LANCASTER PLANTATION, Alabama, March 1861

SCENE I

The cotton fields

Enter JOHN stage right carrying a large basket. He bends over, picks cotton, and puts it into his basket. He winces in pain as he does so and puts a hand to his back.

JOHN: (makes a barely audible grunt)

Enter DESMOND stage left. He is around fourteen or fifteen years old and looks cheerful. Compared to JOHN, he is dressed aristocratically, but does not carry himself like he feels himself above JOHN.

DESMOND: Need help with that?

JOHN: Um, no, sir.

DESMOND: (lightheartedly) Right, you never need help. (Grabs basket lying on the ground and starts picking cotton with JOHN)

MASTER LANCASTER: (shouts from offstage) DESMOND!

DESMOND: (looks up in surprise)

Enter MASTER LANCASTER stage left. He is standing upright and leaning on a cane. He resembles DESMOND to some degree, but looks considerably more stern and is around forty-five years old.
MASTER LANCASTER: Ah, Desmond. There you are. Don't just go off into the fields like that. All the slaves are busy looking for you while they need to spend their time doing more important things.

JOHN: Not all the slaves, mast'r.

MASTER LANCASTER: What did you say?

JOHN: Nothing, mast'r.

MASTER LANCASTER: Do not speak to me unless you have something worthwhile to say, John. Which I doubt you do. (turns to)

DESMOND) DESMOND, come with me.

DESMOND: Yes, Father.

Exit DESMOND and MASTER LANCASTER stage left.

SCENE II

The office of MASTER LANCASTER

Enter MASTER LANCASTER and DESMOND stage right.

MASTER LANCASTER: (sits down in chair) Now, Desmond, what I wanted to speak to you about was about... why you seem to always be found in the slave quarters. The slave quarters are completely unfit for a young man like you to spend your time in, and if word ever got out that you had
been seen in the slave quarters doing anything other than giving orders, it would not be an asset to you; let us keep it at that. So, Desmond, what I want to make clear is this. You are no longer allowed to visit the slave quarters unless you want to give an order. Do I make myself clear?

DESMOND: Yes, Father. But... is it true that we are understaffed on slaves? Would it be advantageous to you for me to possibly work with them on occasion?

MASTER LANCASTER: (Immediately responds) Absolutely not. I cannot risk our family's reputation. Besides, I was going to order another shipment of slaves next week.

DESMOND: (Quickly speaks) Please, Father, don't do that!

MASTER LANCASTER: What did you say to me?

DESMOND: (Retreats apologetically) I'm sorry.

MASTER LANCASTER: I simply do not understand. You have always been so... (hesitates, as if searching for the right word) ...protective, of the slaves, and you are ever so much worse about it now. I have told you, they are not worth caring about! All they will ever be any use for is picking cotton and doing manual labor. They simply cannot perform the same sophisticated tasks that we are capable of. That is why the law forbids them to read... it would only be a waste of time.

DESMOND: Would you change your views if I proved that they can, if given a chance?

MASTER LANCASTER: (Strokes chin) I doubt that. But it is always possible, I suppose.

DESMOND: If one of your slaves learned to read in... a month, say, then would you let that slave and his family go?

MASTER LANCASTER: (Thinks hard) Perhaps.
DESMOND: If I taught a young slave child of my choice to read, would you do that?

MASTER LANCASTER: I do not follow.

DESMOND: If I taught a slave to read, would you let him and his family go free?

MASTER LANCASTER: But that is illegal!

DESMOND: There are a few rare things that can justify breaking the law. In essence, this may be a matter of life and death. So many of your slaves have died this past year.

MASTER LANCASTER: (Nods thoughtfully) Yes?

DESMOND: I know of a certain man and his weak, sick daughter who likely would not survive the year if things remained unchanged.

MASTER LANCASTER: Oh, do you mean that slave John and his daughter Ruth? They were never a profitable buy to begin with.

DESMOND: So would it cost you much to let them go if I chose to teach Ruth to read? You have hundreds of slaves.

MASTER LANCASTER: No, it would hardly cost me anything.

DESMOND: Will you allow me to make this deal?

MASTER LANCASTER: (Sits in silence for a long moment before speaking) Fine.

DESMOND: Thank you.

MASTER LANCASTER: One more detail. The child must learn in one month. No more.
DESMOND: (Nods head in agreement) Yes, Father.

Exit DESMOND stage right.

MASTER LANCASTER: (Settles into a slightly more relaxed position while keeping his aristocratic posture)

Enter MRS. LANCASTER stage left.

MASTER LANCASTER: I just had a most interesting conversation with our son.

MRS. LANCASTER: And what might that have been?

MASTER LANCASTER: I do not mean to disturb you...

MRS. LANCASTER: (Interrupts hastily) Oh, you will not disturb me.

MASTER LANCASTER: If you say so... It is a bit of a problem... I have noticed that he has been spending an excessive amount of time in the slave quarters.

MRS. LANCASTER: (Puts hand to heart as if in shock, gasps loudly, and dramatically faints)

MASTER LANCASTER: (Suddenly turns soft and tender) Oh, dear, do not be vexed... I was afraid of this.

MRS. LANCASTER: (Suddenly revives, indignantly) I was NOT disturbed!

MASTER LANCASTER: Of course not, dear, of course you weren't disturbed at all. (Resumes His formal, stiff posture) Now, would you like for me to continue?

MRS. LANCASTER: (Staggers too her feet, appearing quite disturbed) Yes, I would.
MASTER LANCASTER: And I have made a... deal, as you would, with the boy. If he can teach a slave child to read in a month's time, then that child and his family may go free.

MRS. LANCASTER: (Snorts disdainfully) Well, that's impossible!

MASTER LANCASTER: I am fairly certain that it will not happen, at least not in a month. But, I have a plan. I will ensure that Desmond will not have the time to teach any slave child to read. I will burden him with his own studies; the victor in this gamble is me.

MRS. LANCASTER: Wonderful.

SCENE III

The slave quarters

Enter DESMOND stage left.

Enter JOHN stage right.

DESMOND: (Cups his hand around his mouth and places it next to JOHN's ear as if whispering)

JOHN: Yes, mast'r, ye can teach my daughter to read. I'll fetch her for ye. Just take it easy on her, 'cause she's sick.

DESMOND: That's all right; I will.

Exit JOHN stage right. He shortly emerges stage right carrying RUTH, who is a small seven-year-old.
DESMOND: Thank you.

Exit JOHN stage right.

DESMOND: I only have a really short time, so I need you to work very hard on your own. Do you think you can memorize the alphabet in a day?

RUTH: How long is it?

DESMOND: Only twenty-six letters. In China, they have thousands of letters to learn. Aren’t you glad that you only have to learn twenty-six?

RUTH: (Smiles and nods)

DESMOND: Well, let’s get started.

(Curtain closes and reopens with RUTH standing alone)

RUTH: A, B, C, D, E...

(Curtain closes and reopens again with RUTH and DESMOND sitting together)

DESMOND: Good job learning the alphabet yesterday. Now today we focus on letter sounds, but I have a very short time, because I have a lot of work. Sometimes I almost think that my father is trying to keep me from having the time to teach you to read.

(Curtain closes once more and reopens with RUTH standing alone)

RUTH: A can say “ah” and ay” and...

(Curtain closes and reopens with RUTH and DESMOND sitting together looking at a book)
(Curtain closes and reopens with RUTH flipping through Desmond's book)

(Finally curtain closes and reopens again with no one on the scene)

Enter DESMOND stage left.

MASTER LANCASTER: (Says from offstage) So, it has been a month.

DESMOND: Yes.

Enter MASTER LANCASTER stage left.

MASTER LANCASTER: So no slaves will be freed.

DESMOND: Actually, Father, I think that you will find just the opposite.

Enter JOHN and RUTH stage right.

MASTER LANCASTER: What is the meaning of this?

JOHN: My daughter's learned to read!

MASTER LANCASTER: How is this true? Desmond, how did you possibly find the time to teach her?

DESMOND: I did not have much time. I made the most of the little time I did have, but it was really
Ruth who should get the credit. She memorized what I told her, and all I had to do was teach her the
alphabet and letter sounds, really, and I gave her plenty of literature.

MASTER LANCASTER: I'll believe it when I see it. John, fetch me the daily newspaper!

Exit JOHN stage left. He appears shortly afterwards carrying a newspaper.

MASTER LANCASTER: Now give it to the girl.
JOHN: (Gives newspaper to RUTH)

MASTER LANCASTER: Now read me the head column.

RUTH: "Union Declares War on Confederate States."

(MASTER LANCASTER takes in a sharp breath and looks nervous, while JOHN stands stunned)

MASTER LANCASTER: (Takes a step back) Well... all right. You two have your freedom. I will take you to the courthouse tomorrow, and... get you your documents of freedom, if that is what you want.

JOHN: Thank ye, mast'r. Thank ye, Desmond. I'll miss ye.

DESMOND: I'll miss you and Ruth, too.

Exit MASTER LANCASTER angrily.

JOHN: One day, I hope everyone will be free.

DESMOND: One day, they will. Until then, we simply do the best we can.

(Curtains close, actors bow)