

Part 1

ACT 1 Scene 1. The curtain rises on Catfish Row, formerly a grand mansion, now a dilapidated negro tenement on the Charleston, S.C., waterfront. It is evening, and we hear a tinny piano playing lowdown blues. A few couples are dancing; CLARA is singing a lullaby to her baby; a noisy crap game is in progress.

CROWN is too drunk to read the dice and accuses ROBBINS of cheating him. He attacks ROBBINS with a cotton hook. They fight, and CROWN kills ROBBINS. Somebody mentions the police, and the crowd immediately disappears, leaving SERENA alone weeping over her husband's body. CROWN hurriedly tells BESS that he's going away, but he'll be back for her when all the fuss dies down.



BESS turns to SPORTING LIFE, a thin, over-dressed high yellow negro and the local dope peddler. She begs him for some "happy dust". He gives it to her and offers to take her away with him, but she turns him down. As police whistles are heard, BESS frantically knocks on doors, trying to find someone to take her in. Finally, she gets to PORGY's door. She knocks, and the door opens.

ACT 1 Scene 2. In SERENA's room, ROBBINS' body is laid out on the bed with a saucer on his chest. The room is packed with people mourning and chanting. Periodically, a new arrival drops a few coins in the saucer to go toward the burial; ROBBINS left no money or insurance. BESS helps PORGY up the stairs and puts his money into the dish. SERENA glares at her contemptuously.

Part 2

ACT 2 Scene 1. JAKE and the other fishermen are mending their nets and preparing to go out fishing. CLARA, JAKE's wife, pleads with him not to go because it is time for the September storms, but he pacifies her. PORGY is sitting contentedly on his front porch, smoking a pipe. He offers some penny candy to the children playing in the courtyard. The neighbors comment on the change in him since BESS has come to live with him.

MARIA throws SPORTING LIFE out of her cookshop, shouting after him not to come peddling his "happy dust" around here anymore. BESS is alone in the courtyard. SPORTING LIFE sneaks over to her. He offers her some dope, but she refuses. He keeps pressing it on her and tries to get her to go off to New York with him. PORGY reaches his arm out the window and grabs SPORTING LIFE in an iron grip. PORGY threatens SPORTING LIFE to stay away from BESS.



The inhabitants of Catfish Row start to emerge from their houses, dressed in their Sunday best and wearing sashes which say "Repent Ye Saith the Lord". JAKE and CLARA pass BESS and urge her to go to the picnic with them. She shakes her head, saying that she'll just stay here with PORGY. MARIA and PORGY try to convince BESS to go and have a good time. PORGY gives her his lodge sash, and reluctantly, BESS goes off with MARIA and the others.

CROWN comes out of the bushes towards her. BESS tells CROWN that she's living with PORGY now, and she's living decently. He laughs and insists that she still belongs to him; she'll never change. BESS tries to argue with him and get to the boat, he grabs her and kisses her. The boat whistles again. She struggles to be free of him, but he overpowers her and pulls her down into the thicket.

Part 3

ACT 2 Scene 3. In the courtyard just before dawn, JAKE and the fishermen are loading their boat for a fishing expedition, and there are several street vendors hawking their wares. BESS is heard mumbling from PORGY's room. She is deliriously re-enacting her struggle with CROWN. More than a week has passed since her return, and she has not regained consciousness.

BESS confesses to PORGY that she has been with CROWN. PORGY says he knew, and he forgives her. BESS tells PORGY that she loves him and wants to stay with him, but she is afraid. CROWN is returning for her when the cotton comes. PORGY comforts her and promises to protect her, as he helps her back to bed.



ACT 2 Scene 4. There is a violent storm raging. The inhabitants of Catfish Row are gathered in SERENA's room, singing hymns. There is a deafening clap of thunder. CLARA, whose husband JAKE is out on the sea, screams and clutches her baby. Suddenly, CROWN bursts into the room. He accosts BESS, who shies away from him and hides behind PORGY.

CROWN grabs PORGY, and they argue. SERENA threatens CROWN that God will strike him dead if he doesn't behave. CROWN releases PORGY and curses God defiantly. CLARA becomes hysterical, and after giving her baby to BESS, she rushes out into the storm to find JAKE. No one goes after her. CROWN taunts the others for being weak and afraid, and then rushes out in pursuit of the distraught CLARA. As he leaves, he warns BESS that he will be back for her.

Part 4

When the courtyard is deserted, the gate opens slowly and noiselessly, and a living, breathing CROWN enters the court. Crouching, he sneaks across to PORGY's window and stops to listen. The shutters above CROWN's head open quietly, and we see an arm clutching a knife. The arm descends, plunging the knife into CROWN's back. PORGY leans from the window and hurls CROWN's lifeless body away from the house. PORGY's triumphant laughter echoes throughout the courtyard.

SPORTING LIFE tries to sell BESS on the idea of going to New York with him in search of the "high life"; he makes it sound very glamorous and exciting. She turns him down, but she is wavering, obviously starting to believe that PORGY will never return. SPORTING LIFE offers BESS another bag of "happy dust", which she refuses. But he leaves it on her doorstep, confident of a final victory.



ACT 3 Scene 3. A week later amid the routine morning activity of Catfish Row, there is commotion at the gate---PORGY is returning home. He is in a triumphant mood; he is wearing a new shirt and has brought home gifts: a new hat for Maria, a red dress for BESS, and a sunsuit for the baby. He calls for BESS. There is an embarrassed silence. He sees SERENA holding CLARA's baby, and his agitation grows. PORGY becomes suspicious.

MARIA tries to cushion the blow by telling PORGY that BESS wasn't a fit woman for him; she was no good. PORGY is confused. At first, he thinks BESS is dead, but the neighbors finally explain that she went off to New York with SPORTING LIFE.