

DIE AGYPTISCHE HELENA

By Richard Strauss

ACT I. Late 1890s. On a streetcorner near a mission in the American Midwest, Elvira Griffeths, a missionary, leads her son Clyde and his siblings in a hymn. Many years later, in a smart Chicago hotel, the adult Clyde, now a bellboy, flirts with the chambermaid Hortense. She rebuffs him, then delivers the news that his rich uncle, Samuel, a factory owner from New York, is staying at the hotel. In the hotel ballroom, business associates toast Samuel's success. When the party breaks up, Clyde introduces himself, and Samuel offers him a job at his shirt factory in Lycurgus, New York. When Hortense returns to make a date with him, Clyde tells her he has other plans.

At the shirt factory, Clyde, newly promoted to supervisor, learns the ropes from Samuel's son, Gilbert, who advises him to keep his hands off the ladies. At the closing bell, Clyde's eye is caught by Roberta, one of the workers, who arranges a rendezvous with a friend loudly enough for him to overhear. As Gilbert drives away, Clyde watches enviously, reflecting on his disappointments past and his hopes for the future.

In front of the music hall, Clyde chats up Roberta, telling her of his missionary background and recalling his mother's lectures on temptation, until her friend arrives. Later that evening, Roberta encounters Clyde by the riverbank. When she describes the magician at the music hall, Clyde wishes he had the magic power to make her dreams come true. They arrange to meet again the following night.

Elizabeth Griffeths, Samuel's wife, chastises him for taking a chance on his inexperienced nephew. Their daughter, Bella, arrives with her friend Sondra, newly returned from New York City. When Samuel announces that Clyde is coming to lunch, Gilbert sneers at his father's "discovery," piquing Sondra's interest. After the others exit, Sondra tells Bella how New York has changed her. Entering unseen, Clyde is captivated. When Samuel returns to introduce his nephew, Elizabeth is condescending, but Sondra flirts with him, confiding to Bella that she thinks he would make "a nice project."

In front of Roberta's apartment, Clyde presses her to let him come in. Inside, she describes the place where she grew up, and Clyde dances with her. That night, on the Griffeths' patio, Gilbert flirts arrogantly with Sondra. When he leaves, she and Bella plot to invite Clyde to Bella's birthday party. As Sondra starts to compose an invitation, the scene shifts back to the apartment, where Roberta pours out her feelings to Clyde. He slowly leads her to the bed.

At a supper club, Clyde dances with Sondra, as Gilbert, drunk and sarcastic, disparages his cousin to a group of friends. Sondra leads Clyde outside. When he describes his bellboy days, she senses the power of his dreams. She suggests that he visit her at her parents' summerhouse. He kisses her passionately, then takes her back to the party and rushes out.

Late that night, Clyde makes excuses for keeping Roberta waiting, but she cuts him short. When he asks what is wrong, she tells him she is pregnant. At first, he balks at her demand that they marry, saying he's just getting started in life, but when she bursts into tears, he gives her his promise, sending her home to her parents to wait until he has saved enough money to come for her.

ACT II. On the front porch of her parents' house, Roberta reads through a letter she has written to Clyde, begging him to come soon. Meanwhile, dallying by a lake at Sondra's summerhouse, Clyde and Sondra declare their love. He exhorts her to run away with him, but she counsels patience. As the two revel in their dream of romance, Roberta senses that hers is shattered and closes her letter with an ultimatum, threatening to reveal her secret if Clyde does not keep his promise.

At church in Lycurgus, Clyde sits with Sondra's family. Roberta approaches Sondra at the close of the service; when she is momentarily distracted, Clyde draws Roberta apart and implores her not to expose him. Assuring her that his attentions to Sondra are all about furthering his career, he promises to meet Roberta at the Utica Station that night. Rejoining Sondra, Clyde tells her he will be busy at the factory for several days. Alone, he hatches a scheme to murder Roberta.

Boating on a lake, Clyde tells Roberta they will be married in the morning. When she leans over the side, he raises his paddle but cannot bring himself to strike. Roberta tries to embrace him, but he swings his arms up to stop her, inadvertently knocking her off the boat. Ignoring her cries for help, he watches her drown.

The following Saturday, at the Griffeths' summer house, Samuel tells Clyde he is proud of him, saying Sondra is "quite a catch." Orville Mason, the district attorney, interrupts, asking Samuel to leave him alone with Clyde. Roberta's letters have been found in Clyde's trunk, and the sheriff is waiting to arrest him. Clyde protests that he has done nothing wrong, as Mason leads him away.

At the Griffeths' home in Lycurgus, Elizabeth bemoans Sondra's ruined reputation; Bella and Gilbert urge their friend to forget Clyde, while the chorus is heard reading Roberta's letter in the newspaper. Elvira arrives and asks to see Samuel in private. She begs him to come to the courthouse and show his faith in Clyde. Samuel replies that in paying for nephew's defense, he has done all he can.

In Clyde's jail cell, Elvira visits her son, who continues to protest his innocence. Elvira compares his sufferings with Christ's, saying he must bear his cross, but adds that if he tells the truth about his change of heart, the jury will understand.

In the courtroom, Mason questions Clyde about his relations with Sondra and Roberta. Clyde describes the elopement, claiming it was Roberta's idea and insisting that he tried to save her. When Mason confronts him with evidence that he planned the trip himself, the spectators cry out for justice. As the prosecution rests its case, Elvira prays, but the jury, unmoved, renders its verdict: guilty as charged.

In his cell, Clyde, awaiting execution, hears Sondra's voice reading her parting letter: though she will never understand what he has done, she wishes him freedom and happiness. When Elvira comes to pray with him, he confesses at last that he could have saved Roberta. Elvira, weeping, reminds him that the mercy of God is equal to every sin. As Clyde approaches the electric chair, his youthful self joins him in his old childhood hymn.