a swallow o' water in there?

[BURT EASTHAM *comes in R. His overalls are black with dust from his coal wagon; his face is smeared. He is out of breath.*]

JESSE [*coming out on porch*]. Burt Eastham—is that you, hiding behind the coal? [*Greets him warmly.*]

BURT. Drivin' past in my coal wagon—thought I'd give the new teacher a hello. [*They shake hands and pound each other's backs.*]

JESSE [*bringing him in schoolroom*]. Come on in! It's Opening Day.

JOHN. Help yourself to the water pail. Vaida brung it from Grandma Binion's.

BURT. Hello, Vaida—Don. [*DON gets BURT a drink from old dipper. VAIDA starts to clean blackboard.*]

JOHN. Been lookin' for you to show up. This is School Board business.

BURT [*drinking*]. You know I leave all that up to you and Aunt Effie. All I know is cartin' coal down to the Old Line Special. Couldn't afford to get educated.

JOHN. Been tryin' to tell Stuart, nobody much around here has the time to spend. Too expensive.

JESSE [*pointedly*]. How much do you hold in a load, Burt?

BURT. Twenty-five bushel, more or less. Never measured 'er since I started.

JESSE. What does that fetch?

BURT. About twenty dollars, give or take a little. Why?

JESSE. Why don't you check it with this, once? [*Picks up a yardstick from desk and hands it to him.*] You can bring it back on your way home.

BURT [*taking stick*]. Check my wagon? How in thunder . . .

JESSE. Don knows. Don't you?

DON. A coal wagon?

JESSE. Any wagon. Simple cubic measurement. Take the length in feet and the width in feet and the depth in feet. Then multiply 'em all together.

BURT [*hesitating, holding stick*]. I don't know if the owners would like that.

JESSE. It's your coal. Try it once. You might be surprised.

BURT [*doubtfully, wiping his dirty face*]. Well, you're the teacher. By gee, if you say so. . . . [*Starts mumbling magic formula.*] Width 'n' depth . . .

JOHN. Burt, if you wasn't on the Board, you could start First Grade agin. [*They laugh. JESSE is watching BURT.*]

BURT. What do you mean, First Grade? Jesse will tell you about my schoolin'.

JESSE [*kiddingly*]. You were the best ball player Plum Grove ever had. . . . Good to see you.

BURT. Anything John Conway says, I vote, too. Saves time. [*Waves yardstick as he goes out on porch.*] Won't they be bushwhacked to see me with a yardstick, down the road! Now, if I can jest recall how she goes . . . [*Goes out R, waving stick, and calling to his team: "Hi, Daisy, we're goin' multiplin'!"*]

JOHN [*as all stand near door, watching him go*]. Burt can't use that stick.

JESSE. He'll try. That's all anybody can do. [*Sits at desk, sorting his books.*] I've been a farm boy all my life, so far, Mr. Conway. I helped Grandpa put up the log house we live in, as a boy. Raised as good a crop of corn as anybody in the whole of W-Hollow. [*Holds a book in his hand, grasping it like a weapon.*] But I want to teach school. I've got to! Not just go to high school and win marks in contests, and play football—but to see that everybody in this Valley has got a book—one book—and can read it.

JOHN [*suspiciously, moving toward desk*]. You sure you're eighteen?

JESSE [*surprised*]. Why?

JOHN. The grown-up way you talk.

JESSE. Only thing bothers me, some of my pupils will be more grown-up than I am. And bigger.

JOHN [*pleased with himself*]. It ought to bother you. What happened here two years ago is bound to happen again—and the boys is two years tougher. It ain't the first time they fought the teacher—and hurt him. [*Looks toward VAIDA who, with DON, is cleaning up around room.*] Then, some of the girls is pretty. It's summer. You're just as like as the next young feller to get ideas. We won't stand for any trouble. You got the job. I tried to stop you. You just pay Bertha the twenty-five dollars a month fer yer board, sleep at the house with us, do yer work. But don't ask the Board for a plug nickel, because you won't get it. Taxes are too high now, with the road, and the new steel mills. Ain't too late to back out. Lonesome's gone without a rural school before this. Say the word, and we'll shut 'er up again, and save trouble. [*JESSE looks at him, squarely, then speaks.*]

JESSE. Mr. Conway, you don't believe for one minute that I can last out the year. Do you?

JOHN. I'm willing to wait and see. Promised ye that.

JESSE. But you won't help me.

JOHN. Help you with what? You're gettin' paid good.

JESSE [*looking around*]. With supplies or paint or a well—or anything. Just the way it stands.

JOHN. The way it stands was good enough fer us.

JESSE. But you never went to school. You told me.

JOHN [*irritated*]. Some did and some didn't. So far, I couldn't tell you much difference. You've talked my boy Don into it. But like I say, it ain't too late to stop now.

JESSE. I'm a schoolteacher, Mr. Conway.

JOHN [*looking him over*]. If you change yer mind, you look like a good hand with a double-bitted ax. There's plenty work up the mountain. [*JESSE sees DON looking at him, eagerly.*]

DON. You wouldn't—would you?

JESSE. Willing to give it a try, Don?

DON. I sure am.

JESSE [*looking from DON to JOHN*]. Then ring the bell.

DON. You bet I will. [*Grabs old rope. Bell gives a cracked sound. JOHN laughs. VAIDA bursts into giggles.*]

VAIDA [*giggling*]. Sounds like a sick cow!

JESSE. Maybe it just got tired waiting for somebody with a good right arm. [*Joins DON, pulls strongly on rope. Old bell begins to sound. Intermingled with sound of bell is that of chickens squawking.*]

VAIDA. One of Grandma's hens—stole her nest! [*JESSE finally gets bell ringing.*]

JESSE. Come on! Tell the whole Valley school's holding in Lonesome again—and last one in gets marked "Late." [*As JESSE rings, JOHN takes out his big watch and looks at it. He talks to VAIDA, and decides to stay and watch a while.*]

DON [*over clanging bell*]. Sounds just like goin' to Meetin'.

JESSE. Maybe that's what it *is*. More than one way of saving a sinner.

[*TWO YOUNG GIRLS now appear, creeping in D L, in front of the schoolhouse. They are LEONORA MADDOX and ROBIN BAYLOR. They come forward cautiously, not knowing what to expect. They carry old books and lunch-baskets, and are barefoot.*]

LEONORA. You go first . . .

ROBIN. You promised!

LEONORA. I didn't cross my heart. Let's wait fer the boys.

ROBIN. Somebody'll get our seats. [*Bell stops ringing. JESSE steps out on porch, waiting. He looks around, afraid no one will come. Then we hear whispering, see occasional faces popping up from all sides, like chipmunks.*]

LEONORA. Here. You hold the books, and I—[*As she hands them over, ROBIN drops them.*] Butterfingers! [*ROBIN hastily picks up books.*]

JESSE [*seeing girls, smiling*]. No call to be scared of me. I'm Mr. Stuart, the new teacher. . . . [*They stare at him, speechless.*] Come on in. What's your name?

ROBIN [*pushed forward by LEONORA, quickly*]. I'm-Robin-Baylor—and—that's-Leonora-Maddox.

JESSE [*holding out his hand*]. Are these all the books you've got?

ROBIN [*timidly, handing them to JESSE*]. My mother had some more, but the squirrels ate 'em.

JESSE [*looking at battered books*]. Looks like these just up and died. [*Girls laugh. JESSE hands books back.*]

[*THREE BOYS now appear from U R: SNOOKIE BAYLOR, PETER SNAGGERS, his shadow, and BUDGE WATERS. BUDGE carries books.*]

DON [*who has joined JESSE on porch*]. Hi, Snookie.

SNOOKIE. Howdy. [*Looks at JESSE, silent.*]

DON. This here's Mr. Stuart, the new teacher. From Landsburgh High.

SNOOKIE [*shaking hands awkwardly*]. Howdy, Mr. Stuart.

JESSE. A friend of Don's. That makes three of us. [*Looks over other boys, as SNOOKIE nods.*] Well, we've got a quorum. What about going inside and starting the enrollment? It's near eight-thirty. [*Looks at girls, who have pulled back again.*] Come on, Leonora. I won't bite you. [*Goes in, and stands behind his desk. JOHN stands observing, inside doorway. VAIDA is beside him, his spy.*]

SNOOKIE. Anybody seen Xenia Potters?

ROBIN [*mimicking her brother*]. That's all you hear, home. "Xenia Potters—Xenia Potters."

LEONORA. She had to help with the milkin'.

XENIA [*off R*]. Here I am, Snookie!

[*XENIA POTTERS comes in R, with little JENNY JARVIS in tow, holding her hand tight. JENNY is clutching her picture-book.*]

XENIA [*pulling JENNY along*]. Come on, Jenny Jarvis. This here's the school.

JENNY [*to the world*]. I brought my picture-book. I brought my picture-book.

SNOOKIE [*disgustedly*]. What did you have to drag *her* here for?

XENIA. She's my kin.

JENNY. Startin' First Grade!

SNOOKIE. She's gonna be a big help at recess. How we gonna be alone?

XENIA. We-all can get seats across the aisle, can't we? [*Pupils all hurry inside, JENNY tagging along, joining others, taking desks. As is customary, ROBIN, LEONORA, XENIA and JENNY take desks on the upstage side, the girls' side. SNOOKIE, BUDGE and PETER take seats on the downstage side. DON stands, spraddled, holding two seats.*]

DON. These two's taken! I'm holdin' 'em.

ROBIN. That's my seat, Xenia. It's got my initials on it. See?

JESSE [*from teacher's desk*]. Sit anywhere you like. I want to find out how many students we've got. Sit anywhere. [*A startled pause, as they stop their commotion.*]

LEONORA [*awed tones*]. You mean, boys and girls can sit together?

JESSE [*smiling*]. Why not? This is nineteen twenty-five. You're all pupils of Lonesome Valley School.

SNOOKIE [*quickly*]. Hey, Xenia! Xenia, quick!

LEONORA. Budge—come here! I'll swap you fractions for spelling! [*There is a moment of frightened hesitation, then a scramble. They pair off, back of desks: ROBIN and PETER, XENIA and SNOOKIE, LEONORA and BUDGE. JENNY sits alone, down front, staring at JESSE. He stares back.*]

DON [*frantically, still holding his seats*]. Not here! Hey, Sally! Sally Walden!

[*MINNIE and her friend, EDITH, run in together from R, breathless. They go to get seats, chattering with the others.*]

JOHN. What is this? Just a minute. Hol' yer horses! [*All stop, guiltily. They are afraid of JOHN.*]

JESSE. You all know Mr. Conway—chairman of our School Board.