

AT RISE: STARKEEPER is seated on top of stepladder, hanging out stars and dusting them with silver-handled feather duster. BILLY and the HEAVENLY FRIEND are seen to make their way through clouds, then off, then reenter.

HEAVENLY FRIEND Billy!

BILLY Hey, what is this! [To STARKEEPER.] Who are you?

STARKEEPER Never mind who I am, Bigelow.

BILLY [To Friend.] Where am I.

STARKEEPER You're in the backyard of heaven. [Pointing.] There's the gates over there.

BILLY The pearly gates!

STARKEEPER Nope. The pearly gates are in front. Those are the back gates. They're just mother-of-pearly.

BILLY I don't wanta go in no back gate. I wanta go before the highest --

STARKEEPER You'll go where we send you, young man.

BILLY Now look here!

STARKEEPER Don't yell.

BILLY I didn't yell.

STARKEEPER Well don't. Brother Joshua! [To Friend.] This one's finished. Please hang it over Philadelphia!

HEAVENLY FRIEND A-yah.

*(FRIEND exits.)*

STARKEEPER [Taking notebook out of pocket.] Now this is a routine question I gotta ask everybody. Is there anythin' on earth you left unfinished? The reason I ask you is you're entitled to go back fer one day -- if you want to.

BILLY I don't know. Guess as long as I'm here, I won't go back.

STARKEEPER [Jotting down notes.] "Waives his right to go back."

BILLY Can I ask you somethin'? I'd like to know if the baby will be a boy or a girl.

STARKEEPER We'll come to that later.

BILLY But I'm only askin' --

STARKEEPER Jest let me do the askin' -- you do the answerin' -- I got my orders . . . You left yer wife hevin' thet baby comin' -- with nothin' fer 'em to live on. Why'd you do thet?

**BILLY** I couldn't get work and I couldn't bear to see her -- [Pause.]

**STARKEEPER** You couldn't bear to see her cry. Why not come right out and say it? Why are you afraid of sayin' the right word? Why are you ashamed you loved Julie?

**BILLY** I ain't ashamed of anything!

**STARKEEPER** Why'd you beat her?

**BILLY** I didn't beat her -- I wouldn't beat a little thing like that -- I hit her.

**STARKEEPER** Why?

**BILLY** Well, y'see -- we'd argue. And she'd say this and I'd say that -- and she'd be right -- so I'd hit her.

**STARKEEPER** Hmm! Are you sorry you hit her?

**BILLY** Ain't sorry fer anythin' --

**STARKEEPER** You ken be as stubborn and pernicketty as you want. Up here patience is as endless as time. We ken wait. Now look here, son, it's only fair to tell you -- you're in a pretty tight corner. Fact is you haven't done enough good in yer life to get in there -- not even through the back door.

**BILLY** All right. If I can't get in -- I can't.

**STARKEEPER** I didn't say you can't. Said you ain't done enough so far. You might still make it -- if you tried hard enough.

**BILLY** How?

**STARKEEPER** Why don't you go down to earth fer a day like I said you could. Do somethin' real fine fer someone.

**BILLY** Aw -- what could I do?

**STARKEEPER** Well, fer one thing you might do yer little daughter some good --

**BILLY** A daughter! It's a girl . . . my baby!

**STARKEEPER** Ain't a baby no more. She's fifteen years old.

**BILLY** How could that be? I just come from there.

**STARKEEPER** You got to get used to a new way of tellin' time, Billy. A year on earth is just a minute up here . . . Would you like to look down and see her?

**BILLY** Could I? Could I see her from here?

**STARKEEPER** Sure could. Follow me.

*(STARKEEPER and BILLY cross. The lights dim and gauze cloud curtain descends. The rest of this scene is in front of this curtain.)*