

SCENE III

(The music begins, quietly at first but with a note of foreboding and imminent tragedy, and quickly builds up into a martial spirit emphasized by the deep throated booming of the drums, the staccato beats of the kettle drums, and the clashing of the cymbals. Then the music dies away, the lights go out completely on the audience and come up on the Narrator, who turns several leaves in his big book before he speaks.

NARRATOR

The years have passed since the patriots in the little log court house in Charlottetown issued their challenge to mighty Great Britain. Out at Alexandriana the sugar maples have flamed red, and the bolder, more brash black gums and sweet gums have flaunted their reds and greens and browns and yellows of a gypsy's dress, and the leaves have fallen at the chill breath of winter, and have come again, and again.

But there has been only a false and uneasy peace even here in Mecklenburg, and the hearts of men and women are heavy with foreboding, for there is talk of war coming close and ever closer, and tragedy seems always just beyond the red hills.

Blood has been spilt, for down at the Widow Moore's Creek bridge in the Scotch country brothers have slain brothers as the patriots have fought off the attacking Tories, and the first victory of the Revolution has been won. For this is revolution indeed and now the colonies are warring openly with the Mother Country. The Province of North Carolina through representatives assembled at Halifax has adopted a constitution, regiments of North Carolina troops, including many from Mecklenburg, have marched north to join General Washington, and at Valley Forge in the terrible winter of 1777-1778 have suffered from hunger and desperate cold.

And now the fighting has moved south, and Mecklenburgers have hastened off to the defense of Charles Town, and with them have gone quiet, earnest Dr. Ephraim Brevard, and in the forefront of one of the companies of light horse a young lieutenant whose name will attain a high place in North Carolina history, William Richardson Davie.

But at home women are left to care for the children, and cook and clean and sew and knit--and pray--and always to hope, and pray again.

(The light goes down on the Narrator and comes up on the set. Old Pat Jack walks out through his tavern door, apron about his fat middle. He is coatless but is wearing a waistcoat, unbuttoned down the front. On the porch he shivers, looks down Tryon Street toward Nicholson's Tavern, then up the street, catches sight of Jethro O'Flannagan, who is coming toward him from the left. He throws up his hand.)

UNCLE PAT

Heigh-o, Jethro! Come in the house, boy.

(As Jethro walks up.)

Aint seen you in a coon's age. Tell me you and David's been up 'bout Valley Forge.

JETHRO

(Offering his hand. His left arm is in sling.)

We shore have, Uncle Pat. Pretty rough up there, too.

UNCLE PAT

Look a-here, boy. What's wrong with that there arm? Got it fightin' them Britishers?

JETHRO

God hit busted up at Brandywine in the battle up that a-way, Uncle Pat. 'Twas sixteen Redcoats jumped on me whilst I warn't lookin' and about five of them plugged me in the arm and a couple

jammed they bay'nets into hit afore I got goin'. Course I killed thirteen o' them and the other three took to they feet and got away.

UNCLE PAT

By crackity, Jethro. You musta been powerful busy long 'bout then.

(His expression puzzled.)

And look a-here. They tell me the Battle at Brandywine was in the fall of seventy-seven. Yore arm's takin' a powerful time to get well.

(Changing his tone.)

Le's get inside. It's pretty chilly out here, Jethro.

JETHRO

I was jes' lookin' fer Davy to come out o' Lawyer Avery's office. We wuz figurin' on havin' a couple o' swigs o' that good stewed wine. Still keep hit, don't you, Uncle Pat?

UNCLE PAT

Yes, and it feels mighty good in a man's stomach these chilly days, too.

JETHRO

Yo're right, Uncle Pat. But talkin' 'bout cold weather, you ought to been up at Valley Forge.

UNCLE PAT

I heared tell it was mighty cold up there, Jethro.

JETHRO

Cold! Uncle Pat, you heared tell right. I mind one mornin'-- you see, Uncle Pat, the North Ca'lina troop's dugouts was out in front o' General Washington's headquarters, right perninst 'em, in fact--an' I mind I walked out early one mornin' to catch some fresh air. It was powerful smelly in them dugouts because they tried to

keep all the heat in they could. Well, I walked outside to git some fresh air. The snow hit was waist deep an' I was wallowin' round out in front of our dugout when I stumbled right smack up to a big solemn lookin' man in a cocked hat and a blue coat with green trimmings. An' dad-gumme, Uncle Pat, if'n it warn't General Washington his ownself--

UNCLE PAT

(Very interested.)

The General his ownself, Jethro?

JETHRO

The General his ownself as sure as the Old Scratch, Uncle Pat. Well, I saluted big like, and dad-blimme if'n the General didn't salute back.

UNCLE PAT

He done that, Jethro?

JETHRO

He done hit. Yes, sir. He knocked me off a right snappy salute, an' he looked so friendly and common that I raised my hat and passed the time o' mornin' with him and 'lowed it was plumb cold weather. "Yes, sir, Colonel O'Flannagan," he says, says he, "hit's damnably cold, sir; you're certainly right about that, Colonel O'Flannagan."

UNCLE PAT

You're the first man I ever heard tell he really talked with the General. There's been others from round here that's seen him. My boy Jim seen him when he was up in Philadelphy that time with them declaration papers, but he just seen him when he rid by. He didn't pass no words with him. What else did you all say to each other, Jethro? And look a-here, did the General really cuss?

JETHRO

Well, I wouldn't call hit cussin', Uncle Pat. Hit was damnacious cold.

UNCLE PAT

Look a-here, Jethro. Did you say he called you 'Colonel O'Flannagan?' By crackity, you shore got to be a colonel mighty quick, and the General shore learned yore name in a powerful hurry.

JETHRO

Well, Uncle Pat, I gits around pretty much, and I tries to be neighborly like an'--

UNCLE PAT

(Interrupting.)

What else did you two good friends say to each other?

JETHRO

Not much more, Uncle Pat. It was too cold. I think I said something 'bout wishin' I could git a-hold o' that fellow Clinton over 'bout Philadelphy and the General he 'lowed that's just what he was a-wantin' to do his ownself--

UNCLE PAT

(Interrupting again.)

Look a-here, Jethro O'Flannagan. You are either drunk or you're tellin' one damnacious big lie.

JETHRO

(Slapping Uncle Pat a resounding whack in his chest that almost dislodges the old man's spectacles.)

Both, Uncle Pat!

(He bends over, laughing heartily. Then he straightens up, points to his arm in the sling.)

Brandywine. Hah-hah-hah-h-h)

(He guffaws.)

You know, what, Uncle Pat? Got too much o' Mr. McKnitt's new run o' corn liquor t'other day an' hit made me so happy I fell of'n my horse an' knocked hit out o' place. But hit'll be all right in a spell.

(The light fades, comes up on the Narrator.)

NARRATOR

Cold winter marches through the Carolinas and the Carolinas lie cold an desolate and fearful under the tread of its invasion. In Mecklenburg candles burn and spinning wheels whirl and looms clack late into the nights and the tired sore fingers of women card wool and push knitting needles and sew endless seams. For the men and boys fighting the invading British must be clothed.

But winter's grip is shaken, and spring drives forth invading winter, and weeks pass, and the dead still days of summer lie heavily across the red hills and the woods and streams of Mecklenburg. The thick heavy heat of early August presses in upon the green unstirring pines and cedars and oaks and gums, upon the dark unrustling quiet rows of corn up at Alexandriana and along the banks of the Catawba at John Davidson's Rural Retreat.

For many days now there has been no rain, and the crops are threatened, and relentlessly the British push outward from Charles Town.

(The light fades on the Narrator.)