

# settin' up with the dead

a one-act play

leila shelley

*persons of the play*

ELIZA TREADWELL, a corpse

SALLY DONOVAN, a pretty girl of eighteen, niece of the dead woman

PHIL HARDEN, a young man with a bad reputation

MAG WILLIAMS, an elderly widow

MOLLY SHARP, a middle-aged wife

ALMA ADAMS, a resigned old maid at thirty

*scene of the play*

A front bedroom in the home of the dead woman and her niece. At back, left, stands a large old-fashioned bed, placed in such a position that the foot-board hides from the audience the corpse that is laid out on the bed. Back, right, a bureau, on which stands two kerosene lamps, one lighted. Right, rear, a door leading into the kitchen; back, extreme left, an outside door. Left, a couch standing under a curtained window. Right, front, a Franklin stove with a cheerful fire. Behind the stove is a mantel; placed around the fire are two rockers and a kitchen chair. The room is furnished in the rather gloomy, over-ornamented style of the nineties.

---

When the curtain rises SALLY and PHIL are standing at the foot of the bed, in silence, their backs to the audience. There is a very short pause.

SALLY (turning half about)—I'd rather you'd go, Phil. I can't bear to have you here.

PHIL (facing her)—I know, Sally, I know how you feel. It's terrible, and all that. But don't you realize we're free now? Don't it make you a little bit happy?

SALLY—Happy!

PHIL—Yes, good God! Ain't it anything to be happy about, now that you can come and go as you please—let me come here, or walk in the public street with me if you want to? It's like being let out of jail!

SALLY—Well, she was hard . . . But still I expect she was right.

PHIL (taking her hand)—I thought you was crazy about me.

SALLY—I am—no, no—I don't know! It was fun, meeting you places without her knowing. But now—I keep thinking, if she could see you, right here in her own house, and her not hardly cold!

PHIL—It's right for me to be here with you.

SALLY—No, it's not right . . . It's enough to make her sit up there and drive me out of her house! (She pulls away her hand and walks over to the fire.)

PHIL—I guess you're kind of nervous.

SALLY (impatiently)—No, I'm not nervous! But a time like this you see things different. She was an old woman, and like as not she knew what she was talking about.

PHIL—Yes, of course; probably she did. But what has all that got to do with us?

SALLY—Oh, Phil, it's started me thinking. About you, about men—She always said there was two kinds of men, the kind that married you and worked you to death, and the kind that didn't marry you and—and left you worse off than dead.

PHIL (coming towards her)—Sally, that's a hell of a way for you to talk, and us going to get married and all. You're not like yourself. (He takes her into his arms and kisses her.)

SALLY (resisting him)—Oh, why can't you go away and let me alone! (There is a sound of footsteps outside, and people stamping off snow.) Phil, quick! Run out by the kitchen door. It's the women come to set up. (She pushes him toward door right.)

PHIL—Try to get some sleep . I'll be back in the morning.  
(He goes out. A knock at the outer door.)

SALLY (trying to compose herself)—Come in! (Enter MAG WIL-

LIAMS, MOLLY SHARP, and ALMA ADAMS, brushing off the snow decorously, and coming toward SALLY with gestures of sympathy.)

MAG (in a low voice, laying her hand on SALLY'S shoulder)—Poor child, are you all by yourself?

SALLY (with an uneasy glance toward the kitchen)—Just for a little while. The women that laid her out left half an hour or so ago. Just put your things on the couch. (The women take off their wraps and lay them on the sofa, moving softly.)

MOLLY—Do you mind if we see her? (SALLY leads them to the bed, and they stand staring at the corpse.) My, ain't she pretty?

ALMA—I declare, just like a young girl. And she was how old, Sally?

SALLY—Fifty-four last August.

MOLLY—Who'd 'a' believed it! Just like a girl!

MAG—Did you have any supper, child?

SALLY—Yes, I had some.

MAG—You look wore out. Why don't you lay down and rest?

SALLY—I believe I will, now you're all here. Just take chairs. There's more wood behind the stove, and there's some coffee and doughnuts in the kitchen, if you get kind of hungry.

MOLLY—We'll get what we need, Sally. Don't you worry, but just try to go to sleep if you can. Poor kid! (SALLY moves the wraps to one end of the sofa and lies down.)

ALMA—Here, put my coat over you—it's chilly by that window. (The three women settle themselves by the fire.)

MAG (with a sigh)—Well, poor Liza. Another old familiar face gone from us.

ALMA—We'll sure miss her. Especially at church. Liza was such a good woman, seemed like always doing good to others.

MOLLY—Yes, Liza was good. But of course she had no call to be otherwise, never having any of her own to look after, excepting Sally here.

ALMA—Always like a mother to Sally, she was. Never was a better raised girl, particularly for an orphan.

MAG—Well, Sally *is* a good girl. But I used to sometimes think Liza was maybe over-hard on Sally. She never saw things like a young girl does, you couldn't expect it at her age, and her never married, either.

ALMA—Well, Mag, I've heard a lot about marriage being so broadening, and all that—but so far as I'm concerned I never saw much in it. I allow if it was give to me to raise up a girl I could do a better job of it than many a married woman I know.

MAG—Well, of course, Almy—far be it from me to say. And we all have our failures. But nevertheless it can't be denied that Liza was always strict with Sally.

ALMA—Yes, and a precious good thing for her, too! I've often thought, though it's not the thing to say, I guess, that it was better for Sally that she lost her own mother. Helen was a flighty one, I've heard, different to Liza.

MOLLY—Well, she was a pretty one. The picture of her mother, Sally is, and I always 'lowed she would be turned like her, too. But she's a sight quieter and more of a stay-at-home. (Their eyes wander toward the sofa, on which SALLY lies, apparently asleep.)

MAG—I wonder if she's warm. Seems like I feel a draught. (She goes over to SALLY and puts another coat over her feet.) Just dead for sleep! This has worn her plumb down to the bone. (MOLLY takes a look at the fire and throws on another stick. MAG sits down.

All have their backs to SALLY.)

ALMA—I guess you used to know Sally's mother, didn't you, Molly?

MOLLY—Oh, yes, I knew 'em all, knew 'em since I was that high. Helen was about my age, and Liza then was older. She was a young lady, going with the boys, when I was a little thing in school.

MAG—I've heard tell Liza was right pretty herself when she was young. That was before I come here.

MOLLY—She was quite handsome, and always got herself up nice. But Liza was proud as the mischief. People always said that was

how she come to lose this fellow Helen married, Ed Donovan. Maybe you never heard of it, but to begin with Liza was crazy about him, and they was supposed to be engaged. Then before anybody knew what was up he was off and eloped with Helen.

ALMA—You don't say!

MAG—I had heard that. Poor Liza, I guess that was what set her off to be an old maid.

ALMA (with a deep sigh)—Well, I guess there ain't no woman but what has some romance in her life. Sooner or later.

MOLLY—No, I reckon not. And what I say is, a woman's a fool not to take advantage of her opportunities when they come.

ALMA—Opportunities, rubbish! I suppose you think Liza would have done better to have married that no-count Ed, then? A lot he amounted to, going off like he did and deserting his wife and little baby! Cause of her death, I've heard.

MOLLY—I don't know as he ever cared much for Helen. But Liza now, nine times out of ten, could have brought him out of that and made a man of him. Too proud, just too proud to take a-hold of the man she loved and make something of him.

MAG—Well, in a way I don't blame him. Life with Liza, and her trying to make something of you, wouldn't 'a' been any too pleasant!

MOLLY—I ain't saying Ed was such a wonderful catch. But what I do say is that a woman is better off married.

ALMA—I never saw anything like the way married women talk. A single woman's got a God's plenty to be thankful for. I never did know a married woman but what would admit, if she come right down to it, that there never was a day she didn't some time wished she was single.

MOLLY—Maybe so, but by the same token a single woman never passes a night but what she wishes she was married!

MAG (raising her hand to quiet them, for their voices have risen)—Come now, girls; this is the house of the dead. (There is a short pause.)

ALMA (in a lower voice)—Well, however it may be, Liza done well by herself, and she done well by Sally, the poor little orphan.

MOLLY—Yes, she sure brought Sally up to be a good Christian girl. There is a lot to be said for Liza.

MAG—But Liza is gone now, and Sally is still just a child. She has her big problems still to face. And it won't be easy, when she finds herself alone, after all these years of never having to make up her mind about a form thing.

ALMA—I ain't worrying about Sally. The Bible says, bring up a child in the way that he should go, and in his old age he will not depart therefrom.

MAG—She's got a long ways to go before she gets to her old age. Anybody can be good at my age! (With a chuckle.) My, I'm stiff and tired already from setting! (She gets up and stretches herself.) It's about time we had that coffee, ain't it?

MOLLY—That's the way I feel too. I'll see what I can do about it. (She goes toward the kitchen, and ALMA follows her. They stop at the bureau to light another lamp and carry it to the kitchen.)

MAG—I'll just wait here, I guess you can find things.

MOLLY (through the kitchen door)—Sure, you just rest, Mag.

(MAG stretches out in a rocker, covering her eyes with her hands to keep out the firelight. SALLY sits up on the couch, looks about uneasily, then lies down again, with her back to the audience.)

MOLLY (reentering with a plate of doughnuts, which she places on the shelf behind the stove.)—I'll let Alma tend the coffee. She's heating it up on the oil stove. (She sits down and begins to rock, meditatively.) Say, Mag, somebody was telling me the Harden boy is around here again.

MAG—You mean Tom, the one that was sent up for stealing tires, or whatever it was?

MOLLY—No, this is the young one, Phil. But they was all an onery lot.

MAG—I never heard of Phil doing anything wrong, to speak of. A good-lookin' boy, he was.

MOLLY—Well, I never cared for the bold-faced way he had. Like

he owned the place, and him coming of such a family. About like the rest of 'em, I expect.

ALMA (coming with the coffee pot, sugar and cream)—Who's that you're talking about, Molly?

MOLLY—Those Hardens. I see Phil's back here.

ALMA—Is that so? (Pouring coffee) What's he doing around here?

MOLLY—Land knows—working in a garage, they say. Up to no good, I reckon. (They sit drinking coffee and eating doughnuts, their backs to SALLY. SALLY throws off the coats, and sits up, listening.)

MAG—O, well, Molly, I wouldn't be hard. Just because all his folks was onery don't mean Phil has to be.

MOLLY—Well, he's a brassy impudent thing. Got a lot of nerve to come back around here, seems to me, after all the scandal there's been—his mother running off with that fellow that time, and then Tom in the pen for stealing.

ALMA—People like that *have* got nerve. No shame about them. But then what can you expect, with no Christian upbringing and no family behind them? Runs in the blood, oneryness does.

MAG—I reckon so. And so does narrow-mindedness and a liking for gossip. (ALMA and MOLLY are silent, their noses in the air.) Well, Sally! (SALLY has come forward, unsteadily, staring at them with suppressed emotion.) Did you get your nap out?

SALLY—Quite a while ago, Aunt Mag. I—I didn't sleep long. (She stands still, looking down at them oddly.)

MOLLY—Well, I think you didn't sleep long. Don't you want some coffee? I'll run and get a cup.

SALLY (motioning MOLLY to sit down)—No, I don't want any. I'll stand by the fire a minute.

ALMA—I'm afraid we disturbed you with our gabble.

SALLY (standing with her back to the fire, clasping and unclasping her hands)—No—that is, I wasn't asleep. But—there's something I want to tell you. (There is a curious silence, as they look at her.) You don't know what you're talking about, none of you, about Phil Harden.

MOLLY—What do you mean, don't know what we're talking about?

SALLY—I mean you don't know him, you're just judging him by hearsay—and you're wrong, I tell you! (Her voice rises.)

ALMA—Well, I guess we ought to know; we've lived around here all our lives, and everybody knows what the Hardens are.

MOLLY—What do *you* know about him?

SALLY (almost crying)—I know he's all right! You—you old slanderers—you're not worth his little finger!

MAG (rising and putting her arm around SALLY)—Sally, Sally! You're all worked up; you don't know what you're saying!

SALLY (standing up rigidly)—I do, I do! *They* don't know him!

MAG—Well, do you know him?

SALLY—Oh, Aunt Mag, we're going to be married! I guess I know him pretty well, I'm going to marry him! (SALLY drops her head on MAG's shoulder, sobbing.)

MOLLY (looking aghast)—Well, for the land sakes! Mag, I think the girl is out of her head. She's just overwrought with grief.

SALLY (lifting her head)—Grief! Oh, I have never been happy a moment till now! I have never been free till now.

MOLLY—Hush, child, hush! Don't talk so, like a maniac, and your aunt laying there a corpse—your aunt, that would have given her life to have saved you from this!

SALLY—A fine way for you to talk, Molly Sharp, after all that you just said about marriage and—and love! Ain't it anything that I love him? (MOLLY shakes her head sadly.)

ALMA—The Lord pity her! What would Liza say if she could know?

SALLY—Do you think I haven't thought about that? All my life I have never thought about anything else but what Aunt Liza would say!

MOLLY—And is this all her good influence has come to, that you are bound and determined to throw yourself away on that scamp?

SALLY—Oh, I guess you think it's been easy—that I never had a

notion in my head but to deceive her and go against her will. But I tell you nothing was ever so hard. After she died it seemed like her power over me was stronger than when she was alive, and I was so wore out I was ready to give in. Why, it's not two hours since I drove Phil out of this house, and I hoped to God he would never come back!

ALMA—Well, pray God he never does.

SALLY—But he will come back, and I'll know what to say to him. Thanks to you, Molly, I'll know enough to take him back and hold him.

MOLLY—Thanks to me!

SALLY—Yes, thanks to you! You'll never get a chance to say of me what you said of Aunt Liza—that I was too proud to take a-hold of the man I loved and make something of him!

MOLLY—I never saw such impudence! The idey of making out that I encouraged a thing like that!

MAG (as Sally is about to reply angrily)—Come now, dear, you're going right to bed in your own room. (Leading her toward kitchen door.) You won't be afraid, we're right here. You must get some sleep. Go to sleep in your own little bed, and dream about your boy friend if you want to. (She leads Sally out through the kitchen door.)

MOLLY—Well, of all things! Did you ever hear the like?

ALMA—She's the last person in the world I'd have believed that of, and her brought up like she was!

MOLLY—Mag makes me tired, encouraging a child in such nonsense. sometimes I think Mag is getting childish, ain't got right good judgment.

ALMA—Well, the poor ignorant little thing—she don't know life, not the first thing about life, but she'll find out soon enough, married to that low-down fellow!

MOLLY—Imagine Mag Williams, at her age, countenancing a thing like that!

ALMA—It just shows you, don't it, Molly—it runs in the blood. Flighty, like you said her mother was. (MAG comes in, closing the kitchen door softly.)

MOLLY—Well, that shows you—you can't put no trust in children, no matter what pains you take with 'em. Poor old Liza, and her not hardly cold! (MOLLY and ALMA walk over toward the bed and stand looking down at the corpse.)

ALMA—Yes, poor Liza! It's a God's blessing she went when she did. MAG (drawing the most comfortable chair close to the fire.)—Now I want one of you to lay down and get a little rest and quiet. A fine way to set up with the dead, and this racket going on! Molly, you lay down on the couch there, and Alma and I can rest in our chairs. (She sits down and leans back comfortably.) Seems like it must be near morning, but I reckon not. (ALMA and MOLLY continue to stand disconsolately near the bed.) I'd 'a' brought my quilt pieces if I'd 'a' known time was going to hand so heavy. I'm working on such a nice new pattern, called the Double Wedding Ring. I 'low I'll work fast on that, and if the Ladies' Aid can get it quilted in time it'll be for their wedding present, Sally and Phil's. (MAG folds her hands and sits smiling into the fire. ALMA and MOLLY stand looking gloomily at the bed.)

CURTAIN