Fred

ACT ONE

1. HOUSEWORK

CHARLOTTE CARY *is polishing pewter*
EMMA JENKINS *is soaping her husband's collars*
HANNAH RUSTED *is carrying pails of water on a yoke*
HELEN LUDLOW *is mending a dress by candlelight*
ANN LAVENDER *is changing a screaming baby*
KITTY GIVENS *is scrubbing a floor with sand and brushes*
PEG CARTER *is sweeping the floor and ceiling with a besom*
JUDITH BREWER *is using a smoothing stone to force creases from linen*
SARAH HOLLIS *is beating a rug*
MARY MIDDLETON *is kneading bread as she rocks a crib with her foot*
SARAH SMITH *is plucking a pheasant*
ELIZABETH LUKE *is drying washing at a wringing post*

The baby cries, the brush scrapes, the water slops, flour rises, feathers fall, silver squeaks, the broom and the carpet send up clouds of dust.

Start

2. THE NIGHT IN QUESTION

The middle of the night. A labourer's house. SALLY POPPY, *in the dark, and* FREDERICK POPPY *with a single candle.* SALLY *has been searching for something. We cannot see her properly yet.*

FRED. Home then.

SALLY. Thought you'd be sleeping.

FRED. Four months.

SALLY. I had ten shillings and a nice piece of lace in that tin, where's that gone?

FRED. Four months and not one word.

SALLY. Only four was it? Felt like more. Where's my money Fred?

FRED. I spent that.

SALLY. That's not yours, I put that by.

FRED. You put that by from bilking me on butter, where you been?

SALLY. That's got like a midden in here, don't you know where the broom lives?

FRED. Sally.

SALLY. Thought I'd been away years. Thought I'd walk in here to find it all different and you with a long grey beard but everything's just the same but dirtier.

FRED. Wife, / where have you

SALLY. Disappointing.

FRED. where the fuck have you been?

SALLY. I wanted to see the comet when it came.

FRED. Comet?

SALLY. It has been predicted by Mr Halley, / don't you read the newspaper?

FRED. [don't] talk to me of comets wife, November you left this house on the back of another man's / horse

SALLY. Right, no

FRED. no, do not deny it, you were seen, so do not give me fucking sludder about comets Sally, though I don't doubt you were gazing at stars, flat on your back in a / ditch

SALLY. May I

FRED. I am speaking

SALLY. Oh.

FRED. at church I had to make out you'd gone to mind a sick cousin in Stowmarket. A lie, I told, in the house of God.

SALLY. Going to church is like housework, people judge you by how well you do it, it makes your back ache, and after you have done it, it needs doing all over again a week later.

FRED. That's a dry bob. But you cannot wash a soul as easily as you wash a floor.

SALLY. You are right Fred. Washing a floor is much harder, particularly when you have a dog as we do. Where is Poppet?

FRED. Tied up, out back.

SALLY. Fed?

He puts the candle down and takes his belt off.

SALLY *picks up the candle and uses it to light three more.*

FRED. No, not fed. She's lucky I have not broke her neck, feeding's too good for her, lift your skirts. Put your hands on the wall.

SALLY. Pick one. I can't do both.

She turns. We see her illuminated for the first time. Covered head to toe in blood.

FRED. my God.

He drops his belt.

Are you hurt?

FRED *begins a frantic but tender examination, trying to locate the source of bleeding.*

Who has done this? Who has harmed you?

SALLY. No one has harmed me.

FRED. I cannot find a wound… where is / the?

SALLY. There is no wound. It is not my blood.

FRED. But… how / then

SALLY. You stink, by the way.

FRED. I… I have been shovelling out the earth closet…

SALLY. This parish is full of secrets and yet we spread our shit on the fields for all to see and eat the grain that grows in it.

FRED. Whose blood is it? Whose – my god – my god Sal, what was it, an accident?

SALLY *takes a hammer out of her pocket.*

SALLY. It was not an accident.

FRED. Whose blood is it? Sally whose blood? Speak maw!

SALLY. I'm having a baby. It ent yours.

He slaps her.

FRED. You liar

SALLY. I want my ten shillings. I need / to go away

FRED. you old drab

SALLY. and I must have something to pay the Midnight Woman when / the time comes

FRED. dirty, wicked bunter

SALLY. having a baby isn't / dirty

FRED. hedge-whore

SALLY. or maybe it is, it probably depends on who puts it in and who takes it out again – no.

End