

Scene Five

Scene: A sunny afternoon. MELCHIOR and WENDLA meet each other in the forest.

MELCHIOR. Is it really you, Wendla? What are you doing up here on your own? I've been wandering through the forest for three hours without meeting a soul, and now suddenly you come towards me out of the trees.

WENDLA. Yes, it's me.

MELCHIOR. If I didn't know you were Wendla Bergmann, I'd think you were a wood nymph who's fallen down out of the branches.

WENDLA. No, no, I'm Wendla Bergmann. Where have you come from?

MELCHIOR. I've been thinking.

WENDLA. I'm collecting Eldenflowers. Mama uses them for spring wine. She was coming with me, but Aunt Bauer turned up at the last moment. She doesn't like climbing so I came up on my own.

MELCHIOR. Have you got the Eldenflowers?

WENDLA. A whole basket full! It's as thick as clover over there under the beeches. Now I'm trying to find a path. I seem to have gone wrong. Perhaps you could tell me what time it is?

MELCHIOR. Just after half past three. When are you expected?

WENDLA. I thought it was later. I lay down quite a while on the moss by the stream and dreamed. Time went so quickly. I was afraid evening was already coming.

MELCHIOR. If you're not expected, let's stay here a little

bit longer. My favorite spot's under the oak. If you lean your head back against the trunk and stare through the branches up at the sky, it hypnotizes you. The ground's still warm from the sun this morning. I've wanted to ask you something for weeks, Wendla.

WENDLA. But I must be home by five.

MELCHIOR. We'll go together. I'll carry the basket and we'll take the way along the river bed and be on the bridge in ten minutes. When you lie like this with your head propped in your hands you have the strangest ideas . . . (Both are lying under the oak.)

WENDLA. What did you want to ask me, Melchior?

MELCHIOR. I know you often visit the poor, Wendla, and take them food and clothes and money. D'you go because you want to, or does your mother send you?

WENDLA. Mostly mother sends. They're poor working-class families, with too many children. Often the man can't find work so they're cold and hungry. We've got a lot of left-over things lying about in cupboards and drawers, we'll never use them now. What made you think about that?

MELCHIOR. Are you pleased when your mother sends you?

WENDLA. O, very pleased! How can you ask?

MELCHIOR. But the children are dirty, the women are sick, the rooms are crowded with filth, the men hate you because you don't have to work . . .

WENDLA. That's not true, Melchior. And if it were true, I'd go even more.

MELCHIOR. Why even more, Wendla?

WENDLA. I'd go to them even more. It would give me far more happiness to be able to help them.

MELCHIOR. So you go to the poor to make yourself happy?

WENDLA. I go to them because they're poor.

MELCHIOR. And if it didn't make you happy, you wouldn't go?

WENDLA. Can I help it if it makes me happy?

MELCHIOR. And for that you go to heaven! I was right, I've been going over this for a whole month! Can a miser help it if visiting dirty, sick children doesn't make him happy?

WENDLA. O, I'm sure it would make you very happy!

MELCHIOR. And yet because of that he suffers eternal damnation! I'll write an essay on it and send it to the Reverend Baldbelly. He put it all in my head. Why does he drivel on at us about the joys of sacrificing yourself for others? If he can't answer, I'm not going to any more confirmation classes and I won't be confirmed.

WENDLA. Don't make your poor parents miserable over that! Let them confirm you. They don't cut your head off. If it wasn't for our dreadful white dresses and your baggy trousers we might even get some fun out of it.

MELCHIOR. There is no self-sacrifice! There is no selflessness! I watch the good enjoying themselves while the bad tremble and groan. I watch you shaking your curls and laughing, Wendla Bergmann, and it all makes me feel like a sad outcast. . . . Wendla, what did you dream about when you were on the grass by the stream?

WENDLA. Nonsense . . . silly things --

MELCHIOR. With your eyes open?

WENDLA. I dreamed I was a poor, poor beggar girl. I was sent out on the streets every morning before five. I had to beg from brutal, heartless people, all day in the storm and rain. And when I'd come home at night,

shivering with hunger and cold, and when I wouldn't have all the money my father wanted, I'd be beaten . . . beaten --

MELCHIOR. I understand, Wendla. You get that from silly children's books. I promise you there aren't brutal people like that any more.

WENDLA. O, no, Melchior, you're wrong. Martha Bessel is beaten night after night and you can see the welts next day. O, what she must suffer. It makes me hot when she tells about it. I pity her so much. I often have to cry in my pillow in the middle of the night. I've been thinking how I can help her for months. I'd be happy to take her place for just one week.

MELCHIOR. The father should be reported immediately. Then they'd take the child away.

WENDLA. I haven't been hit in my whole life, Melchior -- not even once. I can hardly imagine what it's like to be beaten. I've beaten myself to find out what it does to you. It must be a horrifying feeling.

MELCHIOR. I don't believe it ever makes a child better.

WENDLA. What?

MELCHIOR. Being beaten.

WENDLA. With this switch, for example. Ugh, how springy and thin.

MELCHIOR. That would draw blood.

WENDLA. Would you like to beat me with it once?

MELCHIOR. Who?

WENDLA. Me.

MELCHIOR. What's the matter, Wendla?

WENDLA. There's no harm in it.

MELCHIOR. O, be quiet! I won't beat you.

WENDLA. But if I let you do it!

MELCHIOR. No, Wendla.

WENDLA. But if I ask you for it, Melchior?

MELCHIOR. Are you out of your mind?

WENDLA. I've never been beaten in my whole life!

MELCHIOR. If you can ask for something like that . . .

WENDLA. Please, please . . .

MELCHIOR. I'll teach you to ask! (He hits her.)

WENDLA. O, God, I don't feel it at all.

MELCHIOR. Of course not . . . through all your skirts.

WENDLA. Then beat me on the legs!

MELCHIOR. Wendla! (He hits her harder.)

WENDLA. You're only stroking me! Stroking me!

MELCHIOR. You wait, you bitch, I'll thrash the hide off you! (He throws the stick away and hits out at her with his fists and she bursts into a terrible scream. He takes no notice and punches at her in fury. Heavy tears run down his face. He jumps up, grips his head with his hands and runs into the wood, sobbing with misery.)

END OF ACT ONE