

BEG PARDON

by

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Characters

THOMAS JEFFERSON, white, age 70, a wealthy landowner

SALLY HEMINGS, black, age 40, a slave in Thomas' household

BEVERLY, black, age 14, Sally's oldest mixed-race son, also a slave

Costumes

Thomas is dressed as an early 19th-century American aristocrat. Sally and Beverly are dressed as slaves assigned to Thomas' main house and to his estate grounds, respectively.

Time

1810.

Setting

The study of a ruling class colonial-style house in the early 1800s, with a writing desk and chair and a door upstage, which leads offstage to the rest of the manor.

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10/1/17

BEG PARDON

JEFFERSON is at his desk. There is an offstage interruption.

BEVERLY (O.S.)

Ma-ma!

BEVERLY has an indistinct O.S. exchange with SALLY. When it's over, JEFFERSON extends the fingers of his free hand one by one. At "five" SALLY bursts in.

SALLY

What are you thinking?

JEFFERSON

I'm thinking that a pauper must be the most envied of men--so encumbered as to be of no further interest to his creditors.

SALLY

Don't be flippant. You know what I mean.

JEFFERSON

Truly. I don't.

SALLY

Sylvie.

JEFFERSON

Who's Sylvie?

SALLY

The goat, the one Beverly just told me will be your dinner.

JEFFERSON

I didn't realize she'd been christened.

SALLY

Eston named her. He loves that goat.

JEFFERSON

So do I. That's why I'll toast her with fennel and shallots at table tonight.

SALLY

Eston couldn't bear to see her eaten. He's a child.

JEFFERSON

He'll be excused.

SALLY

Eston learned to walk holding on to that doe. You'll break his heart. You can't kill her, Thomas. It would be cruel.

JEFFERSON rises, approaching.

JEFFERSON

I do apologize, Sally. I didn't mean to upset you.

SALLY

Think of Eston.

JEFFERSON

(Chuckling.)

Oh, I've seen how are together. The big eyes she makes at him. The way he makes her laugh... MMM-bahhhh!

*JEFFERSON nuzzles SALLY's neck.
He kisses her and she responds.*

SALLY

Thank you, Thomas.

JEFFERSON

For what?

SALLY

For changing your mind and sparing Eston's goat.

JEFFERSON

Who said anything about changing my mind or my menu?

SALLY

But...

JEFFERSON

You jumped to a conclusion, Sally. I merely comforted you. I never acquiesced. I have a hankering for goat and I intend to serve Elias Moreland a savory stew. A savory Sylvi-en stew.

SALLY

No.

JEFFERSON

Sally...

SALLY

I won't allow it... Sir.

JEFFERSON

Mind how you talk to me.

SALLY

No, Thomas. Spare the goat. Serve something else instead.
Serve turkey.

JEFFERSON

Turkey?! God no. Moreland would be apoplectic. If he and Franklin had chosen our national bird, baking a turkey would be an act of treason.

SALLY

Please... Sir, please--

JEFFERSON

--That's enough. Moreland will be here in four hours.

SALLY

(Beat.)

Do you recall what Elias Moreland said to me the last time he visited?

JEFFERSON

(Sighs.)

Yes. He called you a "Nubian princess".

SALLY

Did you put him up to it?

JEFFERSON

How can you think that?

SALLY

Well, you must've given him your we-don't-say-that-other-N-word-around-here-fella speech.

JEFFERSON

One of these days I'm going to forbid your insolence entirely.

SALLY

You know your problem, Thomas? You think that fraternizing with the livestock makes you a gentleman.

JEFFERSON

I'm appalled that you would say that about our relationship.

SALLY

Why not? You don't improve my legal standing by putting your hand down my bodice and your tongue up my skirt.

JEFFERSON

Don't be crude.

SALLY

Except when you want me that way.