

THE MAROON HOAX  
(a gross error redolent of mischief)

---

A full-length play

Represented by:  
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CAST OF CHARACTERS

DR. TARR, 40s, African-American, veiled or masked, also plays:

EKENE, 20s, house slave

ED, 40, madman, Caucasian, also plays:

ED, 19, overeducated

REYNOLDS, 20s, ringmaster and animal trainer, Cockney

SHELTON, 30s, owner of a riverboat line

GIGANTO, orangutan

ELMIRA, 38, wealthy widow, Caucasian, also plays:

ELMIRA, 17, impetuous

YONA, white bear

The action is set in various locations in Baltimore, Richmond and Charleston in 1826-28 and 1849, including a street, a hospital room, an arbor, a circus, a forest and a barn.

SETTING: The set should be shadowy and mutable with scene changes accomplished primarily through lighting. Furniture includes a hospital bed and various kinds of seating. A screen or screens evoking the canvas of a circus tent are suggested for the magic lantern shadow sequences. Perhaps most of the scenic elements could be projections.

CASTING NOTE: DR. TARR/EKENE may be played by any gender; double- or triple-casting the role in the same production is encouraged.

TITLES: Each scene is introduced by a projected title which may be in either early 19th-century type or elegant period handwriting.

TITLE: Baltimore October 6, 1849,  
10:30 p.m. Lights up on DR. TARR,  
somewhat formally attired but  
strangely veiled or masked and  
slightly contorted, eerie. Voice  
may even seem strange.

DR. TARR

The patient arrived at Washington University Hospital in a  
fearful state, disheveled, raving and struggling against an  
invisible foe.

Lights up on ED, roughly dressed in  
drab shades, moving nervously down  
a street as if pursued.

DR. TARR

He suffered much from a morbid acuteness of the senses. His  
eyes were tortured by even a faint light, and there were but  
peculiar sounds which did not inspire him with horror.

Sound of a violin playing *Weber's*  
*Last Waltz*. ED seems to hear  
something sinister.

DR. TARR

His clothing was rough and ill-used. Despite his unfortunate  
history of dipsomania, Dr. Moran quickly determined he had  
not been drinking.

ED hears a creepy animal sound.  
Sound of a heartbeat.

ED

Reynolds?

DR. TARR

What bogeyman--real or imagined--pursued him? The Cherokees  
of South Carolina speak of Nun Yunu Wi, the stone man, and in  
Virginia slave shanties they whisper ominously of The Booger,  
but why would such a creature stalk the streets of Baltimore?

ED

(panic)

Reynolds? Reynolds?!

The animal noise is suddenly  
ferocious, and ED collapses.  
Heartbeat stops. Lights out on ED.

DR. TARR

The patient's aggravated nervous frenzy has not been greatly  
eased in residence at Washington Hospital, which has a  
reputation in Baltimore less than savory.

(moistens a towel)

Local residents avoid the neighborhood after sundown, grimly  
pointing to the nearby cemetery where it's said the newly  
deceased quickly find their way to dissection slabs in the  
teaching hospital.

Lighting change reveals a bed with  
ED in it dressed in a hospital  
gown. DR. TARR limps to the bed and  
places the towel on ED'S forehead.

ED

Reynolds?

DR. TARR

Who, sir, is Reynolds that I may fetch him for you?

ED

No, no! He's dead!

DR. TARR

You've been incoherent and hallucinating until just now, and  
I fear your window of lucidity may be brief.

ED

How do I know you're not an hallucination?

DR. TARR

Your bewilderment has my colleagues and I amazed.

ED

Colleagues?

Dr. tarr

I'm Dr. Tarr, your attending physician this evening.

ED

A Negro physician? Where are we?

DR. TARR

Washington University Hospital.

ED

The bodysnatching school?!

DR. TARR

Unfortunate rumors! A gentleman barged into the servant's entrance just this morning dragging an awkwardly heavy gunnysack. I advised him he was misinformed, that we never accept donations of that type...in the daytime.

ED

How long have I been thus indisposed?

DR. TARR

Three days. Have you any personal history of mental chaos?

ED

My parents were actors. I've been unsettled, on tour since the womb. In especial, the slightest appearance of mystery puts me at once into a pitiable state of agitation.

ED tries to get up, which reveals restraints.

DR. TARR

You very nearly severed Dr. Moran's index finger with your teeth.

ED

Release me!

DR. TARR

Unfortunately, both Dr. Moran and I must certify you for discharge.

ED

I shall perish. Thus, thus and not otherwise, shall I be lost.

DR. TARR

Why were you dressed in cast-offs? Were you robbed?

ED

(reluctantly)

I also shaved my moustaches. The disguise worked for a few days, threw the monstrous phantasm off my trail. But I realize only one thing can truly save me: love.

DR. TARR

Love? The best of care, medicines and unguents, poultices and pills we have aplenty, but love? We are a hospital, not a brothel, sir.

ED

Elmira loves me. You must find her!

DR. TARR

Surname?

ED

Royster, no, Shelton--actually, I'm not quite certain! She lives in Richmond.

DR. TARR

And your name?

ED

Haven't you that listed in your records?

DR. TARR

I'm testing you. The first proof of rationality.

ED

Perry.

DR. TARR

Pardon?

ED

Perry.

DR. TARR

Are you convinced of that?

ED

Surely I know my own name!

DR. TARR

That's not the name we've recorded.

ED

Then you are mistaken.

DR. TARR

(frowns)

I suggest you offer corroborating evidence to gain your freedom.

ED

I have evidence!

DR. TARR

(producing manuscript pages)

Do you mean this?

ED

(reaching for it)

My manuscript! Yes, that will prove me sane.

DR. TARR

(withholding manuscript)

A casual glance did not give me that impression. The handwriting is almost illegible.

ED

Those pages tether me to reality--the most autobiographical work of my career, my *magnum opus*!

DR. TARR

It seems, in fact, fantastical and rather ghastly. Has anyone else read this?

ED

Elmira's heard the story but refused to believe it.

DR. TARR

So you felt compelled to write it down, in horrifying detail.

ED

The horror is why it must be told!

DR. TARR

Excuse me--I have other patients--

ED

No! You can't abandon me to the darkness! That's my legacy--  
if I don't survive--

(reaches for manuscript)

Let me read it to you since you find the penmanship difficult--  
once you hear it, you'll set me free.

DR. TARR

(hands manuscript to ED)

Very well.

ED clutches the manuscript to him  
like a child. DR. TARR sits and  
takes out a quill pen and notebook.

ED

No, no, you mustn't take notes!

DR. TARR

It's vital to your diagnosis. Dr. Moran and I subscribe to a  
new German method called psychiatry, the human mind as the  
final frontier.

ED

It's all here--in the patient's own words.

(DR. TARR sets the writing  
implements aside)

This is a tale of twenty years--

DR. TARR

Twenty years?

ED

No, twenty-two--

DR. TARR

You seem uncertain--

ED

Twenty-three, to be precise--

(reading from manuscript)

When I met Elmira, we were both almost children, her father  
one of the richest men in Richmond.



DR. TARR

Your yarn is richest in ambiguity, the narrator suspiciously unreliable after a scant three dozen words!

Lights slowly fade on the DR. TARR settling in for a long night and slowly come up on ELMIRA as ED describes her. She is indeed lovely, in her late teens and dressed elegantly for a Southern lady in the late 1820s in black.

ED

Her head of hair would have done an honor to Helen of Troy-- nothing could be more richly flowing or possess a brighter gloss.

Lights begin to fade on ED as well.  
TITLE: Richmond, 1826. Lights up on some dangling wisteria.

ED

Hers were the most brilliantly white of all conceivable teeth. In the matter of eyes, the lady was pre-eminently endowed. Either one of such a pair was worth a couple of the ordinary ocular organs.

Even as ED disappears in darkness, ELMIRA seems to be hearing this fulsome description, becoming increasingly embarrassed and uncomfortable.

ED

Her shoulders would have called a blush to the countenance of the Venus di Milo, with the great anatomical advantage of being attached to arms. Nor are the lower limbs less superb, albeit coquettishly covered by skirts--

ELMIRA

(Southern accent)

My husband is the only man shall ever see my legs.

ED suddenly appears, now 19 years old and dressed glossily, almost foppishly, in black.

ED

Then your husband I must be!

ELMIRA

Nonsense! You're going to university tomorrow.

ED

I shall take your heart with me to Charlottesville.

ELMIRA

I doubt they'd let you keep it in student housing, especially if you have a room-mate.

ED

Permit me, if you please, my metaphors.

ELMIRA

You've just given me an entire body of metaphors! You wrote that precious schoolboy speech down before you said it, didn't you?

ED

I will give you my entire body one day.

ELMIRA

If my father could hear you!

ED

He loathes my poverty and poor prospects, but one day we'll toast our marriage with a glass of sherry in a grand palazzo!

ELMIRA

Oh, Eddy, we have such convivial conversations--your explication of *The Sorrows of Young Werther*--I never laughed harder in my life, deeply from my admirable abdomen--but is that enough upon which to build a marriage?

ED

It is not. You must also let me kiss you now and again.

ELMIRA

With all your winsome words, you've yet to earn a kiss.

ED

I'm willing to make payment in advance.  
(holds out his hand)

ELMIRA

A bride price?

ED

Of brightest gold. Please accept it as guarantee that I'll return from Charlottesville worthy of your hand.

ELMIRA

Gold?

He places something in her hands  
but hides it with his own.

ED

Tis a beautiful scarabaeus, at this time unknown to naturalists--

He removes his hand. She stares at  
the object.

ELMIRA

It's a beetle.

ED

Note the two round, black spots near one extremity of the back, and the long one near the other.

ELMIRA

Only by freezing every nerve in my body do I keep from flinging this insect away in disgust!

Lights slowly come up on a young  
slave, EKENE, who observes them  
dutifully.

ED

It's not alive!

ELMIRA

It resembles nothing more  
than a deaths-head!

ED

Twas given me by a Cherokee medicine man who said it had special powers.

ELMIRA

My dearest Eddy, while I respect and admire your interest in the modern sciences, I'm not at all certain I shall accept this uniquely personal gift. Ekene!

EKENE

(coming forward)

I's at yo' serbice, Missy Royster!

ELMIRA

(handing over the beetle)

Ekene, deposit this for safekeeping in my jewelry box.

EKENE

Widdout a doubt, Miss. Woo-ee, dis bug solid, ebery bit of him goole, sep him wing--nebber feel half so hebby a bug in my life!

(disappears)

ED

So we are pledged?

ELMIRA

I pledge to hold your desiccated invertebrate in trust until you return from university.

ED

I'll write you every day!

ELMIRA

Your words are the best of you, and your correspondence is my guarantee we'll wed. Truest love demands truest test.

ED

Anything! The most impossible task!

He dives in for a kiss, but she  
stops him an inch from her face.

ELMIRA

Your task, your quest, will earn you that kiss.

ED

You have my word. It is enough for now to inhale your sweet breath.

ELMIRA

For heaven's sake, Eddy, I just ate a mess of chitterlings!

ED takes a big gulp of her  
exhalation, holds his breath, and  
runs out.

ELMIRA

(narrating)

I very nearly swooned when he put that horrid arthropod in my hand. But his words are like lightning, gone in an instant but seared into the mind forever! My father can't stand the sight of Eddy in his black suits, calls him the little corby--

Lights out on ELMIRA and up on DR.  
TARR and ED in the hospital room.  
TITLE: Baltimore, September 6,  
1849, 11 p.m.

DR. TARR

You presume to know her thoughts?

ED

When one is in love--

DR. TARR

And did the servant really speak that way?

ED

What way?

DR. TARR

Uneducated, ungrammatical, unable to pronounce the letter  
"v."

ED

That's how slaves speak.

DR. TARR

Do I speak that way?

ED

You're remarkably articulate. I presume you're free, Doctor.

DR. TARR

If your accurate memory, your precise recollection of the slave's diction, is correct, then I'll not dispute it.

ED

Well--

DR. TARR

But if you're copying Zip Coon dialect from a blackface minstrel show, the veracity of your entire narrative is called into question as well as your right to tell it.

ED

I knew the slave personally! Which is, in fact, how I know what happened when I wasn't there.

DR. TARR

And this Ekene had not the ability to pronounce a "th" consonant digraph?

ED

Sometimes the story demands that kind of color, exaggerated humorous dialect--

DR. TARR

This is not a tale for my entertainment but **your freedom**. Next you'll claim a lie is justified by revealing a greater truth--

ED

It is!

DR. TARR

Dr. Moran and I--

DR. TARR

--May or may not remove your restraints and--as you've described it--save your life from the evil entity that pursues you with malevolent intent.

ED

(sighs)

I will be precisely accurate.

DR. TARR

Please resume at the point where you enter the mind and private thoughts of Miss Elmira Royster.

ED

Interior monologue is a standard first-person narrative technique!

DR. TARR

And if Ekene returns I shall listen most acutely.

Lighting change puts ED and DR.  
TARR in the dark and ELMIRA once  
again in the light near the  
wisteria. TITLE: Richmond, May,  
1828.

ELMIRA

Off Eddy went to President Jefferson's Academical Village, with the intention of studying both ancient and modern languages. He must have been in intellectual *ecstasy* with every book he borrowed from the University's formidable library. That is my presumption. I have no idea, however, what happened to Eddy in Charlottesville, because he never wrote me, not once.

EKENE

(appearing, articulate, with  
consonant digraphs and even  
clusters)

Not once, Miss? But he gave you his word.

ELMIRA

Not once in a year! Charlottesville's a mere seventy miles from Richmond and a letter weighs no more than an ounce or two.

EKENE

Have you written him, Miss?

ELMIRA

He pledged correspondence--I did not.

EKENE

I'd be happy to write the letter for you.

ELMIRA

Hush, Ekene! If anyone knew I'd taught you letters, I'd be arrested and you'd be sold!

EKENE

No one can see us here.

ELMIRA

How clever of you to find this wisteria-shrouded nook for our literary adventures! I've wasted enough mental electricity on the disloyal Eddy! Here! This has become a burden.

(produces the gold beetle on  
a pendant)

EKENE

Master Eddy's beetle!

ELMIRA

He said it has spiritual properties, but obviously not!

EKENE

(puts on necklace)

Thank you, Miss.

ELMIRA

(takes book from EKENE, sits)

*The Modern Prometheus*. No one saw you with it, did they?

EKENE

(sitting next to her)

No, ma'am. I took the usual precaution of stealing it.

ELMIRA

Theft is a moral failing and violation of the seventh commandment.

EKENE

Yes, Miss, a great failing.

ELMIRA

But not nearly as sinful in my opinion as the Virginia Revised Code of 1819 that criminalized Negro literacy. Having chastised you for your transgression, I've done my duty of moral instruction. What is the book about?

EKENE

God and galvanism.

ELMIRA

Calvinism? We'll be snoring in each other's arms in minutes.



EKENE

Galvanism: the reanimation of dead tissue. A scientist brings life to a monster who pursues and destroys his creator-

ELMIRA

(tears up)

Oh, dear. You've reminded me of Eddy and his fascination with natural and unnatural processes.

EKENE

Pardon me, miss, but after a year perhaps it's time he's forgotten.

ELMIRA

He's certainly forgotten me!

EKENE

My friend in his father's house says Master Eddy dropped out of college.

ELMIRA

Dropped out! How long ago?

EKENE

Some months now.

ELMIRA

Why hasn't he returned to Richmond?

EKENE

Apparently he's enlisted in the army to pay his debts.

ELMIRA

Without coming to see me?

EKENE

I imagine he was ashamed of his profligacy and dissipation.

ELMIRA

Dissipation?

EKENE

Apparently he drinks a bit.

ELMIRA

Where is he stationed?

EKENE

South Carolina.

ELMIRA

And you didn't tell me?

EKENE

Apologies, my lady. The subject seemed too sensitive to bring up.

ELMIRA

(dabbing eyes)

A delayed truth has the same effect as a lie. But I appreciate your delicacy in sparing my feelings.

(grabs the book)

Let's reanimate dead tissue instead of dead emotions! Where in South Carolina?

EKENE

Fort Moultrie, near Charleston.

ELMIRA

You're remarkably well informed!

BARRETT SHELTON suddenly appears,  
elegantly dressed in gray, perhaps  
with facial hair.

Barrett

(Southern accent)

Miss Royster!

ELMIRA and EKENE quickly scoot away  
from each other.

ELMIRA

Mr. Shelton!

BARRETT

They told me I'd find you here with your house nigger.

ELMIRA  
(glance at EKENE)

Who told you?

BARRETT  
Your father, in point of fact. He said my business was directly with you.

ELMIRA  
Business! Mr. Shelton, I presently require no riverboat transportation, neither passenger nor cargo.

BARRETT  
You've got me over a barrel, Miss Royster, but hell or high water I promised your father I'd parley with you about this delicate topic despite him already giving his blessing.

ELMIRA  
Blessing? This is a religious matter, Mr. Shelton?

EKENE disappears.

BARRETT  
I do wish you'd call me Barrett.

ELMIRA  
As long as we are doing business, Mr. Shelton, I prefer formal address.

BARRETT  
I ain't so good at the formalities, Miss Royster. I'm afraid you'll find me a terrible stick in the mud.

ELMIRA  
Please state your business, sir.

BARRETT  
I cotton to you!  
(after a moment)  
Miss Royster.

ELMIRA  
How very sweet and flattering, Mr. Shelton, but I am spoken for.

BARRETT

I know you had a suitor last year, but your father tells me he's abandoned you, broke his word.

ELMIRA

Abandoned?!

BARRETT

And anyway he's poor and couldn't provide for you like I can. I just inaugurated a new paddle steamer schedule from Richmond to Norfolk to Baltimore, stopping in Washington 'pon her return.

ELMIRA

Very impressive, Mr. Shelton.

EKENE returns carrying a packet of letters.

BARRETT

A fine sternwheeler called the Jefferson, but I could rechristen her after you.

ELMIRA

A sternwheeler!

BARRETT

As elegant as yourself, Miss Royster.

ELMIRA

You may call me Elmira. Barrett.

BARRETT

Oh, Miss Royster! I mean Elmira!

EKENE

Miss--

ELMIRA

Hush, Ekene. Don't interrupt.

BARRETT

I'm--I'm--filing the paperwork now!

ELMIRA

For the christening?

BARRETT

For our marriage!

BARRETT runs out.

ELMIRA

Well.

EKENE

A bit awkward.

ELMIRA

But with propitious timing.

EKENE

Is he intellectually worthy of you?

ELMIRA

He's financially worthy of me, and as we've just determined, my sole suitor.

EKENE

I've made a discovery.

(holds out letters)

ELMIRA

(taking them)

What are these?

EKENE

A few weeks ago, when bringing your father his worm chocolate, I noticed upon his writing-table lay confusedly miscellaneous letters and other papers--nothing to excite particular suspicion.

ELMIRA begins reading the letters quickly.

EKENE

Having ingested his calomel, your father rushed out, presumably to the privy, as is his custom. I remained because he frequently requires a restorative upon his return. My eyes fell upon a filigree card-rack that hung by a dirty blue ribbon from the mantelpiece.

ELMIRA gasps and keeps reading.

EKENE

In this rack were several letters tied together with string.

ELMIRA begins to cry but doesn't  
stop reading.

EKENE

The top letter was torn nearly in two and thrust carelessly,  
even contemptuously, into one of the upper divisions of the  
rack.

ELMIRA

The first of these is more than 18 months old!

EKENE

Truly?

ELMIRA

Why did you wait until now, when you knew I wanted these more  
than anything?

EKENE

I wouldn't want you to make a mistake marrying Mr. Shelton  
when your heart lies elsewhere.

ELMIRA

Another delayed truth! Eddy wrote me faithfully for weeks,  
as good as his word! I'm the disloyal one, at least in his  
eyes! I drove him to drink!

EKENE

Surely he's given up on you by now.

ELMIRA

No! No, his last words--

(reads)

"Although wounded by callous disregard, my heart is still  
yours--forever!"

EKENE

That was more than a year ago. Presumably.

ELMIRA

I must beg his forgiveness--and save him from despair!

EKENE

And dissipation.

ELMIRA

I shall murder my father in his bed! He purloined these letters--

EKENE

Hidden in plain sight, very clever!

ELMIRA

Where did you say Eddy's stationed?

EKENE

South Carolina, somewhere.

ELMIRA

Near Charleston!--don't feign ignorance--you remember exactly!

EKENE

Ah, yes, Fort Moultrie. But you can't be thinking of going to him!

ELMIRA

Exactly so!

EKENE

What of Mr. Shelton?

ELMIRA

My father's co-conspirator? I've no doubt he knew all along--timed his proposal--!

EKENE

Your father would never permit you to go to Charleston unescorted.

ELMIRA

You shall accompany me, of course. As my chaperone. And I need a pretext for a trip to Charleston.

EKENE

Do you remember Mr. Brown's Circus that came to Richmond last month?

ELMIRA

Oh, I hate circuses and menageries! So cruel to the animals!

EKENE

Mr. Brown is touring his circus throughout the cotton states and will next week be in residence at Charleston.

ELMIRA

I suppose it's unfair to judge without seeing it in person. You must persuade my father to let me go.

EKENE

I?

ELMIRA

He listens to everyone but me, values even the opinions of servants over mine.

EKENE

Mr. Brown has some unique animal acts, picked up an orangutan at the port in Norfolk.

ELMIRA

I've never seen an orangutan!

EKENE

Tell your father you want to go on a final spree before marrying Mr. Shelton.

ELMIRA

No, you must do it! And you owe me for your unfathomably tardy revelation!

EKENE

I haven't agreed to go!

ELMIRA

Ekene, literacy is not manumission. I believe I've always done my Christian duty as your mistress, but if I say you go to Charleston, you go to Charleston.

EKENE

Of course, Miss.



ELMIRA

Oh, don't look so downhearted! It will be loads of fun!  
Don't you want to see the circus? It was your idea!

EKENE

If you elope, you'll never return to Richmond.

ELMIRA

And you'll miss me, is that what you're saying?

EKENE

Of course, Miss.

ELMIRA

Ekene, I asked my father not to tell you, but I'm going to  
tell you myself.

EKENE

Tell me what?

ELMIRA

You don't belong to him.

EKENE

To your father?

ELMIRA

Last year I asked him for you, and he transferred ownership  
to me. You're my dowry!

EKENE

I belong to you?

ELMIRA

Yes, which means you'll stay with me when I marry Eddy.  
You'll always be mine!

EKENE

I'm ordered to Charleston, not persuaded.

ELMIRA

What would persuade you, engender enthusiasm?

EKENE

If at the end of our journey I reaped the ultimate reward.

ELMIRA

A room of your own rather than shared quarters?

EKENE

No--

ELMIRA

Do you yourself wish to marry? I'm a trifle disappointed in such an unremarkable urge--

EKENE

Manumission, Miss. You mentioned it casually as if impossible, but you've just now told me it's entirely within your power.

ELMIRA

Were I to free you--which I find desperately difficult to contemplate--I'd bring nothing to my marriage--Father will most certainly cut me off **without a half dime**--

EKENE

Do you love me, Miss?

ELMIRA

Of course, Ekene! The bond between mistress and servant is profound, mutually **dependent**--

EKENE

If I take you to your love, will you love me enough to set me free?

ELMIRA

You don't know what you're asking. You're all I have!

EKENE

And all I have is yours. Give me myself.

ELMIRA

This is a most tremendous decision for young lady not yet eighteen years of age.

EKENE

So is marriage and you're willing to leap into that with a college dropout who ran off to join the army.

ELMIRA

If you spoke with such impudence to any other owner, you'd be whipped.

(EKENE says nothing)

But I am myself, an educated and empathic woman who understands that you are also yourself, another intelligent human being, five fifths of a person and deserving of happiness. I am sorry **our life together** doesn't bring you the joy it does me, but that is the difference between servant and served.

EKENE

I stand ready to persuade Mr. Royster that you must see the circus.

ELMIRA

Then I stand ready to consider granting you your freedom when I have mine. I give you my word.

EKENE

Thank you, Miss!

ELMIRA

Why invest all that effort teaching you **the classics**? What a waste!

A flourish of circus music as a lighting change reveals a circus banner: Brown's Traveling Menagerie and Performing Circus. TITLE: Charleston, May, 1828.

ELMIRA

Performing animals repulse me.

EKENE

(reading a broadside)

Bareback riders, an elephant who does multiplication, a magic lantern show, a dancing bear--

ELMIRA

(snatching EKENE'S broadside)

Take care no one sees you reading! In South Carolina there's a 100 dollar fine.

I'll be over there in the main section and you'll be up in paradise, but I'll keep an eye on you just the same. I haven't emancipated you yet!

EKENE

No, ma'am.

ELMIRA

Don't look at me that way! Why are you looking at me that way?

EKENE

I worry, Miss. You suddenly feel inspired to run off to Fort Moultrie by yourself, leaving me all alone at the circus.

ELMIRA

Nonsense! What makes you think I'd be foolish enough to hire a dinghy to an island army base, a woman alone in an unfamiliar state? Not only danger, but also scandal!

Lights out on ELMIRA. EKENE is wearing the golden beetle locket and fondles it while speaking.

EKENE

Of course, as I feared, she disappeared soon after the first circus act. I knew **she would** before we entered the tent and she directed me to nigger heaven. As we crossed onto the midway, she slipped upon a pile of paving stones and murmured the word "stereotomy," a term for this species of pavement. I knew she could not say to herself "stereotomy," without recalling our recent discussion of atomies and the nebular cosmogony. She cast her eyes upward to the great nebula in Orion. With Orion occupying her brain, I knew she was reminded of the dinghy pilot's cry in Charleston Harbor: "Orion Ferry to Sullivan's Island!" which happens to be the location of Fort Moultrie.

(takes a seat to watch the show)

The lady at this point heightened my suspicion by glancing at a broadside which advertised both the ferry to Fort Moultrie and Mr. Brown's performing menagerie. In denial she cited the very dinghy! By bringing her to the circus—as she ordered—I put her in terrible danger. Which of us is more culpable?

Flourish of circus music.  
 REYNOLDS, a ringmaster, appears on  
 a screen or canvas as an elegant  
 shadow, as if projected by magic  
 lantern.

REYOLDS

(English accent)

Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to Mr. Josiah Purdy Brown's  
 Traveling Menagerie and Performing Circus! Tonight you'll  
 witness for the first time on this great American continent  
 zoophagus monsters in contests to the death, a phantasmagoria  
 lantern show and subhuman freaks and oddities who will make  
 you doubt the existence of God. But first on our program:  
 love! Yes, ladies and gentlemen, you shall be the first to  
 see *ocular* proof that the romantic emotion stirs not only  
 hearts that are human. Captured as a tiny monkey in the  
 jungles of Borneo and raised with greatest care by Chinese  
 traders in the Malay archipelago--until he chewed out their  
 hearts as they slept!--I give you Giganto the Orangutan!

Lights up on GIGANTO, dressed in  
 chestnut homespun, not a monkey  
 costume. He is barefoot and  
 dignified, standing somewhat  
 upright and swaying slightly.

REYNOLDS

What could tame this fiery ogre, this bloodthirsty behemoth?  
 How can he stand before you today unchained? Before you rush  
 screaming from the arena in terror, meet she who touched his  
 soul, who calmed his fury: Miss Yona the Albino Bear!

Lights up on YONA, dressed in white  
 clothing somewhat reminiscent of  
 early 19th century women's fashion,  
 not fully skirted but not pants.  
 Not a bear costume. She has a  
 somewhat bear-like posture and a  
 zen demeanor.

REYNOLDS

A bear and an orangutan! Two different species yet very much  
 in love! We learned of their romance quite by accident only  
 last week as the circus band rehearsed a new piece, *Weber's  
 Last Waltz*.

*Weber's Last Waltz* begins to play.  
YONA and GIGANTO react to the  
music, swaying in rhythm.

REYNOLDS

Discovered in 1826 among Carl Maria von Weber's effects when he died in Dresden, this charming melody is the latest rage from the continent.

YONA and GIGANTO approach each other and, after a gentle touch of greeting, begin to waltz. It's awkward, not quite human, but tender and sweet.

REYNOLDS

Almack's, the most prestigious club in London, just last year began permitting the waltz still condemned by some as riotous and indecent. Three-quarter time propels the couple quickly across the floor, balancing delicately on their toes and in each others' arms. But here's the tragedy, ladies and gentlemen: once they leave the dance floor, these concupiscent creatures must be kept apart to prevent breeding. Surely the unholy union of these two inhuman species would produce a hybrid monster!

Lights out on everyone but EKENE.

EKENE

When the lights came up, I searched the stands and then the circus grounds for Miss Royster, but as I dreaded, she was nowhere to be found. What had I done? With dire trepidation, I investigated the dank and drear wagons where the performing animals retired and made a truly shocking discovery.

Lights up on YONA sitting in her wagon or cage. Bars should not be actual, made visible only as shadows or in some other incorporeal way. When YONA and EKENE see each other, they are riveted. YONA may even rise to her feet. Sound of whistling: *Weber's Last Waltz*. YONA stretches out a hand toward EKENE, who responds in kind, almost as if hypnotized.

Their hands are about to touch across the void when the whistling REYNOLDS appears, recognizable by his ringmaster uniform, but now with a Cockney accent.

REYNOLDS

(Cockney)

'Allo, darkie, d'yer wanna lose yer Chalk Farm?

REYNOLDS pulls EKENE violently away from YONA.

EKENE

My what?

REYNOLDS

Yer arm! She's a wild and menacing creature, not to be trusted!

EKENE

She seems gentle enough.

REYNOLDS

Four months ago in Atlanta a little black boy went in to swob her cage wiffout checking. 'Eard the shrieking all the way across the circus, I did, but by the time I got 'ere--

(touching EKENE'S body parts  
as he names them)

--She'd mashed his minces [eyes], bit off 'is fingers and swallowed 'is Hampton Wick [prick] like a Cumberland banger. Barely yuman by the time she got done wiff 'im and not good for nuffin, so we put him outta his misery, poor sod.

EKENE

Is the orangutan similarly aggressive?

REYNOLDS

Twice as worse! Moves faster, too. That's why 'e's chained, even in 'is cage.

(shows key)

I'm the only bloke trusted with their keys.

(puts key in breast pocket)

EKENE

If they're so dangerous, how'd you persuade them to dance?

REYNOLDS

Took a bit more ingenuity, if I say so meself. I got--'ow to say it?--a privileged relationship wiff Miss Yona.

EKENE

Privileged?

REYNOLDS

My peculiar affection for 'airy females started with the Bearded Lady of Barbados, one of our Yuman Oddities, really piqued me energy, she did, if you know what I mean.

EKENE

I'm afraid I do.

REYNOLDS

But a 'airy face ain't nuffin like a 'airy everfing, so when we first got some of them chimpanzees--

EKENE

But a bear--?!

REYNOLDS

'Course, I prefer strong females--strong and--what's the fancy word?--'irsute!

EKENE

And she--performs--this--with you willingly?

REYNOLDS

(shrugs)

I taught 'er to waltz.

(off EKENE'S look)

I get 'er to back up to the bars--

(starts to demonstrate)

--Perfectly natural for a bear to go arse backward--

(off EKENE'S look)

For 'er own good--wiffout regular erotic stimulation 'er 'ealth would decline...I seen it 'appen wiff a gorilla once.

EKENE

Aren't you concerned about--?

REYNOLDS

Wot?



EKENE

For lack of a better word: fertility.

REYNOLDS

She's a bear! I'm yuman! Inconceivable! Totally different anatomies! Once it seemed like she mighta been in a family way, but she lost it early, poor little bugger!

EKENE

Mister--

REYNOLDS

Reynolds.

EKENE

Mr. Reynolds, I have to say I don't believe a word of it.

REYNOLDS

No?

(looks around)

It's late. Ain't nobody around--

REYNOLDS starts to undo his trousers and approach YONA.

EKENE

Oh, no, not for my sake--

REYNOLDS

Won't take but a minute--I'm quick! Yona, c'mere, luv!

EKENE

Truly, you don't have to--!

YONA just stares at him, unmoving.

REYNOLDS

'Ow 'bout a treat, then?

(produces an apple)

Yer favorite!

YONA begins to approach the barrier between them.

EKENE

Please, no!

REYNOLDS

Worry not, the bars are stout--good for leverage--

YONA turns and backs up to the  
barrier.

EKENE

Surely South Carolina has laws prohibiting--

REYNOLDS

(pushing up against the  
barrier)

That's me girl--

YONA suddenly turns around and  
pushes or throws feces in REYNOLDS'  
face.

EKENE

My God!

REYNOLDS

'Oly shit!

REYNOLDS

(wiping face)

You little bitch! You'll not be getting no apple now...nor  
anyfing for the time being!

REYNOLDS sets the apple down just  
out of YONA'S reach.

REYNOLDS

But yer welcome to stare at it like Tantalus till you  
starves!

(starts to leave)

And don't be finking of 'anding it to 'er! She'll rip yer  
boat off, the mood she's in!

(to YONA)

When I get back it's an unscheduled meeting!

REYNOLDS runs out, cleaning his  
face. EKENE and YONA stare at each  
other. After a moment, YONA  
gestures to the apple.

EKENE

Mr. Reynolds said not to.

YONA makes sad hungry eyes.

EKENE

I don't relish the idea of feces in my face.

YONA smiles devilishly.

EKENE

Although it was an amusing trick.

YONA winks.

EKENE

I didn't know bears could wink!

YONA shrugs then points coyly to the apple. After a moment, EKENE pushes the apple near the barrier so YONA can reach it.

EKENE

There, now you can get it. But don't tell Mr. Reynolds!

YONA looks at the apple, then at EKENE with sad eyes.

EKENE

Oh, no. You'll--

(imitating REYNOLDS)

Rip me boat off!

Another sad face.

EKENE

All right. I'm trusting you.

(hands her the apple)

But keep in mind this is me being nice!

YONA reaches through the bars, grabs EKENE'S hand and won't let go.

EKENE

Stop! I'll let out a holler and you'll be in terrible trouble! You'll get an unscheduled meeting!

YONA reaches out with her other hand, gently putting a finger to EKENE'S mouth. EKENE freezes in terror.

YONA

You've nothing to fear, my dear.

EKENE

Oh, my God!

YONA

You've a kind heart. Nothing to fear at all.

EKENE

Except a talking bear!

YONA

And talking ape.

EKENE

A talking ape?

Lights up suddenly on GIGANTO in his own wagon or cage. He is chained to the floor with a long chain that allows him limited movement within his cage. GIGANTO makes an unintelligible ape noise, startling EKENE. GIGANTO moves about the cage athletically, vertically, in great excitement.

YONA

But you won't understand him until you let him touch you.

YONA lets go of EKENE, who jumps away from her and pulls a knife.

YONA

Put that away. He won't hurt you either.

EKENE pockets the knife then slowly goes to GIGANTO and holds out a hand. GIGANTO takes it with enthusiasm.

GIGANTO  
An animal talker!

EKENE  
Oh, my God!

YONA  
I sensed it right away.

GIGANTO  
We speak to humans all the time, but they refuse to listen.

EKENE  
Why can I understand you?

Yona  
Do you have some kind of talisman?

GIGANTO  
What's that around your neck?

EKENE  
It's just a beetle.

GIGANTO  
That's it!

YONA  
Very spiritual. The Egyptians recognized it.

GIGANTO  
Scarab beetles are emissaries between the worlds.

EKENE  
Between animals and humans?

GIGANTO  
Between life and death.

YONA  
(reaching for EKENE)  
But to understand, you have to touch, take hold.

EKENE  
(flinching)  
Did you really grab that black boy in Atlanta?

GIGANTO

Reynolds is a filthy liar!

YONA

He raped that boy himself then fed him to the tiger to hide the evidence.

GIGANTO

Made it look like Yona did it, the bastard!

EKENE

I'd like to believe you.

YONA

(shrugs)

You've seen the content of Reynolds' character.

EKENE

I've never seen anything like you before.

GIGANTO

We're just a metaphor--talking animals!

YONA

Don't be flippant. We need Ekene's help.

EKENE

How do you know my name?

GIGANTO

We've journeyed into your mind, thanks to that beetle.

YONA

Not actually speaking out loud at all.

GIGANTO

So we know your name and everything about you.

YONA

Not everything, don't exaggerate.

(to EKENE)

Perhaps you'd like to know more about us.

EKENE

Do you...actually enjoy the waltz?

GIGANTO

Oh, yes!

YONA

It's the only time we're allowed to touch each other.

GIGANTO

Then straight back to our prisons!

YONA

We've never even had time for a kiss.

EKENE

Apes and bears kiss?!

GIGANTO

My ancestors have kissed for thousands of years!

YONA

Millions, actually, I'm rather sure.

EKENE

I understand. I've never kissed anyone either.

YONA

And of course, that's another reason we chose you. You not only have the scarab, you also have the...well...

GIGANTO

We don't want to presume--

YONA

Possible motivation--

GIGANTO

Or at least empathy.

YONA

We suspect you reside in a similar state of involuntary servitude.

EKENE

Oh, yes, I'm a slave.

GIGANTO

Of the young lady you accompanied?

EKENE

You saw her?

YONA

Briefly. But more importantly sensed her.

EKENE

Sensed her?

GIGANTO

Her longing. For you. She'll help you.

EKENE

Longing!

YONA

We're the same: longing for each other through bars but never permitted to copulate.

GIGANTO

Must you use that word? It smacks of husbandry. Forgive Yona, she's too enamored of science. It makes her indelicate.

EKENE

Reynolds says you'd spawn a monster.

YONA

Nonsense! There's no proof at all that we'd be fertile together.

EKENE

Mr. Reynolds seemed to imply you might have been pregnant with his child.

GIGANTO

EKENE

I think we're completely done with delicacy.      Until you miscarried.

YONA

I didn't miscarry. I took ergot.

GIGANTO

I felt bad for the tiny creature.

YONA

That didn't stop you from eating it.



EKENE

Eating it?!

GIGANTO

We had to remove the evidence. I don't think you could even carry *my* baby to term.

YONA

Why not?

GIGANTO

My ancestors were giants!

YONA

You're not. Smaller than average, in fact. Your name itself is a gross exaggeration. Ridiculous!

GIGANTO

Eight to ten feet tall, according to stories passed down! With hands twice as big as yours and feet wide as elephant ears!

YONA

Nonsense! Giganto's family filled his head with romantic legends.

GIGANTO

Poor Yona was orphaned and kidnapped as an infant. It makes her cynical.

YONA

You were kidnapped, too.

EKENE

And sold.

YONA

Do you remember your parents?

EKENE

Can't you read that in my mind?

GIGANTO

Not when you bury it in your own brain. Are you ashamed?

EKENE

No!

YONA

You're Igbo and named Ekene. The rest of your history's hidden from us.

EKENE

My father was killed and both my mother and I were taken when I was two.

YONA

Did she come with you to America?

EKENE

(reluctant)

Yes...

GIGANTO

Do you have that memory?

YONA

Hush, Giganto, we don't need to know--

EKENE

I've never told anyone--

GIGANTO

Has anyone asked?

EKENE

No.

GIGANTO

We're asking.

YONA

Giganto--

GIGANTO

All right, *I'm* asking!

EKENE

If you tell anyone I'll be killed.

GIGANTO

Who can we tell? Only you hear us.

EKENE

I remember the ship. A schooner. Later I heard the name was Morovia.

YONA

Were you bound on the ship?

EKENE

In the hold, my mother next to me, head to foot. She whispered to me in Igbo so the slavers couldn't understand. All the captives spoke Igbo, and one spoke English, so he knew they planned to sell us in Georgia. By the time we were almost across the sea, we agreed on a plan. My mother--  
(hesitates)

GIGANTO

Your mother what?

YONA

Hush!

EKENE

My mother was beautiful, and offered herself to the sailor with the keys.

GIGANTO

Right next to you?

EKENE

He took her up on deck at night so no one else could see. He never came back down.

YONA

Powerful female!

EKENE

My mother unlocked all our shackles in the dark hold, and we waited until the slavers came to feed us in the morning. We all jumped up, many more of us than them, and slit their throats or threw them into the sea.

GIGANTO

Drowned the bastards!

YONA

All of them?

EKENE

All overboard. So no one was left to sail the ship and we ran aground in a strange new land. There was a king among us and he told us what to do. We couldn't escape, he said, the whites would find and enslave us. So we had to go back to our homeland.

GIGANTO

But no one knew how to sail!

EKENE

The great Chukwu would take us home.

YONA

A god? I don't believe in gods.

EKENE

Chukwu brings rain and governs the water. So my mother took me in her arms as all of us sang the praises of Chukwu and followed the king into the water.

GIGANTO

You drowned yourselves?

YONA

Nonsense! Ekene isn't drowned!

Lights slowly dim on GIGANTO and  
YONA.

EKENE

But maybe my mother didn't believe in gods, either. When the water was up to her chest and almost all the other Igbo had disappeared into the current, she swam with me to the shore. The singing had stopped, the water was quiet. But we weren't alone. Eleven other Igbo had swum silently to the shore and huddled shivering under the trees as the sun came up. Some wanted to hide in the forest, others wanted to offer themselves to the whites, a life of slavery better than starving in the wilderness. But in the end, our choice was made for us. Two white men with guns stumbled onto our group and shot one Igbo dead. We tried to run, but my mother was the next shot. When the men stopped to catch me and one other child, six or seven Igbo escaped. I was sold for thirty-seven dollars on St. Simons Island and a few years later in Richmond.

Lights up on ELMIRA and ED (in uniform) where YONA and GIGANTO had been. Lights also reveal the sloping brick wall of a fort.  
 TITLE: Fort Moultrie, May, 1828.

ELMIRA

To my father.

EKENE

Yes, miss.

ELMIRA

Why have you never told me until now?

ED

Dearest, had you asked?

ELMIRA

You won't be killed!

EKENE

I thought it might be difficult for you to hear.

ELMIRA

How thoughtful you are, Ekene, but you know I love you like--like--well, not like your mother, but you know what I mean!

ED

Like what?

EKENE

I know what you mean.

ELMIRA

And you only told the story for the first time because an orangutan asked?

EKENE

Telling the truth is a step toward freedom--

ED

Rather fantastical, actually--

ELMIRA

Eddy, dearest, it doesn't matter that it's true, only that Ekene believes it's true.

ED  
Next you'll be saying it  
reveals a greater truth.

ELMIRA  
It's so imaginative! And  
whether they can speak or not-

-

ED  
Apparently they're mind readers, but only if you have a  
scarab. I told you it had properties--and you gave it away!

ELMIRA  
What happened to the other Igbo?

EKENE  
I heard a rumor they fled to South Carolina and became  
maroons.

ELMIRA  
Maroons? What are maroons?

ED  
Escaped slaves living like savages in the mountains or the  
woods, a kind of primitive society.

EKENE  
The Igbo are supposed to be in a swamp.

ED  
So they're free.

ELMIRA  
I want to meet the ape and the bear. They predicted I'd help  
you.

EKENE  
Yes, but--

ED  
You won't be able to engage them in conversation.

ELMIRA  
Unless you give me back my golden beetle.

EKENE  
I don't want them hurt further on my account.

ELMIRA

I saw them waltz, and it was a dance of love, not lascivious at all. Imagine them separated, Eddy, as we've been estranged by the cruelty of my father!

(getting tearful)

Every night they embrace in public then sigh in isolation! We should set them free.

ED

Where would they go? Would you set him up in a blacksmith's shop and her as a milliner's assistant?

ELMIRA

They could live perfectly happily in the South Carolina wilderness as maroons eating nuts and herbs.

ED

Be contented dearest that we're together! Soon we'll be sipping sherry in a palazzo!

EKENE

And if emancipation gives you joy, you may fulfill your promise to me as I fulfilled mine to you.

ED

What promise is that?

Lights out on ED.

EKENE

Are you afraid to do what's right?

ELMIRA

First I want to help the ape and the bear.

EKENE

Reynolds holds the keys on his person.

ELMIRA

Where on his person?

EKENE

In his breast pocket.

ELMIRA

Your mother was a heroine to her people. Now that I'm free of my father, I'll be a heroine to the orangutans and the bears! Your mother showed us how.

(holds out hand)

The beetle, please.

EKENE reluctantly gives ELMIRA the beetle pendant. Lights out on ELMIRA and EKENE. Lights up on ED in the hospital bed reading from the manuscript.

ED

Elmira wouldn't let me join her at the circus, sent me instead to purchase tickets to Baltimore. Perhaps she had too much delicacy of feeling to subject me to her flirtation with another man, a carnival barker at that! As I imagined their encounter, I drove myself nearly mad, and sustained my soul with a quick visit to a Charleston tavern--with unfortunate results.

Lights up on DR. TARR.

DR. TARR

(re: manuscript)

This is evidence of mental fitness?

ED

A carefully calibrated lubrication of John Barleycorn gives me the most peaceful of slumbers and the most ecstatically inspirational dreams.

DR. TARR

Nightmares! Talking bears and dancing apes? Acts of bestiality? Magic golden beetles? Is this your memoir or one of your most morbid fictions?

ED

It's a confession more than anything else, a terrible truth, a purge--

DR. TARR

I certainly detect the influence of alcohol.

ED

I can't write with it, I can't write without it. A tiny glass of sherry mutates into a malicious muse.



DR. TARR

This sinister fairy tale will not free you--these characters so extreme--

ED

I know: too scientific, too detailed, to discordant, to grotesque, too much, too much, too much! I can't write simple moral stories that appeal to Baptist preachers and Connecticut school marms--

DR. TARR

You write like a madman.

ED

There's no other way to write. I want to invent monsters like Mary Shelley!

DR. TARR

(starting to leave)

It's very late--you've only forged your own shackles with these words--

ED

We haven't even gotten to the good part!

DR. TARR

The good part?!

Lights out on ED and DR. TARR.  
REYNOLDS appears as a top-hatted shadow in the middle of his ringmaster routine. TITLE: Charleston, May, 1828.

REYNOLDS

Yes, ladies and gentlemen, she is indeed a woman under those magnificent muttonchops! The Bearded Lady of Barbados is our final Human Oddity, the most astonishing of our grotesques, and you may study her up close to view the very follicles from whence springs her tantalizing tomentum! Come down out of your seats, and whilst you exit you'll pass within whispering distance of her whiskers.

Lights up on EKENE and ELMIRA.

REYNOLDS

Gentlemen, you might even receive a personal invitation to visit her later tonight!

Ladies, feel free to ask her for grooming tips! Right this way to meet the Beauteous Barbara of Barbardos!

Circus music as REYNOLDS disappears in silhouette and is replaced by the silhouette of a petite WOMAN sporting a rather bushy beard. The silhouetted WOMAN dances seductively.

EKENE

He'll probably come straight here. Best he doesn't see us together!

ELMIRA

You can't leave me!

Sound of whistling: *Weber's Last Waltz.*

EKENE

He already associates me with Yona and Giganto. I'll arouse suspicion!

EKENE disappears. REYNOLDS appears and is startled to see ELMIRA. The silhouetted WOMAN fades from view.

REYNOLDS

(still proper)

Good evening, Miss! What are you doing back here? It's not safe for ladies such as yourself! There are savage creatures about!

ELMIRA

Do you mean yourself, Mr. Reynolds?

REYNOLDS

(intrigued)

Not me, Miss, I'm gentle as a lamb. May I inquire as to how you know my name?

ELMIRA

I'm an admirer. Not only of your powerful eloquence in the limelight, but also of your deep knowledge.

REYNOLDS

(going Cockney)

Cor, I ain't never been so flattered!

ELMIRA

You bring European flair and scientific sophistication to our benighted republic.

REYNOLDS

(suspicious but aroused)

Wot then, may I do for you, Miss? D'yer crave a discourse on the monsters of our menagerie?

ELMIRA

Listen to you! What thrilling alliteration!

(touches his chest)

Go on! More of the monsters!

REYNOLDS

D'yer wanna 'ear of our helephant?

(ELMIRA takes his hand)

Quite a terrifyin' tusker and yet intellectual as any Oxford don! You saw 'im multiply figgers, but 'e 'as lots of other skills.

ELMIRA

I've always wondered how elephants multiply.

(puts her hand on his chest

and leaves it there)

REYNOLDS

(trying to hold it together)

Oh, my, Miss! It's a monumental undertaking, a complicated operation!

ELMIRA

How so?

REYNOLDS

We got one male and two females. One of the lady pachyderms is fond of 'im, the other won't give 'im so much as a tickle of the trunk--

(getting worked up as she

touches him)

But 'e likes the smell o' 'er better.

So we take a rag to 'er nether bits when she's distracted, eatin' or somesuch, and swobs up some a 'er juices--

REYNOLDS can suddenly stand it no more and dives in to grope ELMIRA. She gropes back passionately for a few moments, but they do not kiss.

ELMIRA

Oh! My! I'm all out of breath thinking of those passionate pachyderms.

REYNOLDS

'Ighly inspirational, they is!

ELMIRA

I'd very much like to see them.

REYNOLDS

Now?

ELMIRA

Right now! I sense they'd heighten my own emotional state even further witnessing them in the flesh!

REYNOLDS

Come wit me then!

(starts to drag her off)

ELMIRA

(disengaging)

Prepare them for me!

REYNOLDS

Right! Sometimes it takes 'im a bit o' time to--rouse 'imself as it were--

ELMIRA

I'm a patient woman. Are you a patient man?

REYNOLDS

Not as patient as I might like, Miss! Fifteen minutes and I'll be back for ya!

(stops)

And don't go near them critters!

The orangutan in particular is especially vicious. I seen him rip the regenitals off a buck with one swipe 'o his paw!

ELMIRA

Hurry, Mr. Reynolds!

He runs off and she reveals the keys she's pickpocketed.

ELMIRA

I'd never behaved so brazenly in my life! Only a few days away from my father's house, from Richmond expectations, and I became a--a--a completely modern woman! Deciding things! Daring things! Seeing Eddy again after so many months made me feel so--biological!

Lights up on EKENE observing ELMIRA from the shadows, unseen, unheard.

EKENE

A woman.

ELMIRA

A primate! With the spark of a soul, but a primate just the same!

EKENE

A dangerous woman.

ELMIRA

No longer afraid, capable of anything!

Lights up on GIGANTO in his cage, the chain obvious. He stares at her.

ELMIRA

Not...afraid...

EKENE

Afraid.

ELMIRA steels herself and takes a step toward the cage. GIGANTO stands. A moment as they size each other up.

She unlocks the cage, opens the door, and they take a few steps toward each other. She produces the scarab, clutching it in one hand. She extends her other hand to GIGANTO. They are face to face, but frozen.

END OF ACT ONE

TITLE: Charleston, May, 1828.  
 GIGANTO and ELMIRA stare at each other, neither moving. He lifts up his chain. GIGANTO takes her extended hand. She flinches but does not withdraw.

GIGANTO

Free me.

ELMIRA gasps then quickly stoops to unlock the chain from the floor.  
 EKENE emerges from the shadows.

EKENE

Miss, he's on his way back!

ELMIRA

The elephant's aroused already?

GIGANTO

(gestures)

Emancipate Yona!

ELMIRA

I understand you!

EKENE

He wants us to free the bear?

ELMIRA

(gestures to chain)

But I have to--

EKENE

(grabs keys)

I'll do it! You don't want to be here when Reynolds returns.

(they hesitate)

Either of you!

ELMIRA gives EKENE the pendant,  
 then she and GIGANTO run off,  
 GIGANTO dragging his chain.

EKENE

I sent a white woman off with a wild and menacing creature. But safer than the menacing man on his way back from pachydermic pricktasing. I find myself still amazed that Miss Royster, for all her evident affection continually postpones her promise of manumission. I hoped Miss Royster's renewed romance would inspire generosity of heart extending beyond circus animals to members of her own species. It's not at all uncommon for tenderhearted people to lavish affection on a dog, a cat, a pet pig, while treating other humans with animal brutality.

Lights up on YONA waiting patiently behind bars.

YONA

If you please.

EKENE

Sorry!

(starts to unlock the door)

YONA

Can you defend yourself if Reynolds returns?

EKENE

(shows knife)

I still have this.

EKENE pockets the knife and quickly unlocks the cage door, but before it opens REYNOLDS appears. EKENE turns to face REYNOLDS, hiding the unlocked door and accidentally dropping the key.

REYNOLDS

Where's she got off to?

EKENE

Who, sir?

REYNOLDS

A lady, not that it's any o' yer business. She expressed a interest in...animal 'usbandry, she did--



YONA  
Get him over near the door.

REYNOLDS  
--And I wanted to let 'er  
know the helephants is ready  
for 'er.

EKENE  
He'll be doubly suspicious!

REYNOLDS  
Did y' see which direction she  
was 'eaded?

YONA  
I'll let him take it further this time.

EKENE  
Oh, you mean the elephant lady?

YONA slips the knife from EKENE's  
pocket and hides it.

REYNOLDS  
You saw 'er?

EKENE  
A pretty white lady?

REYNOLDS  
Yeah! Where'd she go? And git away from that cage--I told  
y' the bear 'ates darkies!

EKENE  
(stepping away from the cage)  
The lady said she had to return to her hotel immediately.

REYNOLDS  
She did? Bloody 'ell!

EKENE  
But she'll return tomorrow.

REYNOLDS  
Wot a kick in the orchestras!

EKENE  
I don't imagine you'd want to try again.

REYNOLDS  
Try again? For wot?

EKENE

(EKENE gestures to YONA)

Not after she got the better of you last time.

REYNOLDS

She smeared a Richard in me boat!

EKENE

Which is of course why I'd never suggest attempting something so hazardous again. I presume you punished her after.

REYNOLDS

Right 'arsh, I did!

EKENE

So although she's learned her lesson, I couldn't possibly ask you to indulge me, even though she's likely to submit to you now.

They look at YONA who backs up to the bars.

REYNOLDS

She appears receptive.

EKENE

Even eager. Is there any other gentleman of the circus who might be willing to titillate me with risk?

REYNOLDS

Hit requires expertise, hit does!

EKENE

Such a shame. I must leave after tonight.

REYNOLDS

(undoes trousers)

Well, seeing as I just got diddled outta my evening's entertainment--

EKENE

And I'm sure you'd be terribly embarrassed if I watch.

REYNOLDS

(goes to bars)

In the name of instruction.

(copulates with YONA)

In case you ever 'as to conduct any form of captive breeding-- now you gotta start gentle-like--cause bears got shockingly dinky Hamptons--

(climaxing)

--And humans being superior to animals got the biggest of all, proportionately speaking--!

YONA suddenly pulls free, pops out the door, grabs REYNOLDS and looks him in the eye.

REYNOLDS

Yona---yer me favorite--!

YONA

And you're mine.

YONA whips out the hidden knife and slashes REYNOLDS' throat. He collapses immediately. Lots of blood and gurgling.

YONA

(to EKENE)

Thank you. You mustn't try to find us, but Giganto and I will always remember you set us free.

Lights out on YONA and REYNOLDS.

EKENE

I turned Reynolds over and his head fell completely off. Then I ran away as well so I didn't get blamed for the decapitation. Who'd believe a sentient bear could use a shiv to slice her way to freedom? Who'd believe a slave? It's natural for animals to be free unless enslaved by humans. But can a human, even emancipated from legal bondage, ever be truly free? Even the richest, whitest heiress is a slave--to her wealth, to her family, to society, to expectation. Would people be happier together--freer--if we were more like animals?

Lights up on ELMIRA and ED, he in his uniform. The shadows of the cages reappear.

ELMIRA

You're calling me a slave?

ED

(drunk)

It's a metaphor.

ELMIRA

Eddy, have you been drinking?

ED

No!

EKENE

But now you're free.

ELMIRA

And you wish to be free as well.

EKENE

I'd like to think of you as a woman of her word.

ELMIRA

You've been with me all my life--

EKENE

You taught me to read--

ED

Your secret's safe with me!

EKENE

You've shared with me the  
wonders of books, of art, of  
the world beyond Richmond--

ELMIRA

And now we're free to see the world together!

ED

We do need to be cognizant of expenses--

(brandishing tickets)

Tickets to Baltimore are costly! I only have a soldier's pay  
and your father will cut you off--

ELMIRA

I've been kind, haven't I? I hope I have.

EKENE

You've been very kind to Yona and Giganto. They're halfway to the Appalachians by now, safe in the forest--

ED

Maroons.

EKENE

Yes. Must I maroon myself, hide myself to be free?

ELMIRA

I set your mind free!

EKENE

But my body! My flesh and blood! My soul may fly away with yours--

ED

EKENE

You and I can fly, Elmira--! But only in a dream!

EKENE

You've shown me the world yet denied me the freedom to experience it.

ELMIRA

Together! We've dreamed together--! Remember that time we agreed--an experiment--to meet in a dream?

EKENE

It didn't work.

ELMIRA

We didn't concentrate, didn't dream hard enough.

ED

EKENE

That's odd and disturbing. We have different dreams!

EKENE

You've professed devotion to me--

ELMIRA

To your soul!

EKENE

What empirical evidence is there of soul?

ED  
I certainly have a soul,  
Elmira. You, too.

EKENE  
A spark within humans to  
distinguish us from bears and  
orangutans?

ED  
Our souls commune!

EKENE  
That makes us superior?

ELMIRA  
Of course we have souls! God in us! God in you!

EKENE  
Then if there is God in you, Miss, exercise your omnipotence  
and emancipate me.

ELMIRA  
(reaching out to EKENE)  
Ekene...I...I...you know how dearly--

ED  
Too dearly?

EKENE  
If you refuse to sign a legal  
document--

EKENE  
(pushing her away)  
--Then I must free myself. I'll join the maroons in the  
wilderness and you'll never see me again--

ELMIRA  
No, that I cannot bear--!

ED  
(struggling for eloquence)  
Dearest Elmira, while I most sincerely respect your property  
rights under the laws of the United States of America and the  
Commonwealth of Virginia, I perceive the exercise of those  
rights--in the instance of Ekene, a bonded laborer--to be a  
burden upon your soul. As we begin our life in Baltimore  
together--our joyful union as husband and wife--that burden  
would become ours to share. Would it not be better for us,  
for our marriage, to relieve ourselves of that moral  
millstone--

ELMIRA  
Ekene is not a millstone!

ED

--That psychic weight and responsibility--with an act of generosity and--indeed!--sacrifice--setting Ekene free?

ELMIRA

You've placed me in an impossible position.

EKENE

Difficult, but not impossible.

ELMIRA

Do you love me?

ED

Of course!

EKENE

(after a moment)

Yes, Miss!

ELMIRA

But you love freedom more.

EKENE

I know you. More in this moment than ever before. I do not yet know freedom.

ED

That makes perfect sense.

ELMIRA

It does! But be patient with me!

EKENE

I have been absurdly patient my entire life. You've broken your word. I shall leave of my own accord.

ELMIRA

And I shall send the law in search of you.

EKENE

Let them search. This country is vast, the forests deep, the mountains tall and wild.

ELMIRA

You won't get out of Charleston. I shall raise my voice, restrain you with the force of a word--I shall scream--!

ED

No, you shan't!

ED restrains her forcibly and covers her mouth. ELMIRA struggles in his grasp.

ED

Go! Get as far away as you can as fast as you can!

EKENE

This is not how I wished to depart--

ED

Your first act of self-determination is the dangerous choice of freedom--take it!

EKENE

Miss, I'm so sorry!

ED

Or lose it forever!

EKENE

I always thought Elmira would free me, not you!

ED

She's my Elmira, not yours!

EKENE kisses the hand of the struggling ELMIRA.

EKENE

I'll meet you in your dreams.

EKENE runs off as ELMIRA thrashes in ED'S grip.

ED

Dearest, it's for the best. I perceive your depth of feeling, your extraordinary sensitivity toward Ekene, and your debilitating loss after a lifetime of--dare we call it friendship? But we mustn't think of that now. Think only of us, the obstacles we've overcome: my purloined letters, your rough journey to Charleston--and now we're together.



Just us. Think of it, darling, we have nothing. Only each other! More than enough.

He releases her. She remains frozen.

ELMIRA

You're inebriated. You have interfered with me.

ED

No, not--!

ELMIRA

Thus begins our marriage. Your first act!

ED

Of love!

ELMIRA

You've stolen my property. All I have in the world.

ED

You have me.

ELMIRA

Pray, what is that? A drunken poet? In the army?

ED

I'm applying to West Point--

ELMIRA

When a man drinks, his true character is revealed. Is this who you are? A disrespector of women, of property?

ED

A respector of freedom!

ELMIRA

I promised a scream.

ED

There's no need of that.

ELMIRA

A murdered man lies but a few steps from here, his head a few steps beyond that.

ED

Yes, certainly, we could alert the authorities, but they'll find Reynolds soon enough.

ELMIRA

But will they apprehend the assassin?

ED

The bear absconded to the jungles of South Carolina. They'll never find her, nor the orangutan.

ELMIRA

Nor Ekene.

ED

Ekene's innocent of the murder.

ELMIRA

(pointing to knife on the ground)

Ekene's knife effected the crime.

ED

(picks up knife)

But there's no Ekene to answer for it in any case.

(picks up key)

Oh, look, the key.

ELMIRA

There's you.

ED

I had nothing to do with it, either. Of course.

ELMIRA

You're present at the scene of the crime.

ED

So are you, my dear.

ELMIRA

With the murder weapon in your hand.

(screams)

Decapitation!

ED

(reaching for her)

Dearest, don't!

ELMIRA

(shrinks from him, screams)

Decollation!

ED

I love you--!

ED

--With a love that's more  
than love!

ELMIRA

Villain! Dissemble no more!

ELMIRA

You'll never silence me again!

(screams)

Mactation!

(ED hesitates)

Extermination! Slaughter!

ED runs away.

ELMIRA

(a soul-searing scream)

Uxoricide!

Lights out on ELMIRA and up on DR.  
TARR. TITLE: Baltimore, October  
7, 1849, 3:30 a.m.

DR. TARR

The slave disappeared into the coastal forest, the soldier reported for duty at Fort Moultrie, and the young lady retreated to her father's house in Richmond. A sad and frustrating denouement, except of course, for the bear and orangutan, who were at last together and free. And I suppose at least somewhat joyful for the slave, who was also free, but forced to hide among the cypress trees and magnolias in order to remain at liberty.

Lights up on ELMIRA, now 20 years older, with some gray in her hair, still beautiful. She wears a gray shawl.

ELMIRA

Why are you telling me this?

DR. TARR

If it's a long-hidden injustice, it should be brought to light.

ELMIRA

To serve whom?

DR. TARR

Truth.

ELMIRA

Truth? It's an incredibly complicated *fiction*! While there exist kernels of truth here and there, by and large it's an outrageous fabrication, very nearly a hoax in its entirety. The implied intimacy between slave and mistress is libelous, I never went to Charleston--bearded Barbara, baboons, bears wielding knives, ridiculous! Where did all this come from?

Lights up on ED lying unconscious  
in the bed.

DR. TARR

The patient's perfervid imagination, perhaps?

ELMIRA

Perhaps you made it up!

DR. TARR

I? I'm a doctor, not an author, not a fabulist.

ELMIRA

When was he last conscious?

DR. TARR

An hour ago. He may wake soon, but we can't disturb him. And the other doctors mustn't find you here. We're not even allowing family--

ELMIRA

I'm his fiancée!

DR. TARR

His fiancée now or in 1826?

ELMIRA

We became engaged *again* only four weeks ago in Richmond.

DR. TARR

How am I to believe you?

ELMIRA

I must justify myself to you?

DR. TARR

I'm the attending physician.

ELMIRA

Perhaps this will prove I'm the same woman.

(produces the gold insect)

The golden beetle you just described.

DR. TARR

So that part of the story is true at least.

ELMIRA

Will you permit me to stay if I tell you what really happened? It may have bearing on his diagnosis and treatment.

DR. TARR

(taking the manuscript)

I would be pleased to make corrections.

ELMIRA

Oh, you *write*.

DR. TARR

Maryland has no prohibition of Negro literacy.

ELMIRA

Nor Negro doctors, apparently. Instead of amending the absurdities you've just related, I'll continue the history from where your patient left off. The contrast between sober truth and gander's eggs will be immediately apparent and allow you to retrospectively correct his demented utterances.

DR. TARR

You do not sound to me like a woman in love.

ELMIRA

Impertinent! I shall make formal complaint when the other doctors arrive. Your assessment is in fact the opposite of the truth. That's what the entire story's about.

DR. TARR

The entire story? What is it about?

ELMIRA

Love.

DR. TARR

Love? That's what the patient claims. Isn't it really about madness, slavery, freedom, tragic consequences--?

ELMIRA

You've just described love perfectly. Twenty-two years ago I sacrificed love when I married Barrett Shelton and became instantly a wealthy woman. I spoke not a word to Eddy until one month ago.

DR. TARR

When you became engaged, renewing your interrupted vow.

ELMIRA

My husband died five years ago. I've mourned properly and am ready to move on, to marry--

DR. TARR

A famous man.

ELMIRA

He is in many ways more infamous than famous, but Eddy's agreed to join the Sons of Temperance at my request.

DR. TARR

In order to become a wealthy man.

ELMIRA

I adore the way Eddy turns imagination into words. Ours is a love story, pure and simple.

DR. TARR

Simple? Ekene also loved you.

ELMIRA

Which is why I failed at first to understand the plea for manumission. It was impossible at the time.

DR. TARR

But also why you were not surprised when Ekene returned to Richmond.

ELMIRA

Is that what Eddy told you, that Ekene returned?

DR. TARR

He didn't just tell me. He's written it down.

ELMIRA

(alarmed)

He's written it down?

DR. TARR

This manuscript was his only possession when he was admitted.

Lights out on them and brighten on ED in the bed as he sits up and begins to read from manuscript pages. TITLE: Baltimore, October 7, 1849, 2 a.m.

ED

(manic and precise)

For four months after the circus catastrophe, Elmira refused to see me, returned my missives unread. It became clear--

(uses DR. TARR'S pen to make a correction)

--It became *manifestly* clear that truest love demands truest test. Elmira's fury with me arose because I deprived her of property, honored the universal human right of freedom by restraining her as Ekene fled. Choosing Elmira's love over Ekene's freedom was my impossible task. Fortunately Ekene provided the analytic technique with which to make the pursuit. I deduced that Ekene followed the bear and orangutan into the lowland forest on the South Carolina mainland across from Sullivan Island in search of the Igbo maroons. I procured a scientific treatise on the orangutans of Borneo and searched the woods until I found an orangutan nest, first one, then dozens in the trees.

By following the greener nests, I moved closer and closer to Giganto's current habitat and deeper into Hell Hole Swamp. But was Ekene nearby?

Lights up on EKENE tending a campfire and out on ED, who continues in voiceover. TITLE: Hell Hole Swamp, September, 1828.

ED

(voiceover)

As the weather grew cooler in September, Ekene needed fire at night, so I simply hid myself near the most recent nests and waited until dark. I was soon rewarded with a glimpse of warm light deep in the cold forest.

Lights up on ED, once again in his military uniform. Nighttime forest sounds.

ED

You don't seem surprised to see me.

EKENE

You're hard to miss, crashing through the woods in your military boots and uniform. We've been watching you for days, waiting for your courage to win out over your trepidation.

ED

We?

EKENE

(gestures)

The Igbo maroons. My family in the wilderness, free of your society of slavery. The day I found them, I found true joy.

ED

I expected a modicum of gratitude.

EKENE

For clasping our beloved Elmira in your arms while I escaped?

ED

It cost me.



EKENE

What did it cost you? Your engagement?

ED

Not at all. We married a month after that.

EKENE

Congratulations.

ED

And she consented to sign your deed of manumission.

EKENE

Truly?

ED

She's requested you return to Richmond where you may enjoy your freedom back in civilization.

EKENE

I'm enjoying my freedom right here, a proud maroon. I own nothing, but no one owns me.

ED

Your freedom ends the moment a slave-catcher discovers your refuge.

EKENE

I'll not be easily apprehended, with my people to defend me.

ED

The Igbo are no match for Remingtons.

EKENE

Elmira's prepared a document of enfranchisement?

ED

She needs only your consent in order to sign.

EKENE

What inspired her change of heart?

ED

I'd like to think I did.

EKENE

Very well. I am doubly grateful to you.

ED

You'll come to Richmond?

EKENE

(preparing to leave)

Immediately.

ED

What of your Igbo family?

EKENE

I'm completely free to do as I wish--for the first time in my life.

ED

I anticipate a joyful reunion.

Lights up on (young) ELMIRA, a look of utter shock on her face, not joyful. Lights also reveal a painted barn wall. TITLE:  
Richmond, September, 1828.

ELMIRA

I don't understand.

EKENE

You said you would--

ED

Dearest, you wanted Ekene, so Ekene you shall have!

ELMIRA

Eddy, please go.

ED

It's not advisable that you be alone with one so recently a wild maroon--

ELMIRA

And yet that is my desire. Go!

ED

But I need to tell you--

ELMIRA

Go have a drink!

ED leaves.

EKENE

Is it true?

ELMIRA

That I've missed you horribly? I told you I would.

EKENE

I've missed you as well.

ELMIRA

(sits)

So much that you came back.

EKENE

(sits next to her)

Because of your promise.

ELMIRA

What promise?

EKENE

The one your husband inspired.

ELMIRA

My husband? I can't even think of him right now.

(takes EKENE's face in her  
hands)

I haven't seen your face in four months.

EKENE

I've seen yours in my dreams.

ELMIRA

Oh. I met you there?

EKENE

As we tried years ago.

ELMIRA

Did I have on my head--

EKENE AND ELMIRA

--A cornette with a scarlet plume?

EKENE

I'd never seen it before. Is that the fashion now?

ELMIRA

(gasps)

I bought it just a month ago. What else was I wearing?

(EKENE looks at the ground)

And what did I say?

EKENE

Nothing.

ELMIRA

What did I do?

EKENE looks embarrassed.

ELMIRA

What? It was only a dream, imagination.

EKENE

Not if you appeared in a cornette I'd never seen--

ELMIRA

When I woke I found this under my pillow.

She reveals the golden beetle on  
the necklace she wears.

EKENE

The golden beetle! I thought I'd lost it!

Suddenly ELMIRA kisses EKENE, who  
tries to pull back. BARRETT  
suddenly storms in.

BARRETT

Elmira! What--?!

ELMIRA and EKENE spring apart.

ELMIRA

(formal)

Barrett! You remember Ekene?

BARRETT

Your house nigger, Ekene?

EKENE

Not any more!

BARRETT

The one who ran away?

ELMIRA

But has returned!

BARRETT

The one you taught to read?

ELMIRA

Oh, no, dear. I'd never break the law!

EKENE

This is your husband?

ELMIRA

Of course, Ekene! How ignorant!

BARRETT

(hands EKENE a paper)

What does this say?

EKENE looks at the paper for a while, may exchange glances with ELMIRA, or perhaps they are too afraid.

EKENE

I's sorry, suh!

(hands back paper)

Back in de day, I usedta play like I could read dem nobbles cause it please de mistress, but in troof, I cain't tell de alpha fum de omega!

BARRETT

(not quite convinced)

Huh.

ELMIRA

That's right, Barrett. Ekene wasn't reading, just play-acting. Now, Ekene, go clean up and ask Quashie for your old uniform back. We kept it nice for you.

EKENE

No, ma'am, I don't believe I can do that.

BARRETT

I don't believe Ekene can do that either, Elmira.

(pulls out shackles)

The rebellion of escape must be met with punishment sufficient to discourage defiance--

ELMIRA

Ekene's my property, Barrett, not yours!

EKENE

But you promised manumission if I returned!

ELMIRA

What?

EKENE starts to run out, but  
BARRETT wrestles EKENE into the  
shackles.

EKENE

Miss Elmira, let me go!

BARRETT

Your mistress gave you too  
much freedom as it was!

EKENE

I came back for you, and for  
freedom!

ELMIRA

Barrett, there's no need for  
that!

EKENE

Legal freedom!

BARRETT

Gonna string you up so you  
can never get away!

EKENE

Miss Elmira, please!

BARRETT

Elmira, this ain't something should be witnessed by a lady.

ELMIRA

Barrett, Ekene belongs to me!

BARRETT hooks the shackles to a hanging chain.

BARRETT

What's yours is mine.

ELMIRA

Not in this specific instance, and in any case, I have decided to set Ekene free.

EKENE

As you promised!

ELMIRA

That's right. I gave my word.

BARRETT

I decide what our slaves deserve.

ELMIRA

Unlock those shackles or I'll never speak to you again!

BARRETT

I saw how you touched my wife, put your mouth on her like a juicy slice of melon--

EKENE

She kissed *me*!

BARRETT

(slugs EKENE)

You shoulda never been that close to her in the first place!

BARRETT steps behind a screen lit by a torch. In silhouette he can be seen pulling down on a chain. As he does so, EKENE is hauled, jerk by jerk, into the air.

ELMIRA

Barrett, I've set Ekene free!





EKENE

(off)

You may drunkenly butcher *When I Drain the Rosy Bowl* as she plays Mozart's notoriously complex *Trumpet Sonata* and Beethoven's impossible but exquisite *Große Sonate für das Hammerklavier*. You are not worthy of her! You bought her but will never own her!

BARRETT

She's changed. She's a married lady now.

YONA

Ekene, who is that man?

EKENE

(off)

Yona? Don't get caught or you'll be back in the circus like me!

In silhouette, BARRETT stops whistling, secures the chain and picks up the torch.

BARRETT

Elmira, get up--go back into the house!

YONA

Who is he?

EKENE

Miss Elmira's husband!

BARRETT

Who're you talking to?

EKENE

Yona, go back to the forest!

BARRETT

Yona?

YONA goes behind the screen, appearing as a bear (not at all human) silhouette with BARRETT, who immediately picks up the torch and threatens her with it.

EKENE  
Stay away from him!

BARRETT  
Get back, you carnivorous  
monstrosity!

EKENE  
He could burn you!

YONA  
I'm an omnivore!

EKENE  
You're covered in hair!  
Flammable!

BARRETT  
I'll roast you! I'll roast  
you all!

BARRETT brings the lit torch near  
EKENE. With a burst of light and a  
scream, it's clear that EKENE is on  
fire.

EKENE  
I curse you, Barrett Shelton! This sin is yours for all  
time! You've condemned yourself as well as me!

YONA  
Giganto, get Ekene down! I'll take care of this one!

With a growl, YONA advances on  
BARRETT, who turns and runs. They  
both disappear in silhouette as  
GIGANTO suddenly appears and climbs  
quickly out of sight, up to the  
burning EKENE.

GIGANTO  
I'll get you down, Ekene!

EKENE  
(off)  
No, Giganto, your hair!

A quick change in light indicates  
GIGANTO has also caught fire.

GIGANTO  
(off)  
Hold still!

EKENE  
You can't break the shackles!

GIGANTO  
Stop squirming!



ELMIRA

(points)

Ekene and the orangutan! They're burning!

ED

(stares in horror)

They're too high! Water wouldn't reach them!

Sound of a heartbeat, louder than  
before.

ELMIRA

Get them down! This is your fault!

ED

I didn't set them on fire!

ELMIRA

You brought Ekene here on the false promise of freedom!

ED

I thought you'd take pity!

The heartbeat gets louder.

ELMIRA

I did! I honored my word--but too late--get Ekene down from  
there! Take responsibility!

ED

It's too late!

ELMIRA

This is your task! You have  
the key!

ED

What key?

ELMIRA

You gave your word!

EKENE

(weaker)

Miss Elmira!

ELMIRA

The key to Giganto's chain--they're tangled but still alive!  
Go up there! You have the key!

EKENE

I love you!

The heartbeat is very loud. ED pulls the key from his pocket, stares at it stupidly.

ELMIRA

You're intoxicated! Give me that!

ELMIRA grabs the key and starts toward the fire, but ED grabs her and holds her as he did at the circus.

ED

No, Elmira! The fire's too hot--!

ELMIRA

Let me go!

ED

You'll kill yourself!

ELMIRA

You're killing Ekene unless you let me go! You're killing me!

ED

I'm holding you because I love you! Can you feel it? Can you feel my heart?!

ELMIRA

You have no heart! Ekene!

ED lets her go. She stares up at EKENE and realizes with horror it's too late.

ED

You have it! You have my heart!

ELMIRA

You don't have mine. You've failed in your task once again. Your great sin isn't what you've done, it's what you've failed to do. You let Ekene die out of jealousy! For that I curse you as Ekene cursed my husband! I never want to see you again, you drunken, useless creature!

ELMIRA runs out sobbing. ED stares at the burning figures as the heartbeat gets louder. A shadow on the screen of the very pregnant YONA. ED sees it and the heartbeat gets more frantic, approaching a kind of climax. Lights out on ED and come up on DR. TARR reading from manuscript pages. The heartbeat continues.

DR. TARR

As the two scorched figures twisted and turned on their chains, my eyes were drawn back to the horror. The great white bear stared at me as if I was the one who cremated her mate. The hellish tattoo of my heart increased. It grew quicker and quicker, and louder and louder every instant. I could feel her animosity--any moment she might attack. My terror was extreme. I should have fled but could not move, my gaze riveted on the dangling pair. The fire charred their skin and exposed ribs, femurs, **seared flesh**, a blackened skull. Nor did the bear move, her malevolent glare hotter than the fire, a curse like Elmira's, Ekene's. My heart grew louder, louder every moment! The smell like an abattoir at night when they burn the offal, incinerate the bones! The fury of the vengeful bruin, poised to rip out my bursting heart! I felt that I must scream or die! And my heart, beating, beating--hark! louder! louder! louder! louder!

The heartbeat ceases. Lights out on YONA and up on the older ELMIRA, unimpressed, and ED, still unconscious in the bed. TITLE:  
Baltimore, October 7, 1849, 4 a.m.

ELMIRA

That's not at all how it happened.

DR. TARR

You don't seem shocked to hear it.

ELMIRA

Eddy told me this four weeks ago. I didn't believe it then and I don't believe it now. How could I? I certainly couldn't marry him if I thought it was true. But it's fantastically imaginative, isn't it?

DR. TARR

What really occurred?

ELMIRA

I stayed with Barrett out of feminine weakness, chose money over imagination, over love, no melodramatic betrayal nor funeral pyre. My heart was the only flesh destroyed.

DR. TARR

The beasts never came to Richmond to rescue Ekene?

ELMIRA

Neither bear nor orangutan has left my mind in twenty years, but I never saw them again. I heard other circuses lost their apes and bears: South Carolina, North Carolina, Georgia, Virginia, and I imagined Yona and Giganto liberating them to breed monsters in the mountains.

DR. TARR

The bear and the ape are true at least?

ELMIRA

But they did not speak.

DR. TARR

(gesturing to bed)

And the patient?

ELMIRA

I spied Eddy in 1836 or 37 across a ballroom in Richmond soon after he married his little cousin Virginia. I asked Barrett to take me home immediately.

DR. TARR

You had no wish to see him? He was quite famous by then.

ELMIRA

I was married. He was married. He didn't need me. And I was well aware of his reputation.

DR. TARR

His literary reputation?

ELMIRA

Dipsomania. The curse of writers. He was overfond of sherry in particular.

DR. TARR

And yet, a month ago you agreed to marry him.

ELMIRA

Barrett died, Virginia died. Eddy assured me the dipsomaniac in him had died as well.

DR. TARR

But if you don't believe his tale, how could you agree to marry him?

Lights out on DR. TARR and up on ED, now 40 years old with a moustache. Lights also reveal Virginia creeper vines clinging to a wall. TITLE: Richmond, September, 1849.

ELMIRA

I love your imagination. The most vivid in the world, so far beyond your schoolboy verses. Humorous but dark, famously tormented--

ED

Because of all we've suffered, horrific history only you understand. Only you can redeem me as you tried so valiantly to save Ekene. Now that we've found each other again we can plan our future--

ELMIRA

Eddy, I desperately want to save you, but we can't plan our future if we don't agree on the past! Who knows this story-- your version of this story?

ED

Only you.

ELMIRA

Then this--phantasmagoria, this magic lantern show--must go no further. No one else may know of it. You've turned me into a bear with an opposable thumb!

ED

But if it's only my imagination--



ELMIRA

Imagination's the most powerful force on earth. Without imagination there would be no God, no government, no money, no slavery--these abstractions only exist because we agree to believe in them. Our collective belief makes them real. And we have to take responsibility for that. So you must not write your imagined past--that would bring it to life. Do you agree?

ED

Not to write?

ELMIRA

Not about talking bears, orangutans, maroons nor me.

ED

This is the hardest thing to ask a writer--not to tell my story--

ELMIRA

It's my story as well, true or not. Think of it as your final impossible task. Simply not to write.

ED

(after a moment)

I give you my word. I will not write it.

ELMIRA

Then in answer to your original question: yes.

ED

You'll consent to marry a minor writer with insecure income?

ELMIRA

Minor? I've read everything you published.

ED

I've never written a single novel.

ELMIRA

The whole world acknowledges the genius I fell in love with 20 years ago. A celebrated author forty years of age with decades of literature ahead of him.

ED

(joyful)

Yes! So much to write! I've made arrangements to start a new literary magazine called *The Stylus* out of New York and St. Louis--

ELMIRA

I hope you're not relying on me to underwrite it.

ED

(clearly he is)

Oh! No! Of course not. *The Stylus* will be completely self-supporting!

ELMIRA

And you'll join the Sons of Temperance?

ED

I've already made arrangements with the Shockoe Hill Division to be initiated.

ELMIRA

Your first step toward salvation! I can't tell you how happy that makes me!

ED

My darling! I'm in an ecstasy! Your love will save me! To think, after twenty-four years--

(tries to kiss her)

ELMIRA

(keeping him at bay)

Let us save the kisses for our wedding day!

ED

Yes, all the more beautiful if our precious first kiss is at the altar of love!

ELMIRA

We both make sacrifices at that altar.

ED

That's how we know it's love.

Lights out on ED and up on DR.  
 TARR, who holds many manuscript  
 pages. TITLE: Baltimore, October  
 7, 1849, 5 a.m.

DR. TARR

He's not yet made his sacrifice. This is the story he  
 promised he'd never write. Your story.

ELMIRA

May I have it?

DR. TARR

I've no legal right to give it to you.

ELMIRA

You've a moral right.

DR. TARR

Yes, I do. It's my tale, too.

Lights up suddenly on ED sitting up  
 in the hospital bed.

ED

Your tale?!

ELMIRA

Eddy, you're awake at last!  
 (goes to him)

DR. TARR

Yes, my story.

ELMIRA

What's happened to your moustaches?

ED

(taking ELMIRA'S hand)  
 I'm being pursued--can't even use my real name--!  
 (to DR. TARR)  
 Your tale simply because you hold the pages in your hand?

DR. TARR

Because I hold the story in my heart.

DR. TARR removes the veil and perhaps other costume pieces to reveal horrific burn scars.

ELMIRA

Ekene!?

ED

You...survived immolation?

ELMIRA

I thought--but was afraid to hope--  
(reaching out but afraid to touch)

How horrible!

ED

(to ELMIRA)

Ocular proof of my truth.

ELMIRA

(to EKENE)

You're not a doctor, not even employed by this hospital, are you?

EKENE

I survived, but Giganto died, gave his life for me. Yona took me down from the chains and back to the wilderness. Some species of healing herbs from Africa also thrive in Appalachia, so the Igbo maroons could make me better but never make me whole.

ELMIRA

(crying)

You let me think you dead! For twenty years!

EKENE

You left me for dead.

ELMIRA

I blamed Eddy because he didn't let me save you! But your death was a hoax!

EKENE

My only chance to escape you forever.

ELMIRA

Escape me!?

EKENE

Legally, you still own me. So in honor of you I took your name.

ELMIRA

I don't own you any more. I freed you the day you burned! Don't you remember?

ED

My influence!

EKENE

That's your version of the story.

ED

My version!

ELMIRA

You've been free for 20 years.

EKENE

I rarely leave Hell Hole Swamp, but if I go into a town and they want my name, I say I'm Ekene Royster. Almost as if we were married.

ED

She's marrying me, not a fire-scarred servant!

ELMIRA

(indicates manuscript)

You wrote what you swore not to write--a hoax in a hoax in a hoax.

ED

It's not a hoax, it's a novel!

ELMIRA

You've deceived me again and again. Broken your word.

ED

Ekene's scars aren't proof enough? What more do you need?

ELMIRA

You say Yona was pregnant. Did her baby survive?

EKENE

Yes.

ED

How could it live? Part bear, part orangutan--

EKENE

Part human.

ELMIRA

Human?

EKENE

Reynolds.

ED

That's impossible! Nothing has three biological parents!

EKENE

This creature does.

ELMIRA

Which parent does it resemble?

EKENE

He has Yona's strength, Giganto's appearance, and Reynold's whistle.

ED

Humans are the only primates that whistle!

EKENE

Exactly. Also Reynolds' temperament: monstrous, cruel. Yona raised him almost affectionately, called him the little Booger when he was small. But once he grew, he repulsed her and she rejected him, referred to him contemptuously as Reynolds. Now he lives only for revenge.

ED

Revenge? Against whom?

EKENE

You, for one.

ED

Me?!

EKENE AND ELMIRA

For letting his father die.

ED

Barrett Shelton set that fire!

ELMIRA

When you see evil, you can't just stand by!

EKENE

I helped the Booger catch up  
with Shelton in 1844.

ELMIRA

Can't just write it down!

EKENE

Finished what Yona couldn't when she pursued Shelton twenty  
years ago.

ED

You helped him?

EKENE

Monstrous acts beget monsters.

ED looks to ELMIRA in a panic.

ELMIRA

I told people Barrett died of pneumonia. We didn't know what  
could have done that to him.

ED

He was...mutilated?

ELMIRA

Not a mark on him. But the look on his face, starting eyes,  
a rictus of fear! It haunts me to this day. As if he'd been  
literally scared to death.

ED

You killed him!

EKENE

His deed killed him, his guilt.

ED

You and—Reynolds!

EKENE

Shelton condemned himself.

ELMIRA

We found a monstrous footprint in the garden.

ED

This creature looks like Giganto?

EKENE

(leaning into ED)

Much bigger, truly gigantic, like orangutans' ancient ancestors, but bearish. Especially the feet, which are quite disproportionate. A misbegotten creature doomed to roam the world in search of his creator.

ED

I'm his creator?

EKENE

(indicating manuscript)

Here's the evidence. You've condemned yourself.

Although he's still restrained, ED is able to grab the manuscript pages away from EKENE.

ELMIRA

Eddy, give me those pages. They're all that stand between you and deliverance.

ED

(re: manuscript)

This is our love story!

ELMIRA

If you wish to marry me, you'll burn that travesty.

ED

(re: manuscript)

This is immortality! Yours and mine! In a hundred years, two hundred years, we'll live again--all three of us--in these pages!

ELMIRA

Enjoy your immortality alone.



EKENE

(to ELMIRA)

Then come with me. I'm here to free you.

ELMIRA

Free me?

ED

From me?

EKENE

All that you own, owns you. And he'd own you, too, if you marry.

ELMIRA

I'm not...worthy of you. I've disappointed and betrayed you again and again. I'm as guilty as Barrett and Eddy! I just stood by!

EKENE

You freed me.

ELMIRA

But too late!

EKENE

You created me. You gave me words.

ED

(re: manuscript)

I wrote your words! I invented you!

ELMIRA

(to ED)

You clutch that manuscript tighter than you ever held me. You won't *let* me save you!

EKENE

(embracing--or gripping--

ELMIRA)

He will sleep. His grip on those pages will relax.

ELMIRA

(returning the embrace)

And I suppose even if it's published--

ELMIRA AND EKENE

No one will believe him.

EKENE

He just imagined the whole thing.

ELMIRA

Imagined we were here.

EKENE

Not real at all.

ELMIRA AND EKENE

Nothing but a fever dream.

Lights out on EKENE and ELMIRA.

ED

(clutching the pages)

Elmira! Ha, ha, ha!--heh,heh!--a very good joke indeed--an excellent jest, leaving me alone like this!

Sound of whistling: *Weber's Last Waltz*. ED tries not to hear it.

ED

We will have many a rich laugh about it at the palazzo--heh, heh, heh!--over our wine--

Shadow of a tall, apelike creature appears, the source of the whistling. ED pretends not to see it, but the faint sound of his heartbeat can be heard.

ED

--Over our Amontillado. But is it not getting late? Will not they be waiting for us at the palazzo? Let us be gone, Reynolds. Let us be gone.

The shadow is larger, nearer. The heartbeat is louder. ED can ignore it no longer and stares at the shadow in terror.

ED

I haven't done anything! I don't understand!

ED flails against the restraints as the shadow grows until it fills the room, turning the entire space into a magic lantern show. The heartbeat gets louder and faster than it's ever been.

ED

Reynolds, for the love of God!

ED stares, his eyes starting, his mouth a rictus of mortal terror. The heartbeat reaches a climax. A monstrous animal roar. Lights out on ED as the heartbeat abruptly stops. Lights up instantly on EKENE holding the manuscript.

EKENE

Master Eddy died half an hour before dawn on October 7, 1849, leaving behind countless poems, short stories, literary criticism and one unfinished play. No one knows what killed him. Was it me? Or had he condemned himself?

(re: manuscript)

And what is this? The only novel by Edgar Allan Poe, lost until now, at last brought to light? A forgery by an anonymous author? A phantasm of the mind? His story, his truth, or mine? Whose scars? They're yours now. Take responsibility for them.

The circus band plays *Weber's Last Waltz*. YONA appears.

EKENE

A rumor arose that Poe had been drugged and forced to vote again and again at polling places throughout Baltimore, then abandoned by his kidnappers in the gutter.

GIGANTO appears and begins dancing with YONA to the waltz.

EKENE

His biographer, a minor writer envious of Poe, blamed alcoholism, but as you know, the doctors confirmed he'd not been drinking when he was found. No one knows what killed him.

GIGANTO and YONA pause their waltz  
to share a tender kiss.

EKENE

(holds up the manuscript)

But you do.

THE END