

ACT I

PRELUDE:

A stage with a backdrop of magnificent Blue Ridge mountains. Before the mountains: a line of waist-high shrubbery and two or three trees.

Over music, we see figures in silhouette:

TWO MEN are walking, stage left toward stage right. One leans on a cane.

TWO MEN climb out of the bushes, each holding rifles. The BIGGEST approaches the one with the cane. The cane raises as if to strike, but the other MAN shoots, dropping the CANE-BEARER in his tracks.

FADE OUT

SCENE 1: YOU TO DECIDE

THE MOUNTAINS OF NORTH CAROLINA. 1866.

At stage left, a LAWYER stands.

At stage right, seated on a wooden chair, is KEITH BLALOCK, his wrists chained. MALINDA stands beside him. They are both in their 20s. She is of average height and build, long-haired, and her eyes shine with fierce light. Seething in his chains, Keith is a big man, the kind you would not like to see get upset.

In between them the ENSEMBLE stands, in half light, dressed as "regular folk" of the mountains.

LAWYER

Mr. Keith Blalock of Grandfather Mountain, Watauga County, North Carolina?

KEITH

That's me.

LAWYER

You're in a load of trouble, son. You stand accused of the murder of John Boyd, and I have no idea how I'm going to get you out of it.

ENSEMBLE ALTO

HE WAS JUST A BUSHWHACKER

ENSEMBLE TENOR

AN HONORED UNION SCOUT

ENSEMBLE SOPRANO

A FARMER AND A LOYAL SPOUSE

ENSEMBLE BASS

A WRETCHED TRAITOR AND A LOUSE

ENSEMBLE

FOR YOU TO DECIDE!

KEITH

I didn't murder no one!

LAWYER

Bill Blair watched you do it, son!

MALINDA

And don't you go callin' him "son"!

ENSEMBLE ALTO

TWO BUSHWHACKERS

ENSEMBLE SOPRANO

TWO BUSHWHACKERS

ENSEMBLE ALTO & SOPRANO

SHE A LOVING WIFE

ENSEMBLE TENOR & BASS

TWO BUSHWHACKERS

ENSEMBLE

A LOYAL PAIR THEY LOVED THE UNION LIFE
NOW THEN MAYBE YOU CAN DECIDE!

ENSEMBLE SOPRANO, ALTO, BASS

MONSTERS WHOSE HEARTS TURNED TO ROT
THEY KILLED MANY OTHERS
BROKE HEARTS OF MOTHERS.

ENSEMBLE

WHAT IS RIGHT OR WRONG
 CAN'T BE DECIDED IN A SONG
 THERE ARE TWO SIDES
 MAYBE YOU CAN DECIDE!

LAWYER

Things look bad if we can't find--

KEITH

I can't hear you for the noise outside my cell!

ENSEMBLE SOPRANO

LET 'EM HANG, WATCH 'EM CHOKE

ENSEMBLE ALTO

HE'S A HERO TO THE FOLK

ENSEMBLE TENOR & SOPRANO

EYE FOR EYE, TOOTH FOR TOOTH

ENSEMBLE ALTO & BASS

WILL WE EVER KNOW THE TRUTH?

ENSEMBLE

MAYBE YOU CAN DECIDE!

ENSEMBLE TENOR & SOPRANO

GUILTY! GUILTY! GUILTY! GUILTY!
 HE NEEDS TO DIE HE NEEDS TO DIE

ENSEMBLE ALTO & BASS

NOT GUILTY! NOT GUILTY! NOT GUILTY! NOT GUILTY!
 HE WANTS TO LIVE HE WANTS TO LIVE

ENSEMBLE

WHAT IS RIGHT OR WRONG
 CAN'T BE DECIDED IN A SONG
 THERE ARE TWO SIDES
 MAYBE YOU CAN DECIDE!

KEITH

It was an act of war!

LAWYER

War's been over for a year, so this is premeditated murder.

KEITH

Ain't murder defined as layin' in wait for your man?

LAWYER

It is!

MALINDA

Then Keith ain't no murderer!

KEITH

'Cause John Boyd warn't no man!

LAWYER

If I'm going to keep you from dancing on the end of a rope, I need to know everything.

KEITH

Everything?

LAWYER

Everything! How you met your wife, how you got into this bushwhacking in the first place--!

MALINDA

He ain't no bushwhacker! He was an enlisted scout!

LAWYER

(ignoring this)
--how you lost that eye, and why the hell you kept on fighting with it gone!

ENSEMBLE 1

I THINK HE SHOULD LIVE

ENSEMBLE 2

I THINK HE SHOULD DIE!

ENSEMBLE 3

JUSTICE FROM A GALLOWS!
SEE HIS WIDOW CRY!

KEITH

(shouting)
Alright!

(normal voice)
I'll tell my story. At least what I want you to know.

ENSEMBLE

THIS IS FOR YOU TO DECIDE!

The stage goes black and the mood changes to something more serene. WE HEAR STRAINS OF "OLD NORTH STATE.

INSTRUMENTAL: "OLD NORTH STATE

Keith and Malinda walk to down center stage, she taking a picnic basket from an Ensemble member.

As the ensemble exits, Keith and Malinda kneel together and put together their little picnic.

As they share and talk, the left and right stage are set up: at SR, Malinda's home with a table and two chairs, on one of which ELIZABETH PRITCHARD, mother of Malinda, sits, paring potatoes.

At stage left, another table has been set with two chairs, two bowls and a pot of stew with a ladle. At THIS sits AUSTIN COFFEY, stepfather of Keith. He is a tough but gentle soul.

KEITH

We knew each other from our school days.

MALINDA

We liked each other from the start.

ELIZABETH PRITCHARD

Malinda!

AUSTIN COFFEY

Keith!

The lovers share a brief kiss then hurry off stage.

ELIZABETH & AUSTIN

Where be ye?

Keith enters his home.

AUSTIN COFFEY

You beat the moonrise, Will, but not by much.

KEITH

(grinning)
I told ya, Pa! Call me Keith!

AUSTIN COFFEY

(smiling as he ladles both
bowls)
Ain't your name. I looked in your Ma's family Bible: "William
McKesson Blalock." Not a K, E, I or T-H in there.

KEITH

"Keith" ain't my birth name. It's my honor name.

AUSTIN COFFEY

You're meanin' Alfred Keith?

KEITH

That's right! The best bare-knuckle boxer in the South!
Ever'one calls me that 'cause I fight just like him!

AUSTIN COFFEY

(smiling)
You're like him, but you ain't him.

Across the stage, MALINDA enters her
"house," sits across from her mother,
and begins peeling potatoes. Her mother
looks up and they smile at one another.

KEITH

(laughing)
And you ain't really my daddy!

AUSTIN

Closest you got since your first one died.

KEITH

And the best one I ever had! That's why I call you Pa! It's
an honor name!

AUSTIN

Then I guess I'll have to call you Keith!

AUSTIN & ELIZABETH

Where you been?

KEITH & MALINDA

On Grandfather Mountain.

ELIZABETH PRITCHARD

Grandfather Mountain! That rock is swarming with Blalocks!
Are you outta your mind?

MALINDA

Don't worry, Ma. I didn't shoot any of 'em.

ELIZABETH PRITCHARD

What if one of them got sight o' you?

MALINDA

They don't shoot women and half of them Blalock boys couldn't
hit a horse if it was standin' on their foot, anyhow.

ELIZABETH PRITCHARD

I hear that Keith Blalock's a dead shot.

For a moment they just look at each
other as Malinda turns red.

ELIZABETH PRITCHARD (CONT'D)

And thinking he hit you right dead smack in the heart.

Malinda reacts with a gasp and
furiously hacks at her potato.

Across the stage the men have been
silently eating. Austin startles his
stepson when he speaks.

AUSTIN

So what were you doin' up on Grandfather?

KEITH

Huntin'!

AUSTIN

What kind of game?

KEITH

I dunno. Deer.

AUSTIN

Deer.

KEITH

Or wild hogs! Whatever turned up!

AUSTIN

Any luck?

KEITH

(after a beat:)

Nope.

AUSTIN

Talk in town's you been makin' sweet on that Pritchard girl.

KEITH & MALINDA

(looking up)

Just what are you gettin'at?

AUSTIN & ELIZABETH

--the Pritchards and the Blalocks have been feudin' for nigh on a hundred and fifty years!

Malinda rises out of her chair and storms back and forth.

AUSTIN

...Your own Pa was cut down by Pritchard bushwhackers when you were knee-high to a rabbit.

KEITH

We don't know that!

AUSTIN

We don't know the sun's gonna rise, but it's a pretty sure bet.

MALINDA

What are we feudin' over anyhow?

ELIZABETH PRITCHARD

Oh, who knows? It started back in Scotland, God knows how long ago--

MALINDA & ELIZABETH

--"and He ain't sayin'!"

KEITH & MALINDA

Then maybe it's time we end this thing.

AUSTIN & ELIZABETH

(sarcastic)

Why, certain!

ELIZABETH PRITCHARD

Child, you think you can make peace all sweet and pretty,
like in some kind of silly play?

MALINDA

Well, call Keith Romeo and name me Juliet.

ELIZABETH PRITCHARD

They stopped the feud, I recall, but it didn't end too well
for those them!

AUSTIN COFFEY

Well, I don't know what your Ma will say but I ain't fool
enough to interfere with a pair of--

AUSTIN & ELIZABETH

Star-crossed lovers!

MALINDA

It won't end that way for us.

ELIZABETH PRITCHARD

Remains to be seen, child.

She taps the potatoes and Malinda sits
and begins paring again.

AUSTIN

You think you can haul that girl to the church and not get
curicified by a Pritchard, you go right ahead.

KEITH

I'm glad you said that, 'cause--

KEITH & MALINDA

We're engaged!

ELIZABETH PRITCHARD

My God, I'm glad your father died two years ago.

MALINDA

Ma!

ELIZABETH PRITCHARD

Hush.

AUSTIN & ELIZABETH

You're dead set on this?

KEITH & MALINDA

You bet I am!

AUSTIN

(hugging him)
 Congratulations, son. I know she's a firecracker.

KEITH

(hugging him)
 Thanks, Pa!

AUSTIN exits, leaving KEITH leaning
 back, fingers woven behind his head,
 grinning.

MALINDA

You'll come to the wedding?

ELIZABETH PRITCHARD

'Course I will. We all will. But when you kiss him after
 Pastor Muir says his man-and-wife thing, you jump back quick.

MALINDA

Why?

ELIZABETH PRITCHARD

'Cause I don't want you too close when your uncle blows that
 boy's head off.

(SHE picks up the bowl of
 potatoes and touches Malinda's
 cheek)

Yes, sir, you're gonna be the quickest young widow these
 mountains have ever seen!

(gives HER a kiss)

But the prettiest too!

She exits.

SONG: "I WANT TO GROW OLD WITH YOU"

KEITH

I FIRST FELL IN LOVE WITH YOU
 WHEN YOU OUTRAN THE BOYS

MALINDA

EVEN YOU!

KEITH

RUNNING DOWN THE HILL.
 YOU OUT-COOKED YOUR MA
 YOU OUTSHOT YOUR PA,
 AND YOU LEFT THE PURTY GIRLS
 STANDING STILL ALL ALONE

MALINDA

I FIRST FELL IN LOVE WITH YOU
 WHEN YOU PINNED THE TEACHER TO THE WALL

KEITH

OFF THE FLOOR!

MALINDA

"YOU LET THAT GIRL BE!"
 YOU WHIPPED ALL THE BOYS,
 BROKE 'EM JUST LIKE TOYS
 AND YOUR SMILE SURE DID CAPTURE ME

They cross to each other at center
 stage.

KEITH & MALINDA

PROMISE ME YOUR HAND!

MALINDA

I'LL BE YOUR GIRL

KEITH

I'LL BE YOUR MAN

KEITH & MALINDA

BECAUSE I WANT, I WANT
 BECAUSE I WANT TO GROW OLD WITH YOU!

MALINDA

YOU'RE MORE THAN JUST BRAWN
 YOU'VE GOT LOTS OF BRAINS
 YOU KNOW THAT I LOVE THAT TOO!

KEITH

YOU'RE TOUGH, YOU GOT SASS
 AND STILL A GREAT ASPIRATION.
 AND YOU KNOW THAT I LOVE THAT TOO!

MALINDA

SO WHO REALLY CARES
 IF OUR FOLKS WANT TO FIGHT
 YOU KNOW WE WERE MEANT TO BE.

KEITH

THEY'D SHOOT THEY'D KILL EACH OTHER DEAD
WHY CAN'T THEY LEAVE, JUST LEAVE IT BE?

KEITH & MALINDA

WE'RE BOTH MEANT TO BE,
ME AND YOU, DON'T YOU SEE?
AND THEY'LL HAVE TO GET IT THROUGH THEIR HEADS

KEITH & MALINDA (CONT'D)

PROMISE ME YOUR HAND!

MALINDA

BY YOUR GIRL

KEITH

BE YOUR MAN

KEITH & MALINDA

MAKE ME ALL YOU CAN
CAUSE I WANNA GROW OLD WITH YOU!

MALINDA

CAUSE I WANNA GROW OLD

KEITH

CAUSE I WANNA GROW OLD

KEITH & MALINDA

CAUSE I WANNA GROW OLD WITH YOU!

FADE OUT