

THE CUNNING MAN

by

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THE CUNNING MAN

FADE IN:

EXT. OUTSKIRTS OF BOSTON -- NIGHT

A large bonfire illuminates a crowd of COLONIAL-ERA FAMILIES, working class folk mixing with well-to-do. They hold lanterns, proudly watch an on-going ceremony.

SEVEN STUDENTS, young men and women, preen as their instructor, ANDERS MICKELWHITE (30), a slight, scholarly man, hands each one a dowsing rod, speaks so all can hear.

ANDERS

...Healing, scrying, dowsing. Charms for love and for luck. I've taught you what I can. I greet you, my students, as new Cunning Folk.

The final student, SERENA RICE (18), tall, tomboyish, dressed plainly with beautiful long hair, gives Anders a look of heartfelt admiration. He hesitates, his face fond as well.

ANDERS

(quietly)

Your dear mother and family, Serena?

A wagon rumbles up. The RICE FAMILY piles out -- parents plus five rowdy children in mended clothes. Serena's mother (42), a distracted, sweet-voiced woman, calls out.

GOODY RICE

Your brothers may be missing a buckle or two, Serena child, but here we are! Here we are!

Serena sighs. Anders holds up the final dowsing rod, white wood with a silver metal plug at the bottom. His loud voice is especially proud.

ANDERS

For the most gifted student of white magic I've seen. This special hazel wood dowsing rod, hollowed out and filled with a quicksilver core.

He presents it to Serena. Her family cheers; the crowd joins in. Anders starts to speak privately to Serena, but nervously chokes. MARIAH (20), pregnant and well dressed, calls.

MARIAH

Master Mickelwhite! Since we're all here, won't you grace us with a show of the magical arts?

The crowd cheers louder. Anders pretends surprise, then gestures at the bonfire. It glows brighter, a big ball of yellow erupting from the center.

ANDERS

As an alchemist, my goal is to uncover the foundations of the cosmos.

He gestures again. The fireball grows a horned head, a snaky neck, unfurls mighty wings.

ANDERS

The dragon. A symbol of the alchemist's questing mind.

The dragon launches up from the bonfire. The crowd AHHS. The dragon swoops down around the families making wind but no heat. The crowd OHS. The dragon dives back into the bonfire with a shower of sparks. The crowd cheers.

GOODY RICE

Surely Boston has the best Cunning Man in all of the Colonies!

EXT. OUTSKIRTS OF BOSTON -- NIGHT

Families feast and drink around the bonfire. Students admire their new dowsing rods. Anders doesn't notice the many fawning looks as he searches the crowd.

ANDERS

Serena! Um, Miss Rice! A word?

From her family's blanket, Serena calmly rises and separates two rowdy brothers.

SERENA

Care to see a double hex, boys? No?
(smiles)
The hazel rod is beautiful, Master Mickelwhite.

She follows him to a quieter spot.

ANDERS

Please call me Anders.

Serena smiles delightfully, sending Anders into a nervous fit.

ANDERS

I--I myself still treasure the magicked spyglass my master gave me. You and I Serena seem to be... You appear... That is, we...

He takes refuge in a lecturing tone.

ANDERS

My work as you may know demands a balance of the male and female principles. As a single man...

SERENA

You need the Alchemical Queen, your Soror Mystica. Oh! Are you asking my aid for your experiments?

He takes her hands in his. The whole crowd notices.

ANDERS

I'm asking for another, happier partnership, Serena. Your youthful grace to offset my rough male self. Can you even consider it?

Serena lets her adoring gaze answer for her.

INT. - RICE HOUSE -- DAY

A shabby but large home with a big table loaded for a wedding feast.

The Rice family and a few FRIENDS observe as a JUSTICE OF THE PEACE marries Serena and Anders. Anders looks formal in his suit coat. Serena wears a lovely, simple dress of blue, her hair up and womanly. They are almost the same height.

The Justice nods to them. Serena and Anders exchange wedding thimbles. Serena looks radiant.

INT. MICKELWHITE COTTAGE - BEDROOM -- NIGHT

A mud-chinked log cabin, a tiny, tidy bedroom. The window has oiled paper panes that moonlight glows through.

Anders combs Serena's hair; they both wear night clothes. She concentrates on four things before her: a lit candle, a rock, a pitcher, and a feather. Anders' pop quiz for her.

SERENA

The relationship of these objects?

ANDERS

Yes, Serena. From one of your first lessons. Four things...?

SERENA

Four! Then the candle is part of the test? So. Fire.

(sloshes the pitcher)

Water.

(touches the stone)

Earth.

(fans the feather)

Air.

ANDERS

Brilliant! The four elements, the foundation of alchemy.

He breathes in the fragrance of her hair. Serena watches in the mirror hopefully, but he recollects himself.

ANDERS

What is the term for primeval matter, the first substance from the beginning of the world? From the Greek...?

SERENA

All four elements in their combined state? That is called: Chaos.

She's right. Anders is pleased.

SERENA

Chaos, imagine! As odd and unlikely as the Philosopher's Stone.

ANDERS

(truly shocked)

Serena! If there is one thing you must accept, it's the Philosopher's Stone. It is the goal of alchemy!

SERENA

One substance that can cure all ills? Turn all metals into gold?

ANDERS

Healing a metal, my dear, returns it to gold, back to its purest state.

SERENA

Cannot alchemy and practicality work together? Had we enough "healed metal," we could have glass in our windows like Mariah.

ANDERS

Only those free of vice, of greed,
can find the Philosopher's Stone. I
must be above ...practicality.

He pulls her to her feet, leads her to the bed. He shines
with passion for his work and for her.

ANDERS

My Alchemical Queen. Tomorrow I'll
show you something to cure your
skepticism.

SERENA

Oh Anders, this is not a marriage as
my parents have, but I do love you.

Serena passes through the filtered moonlight, shivers.

SERENA

Eh! A chill! Someone somewhere is
doing a mischief.

ANDERS

Come into bed where it's warmer.

He gestures gently. A MUSICAL BREEZE puffs out all the
candles. Only the moon glows round behind the paper panes.

EXT. BANKS OF DELAWARE BAY -- NIGHT

The same moon shines on rolling bluffs, sparse bushes and
scrub trees alongside a river inlet. Further off the mighty
Delaware River splashes past. Birds hoot, crickets call.

From O.S. a clank of metal, huffs of breath. A glow builds
from behind a bluff, turns into a glare of lantern light.

THREE PIRATES (MARKHAM, CHURCHER, and BROWN) crest the hill
and stand in silhouette. They wear large hats over long
lank hair, cutlasses, high boots with buckles.

One pirate, Seth Markham (38) holds a map to the light.
Jerks his head -- "that way." The pirates exit O.S.

Following them silently, a fourth TALL MAN (KING JAMES),
laden down with satchels and shovels, crests the bluff. He
too exits O.S. He seems to see oddly well without light.

EXT. BANKS OF DELAWARE BAY -- NIGHT

The three ratty pirates stand in a ring of lantern light,
scowl at a shovel stabbed into the ground. Empty satchels
and another shovel lie nearby.

Sensitive Freddy Churcher (34) shivers like a rabbit. Caleb Brown (38) has a bully's air and mass of frizzy hair. Sly Seth Markham holds the map, however. Markham and Brown watch each other like mongrels in a dog pit.

BROWN

(to Markham)

--Just tell us where lies the iron
pot of pistoles, ye poxy fool.

Markham holds up the map coyly.

MARKHAM

Aye, here's the note made in my own
fine hand. Shall you like to read
it, then, Caleb?

Churcher misses all the undercurrent and insult.

CHURCHER

Oh! Caleb can't read--

BROWN

(to Markham)

--Ain't you smart as paint? Heave
to, Seth! I'm the one what Peggity
Hank made his second mate.

MARKHAM

The more fool he. Well, the tree I
drew here is not the one we see.

Markham nods toward a tree O.S.

EXT. BANKS OF DELAWARE BAY -- NIGHT

A single gnarled TREE sits in a circular clearing surrounded by small white pebble-like things that reflect moonglow. Two upflung branches look like arms. Two holes in the bark look like eyes, a hole beneath them like a wailing mouth.

MARKHAM (O.S.)

But according to the compass marks I
made, this be the spot.

Churcher creeps toward the tree holding out his lantern. The jumping light suddenly brings out the tree's face. Churcher yelps and skitters back.

CHURCHER

There's a demon thing a-watching us!

BROWN

Bah! Ye're as scared as any woman,
Freddy! 'Tis just a tree.

Brown puts a shovel in Churcher's hand.

BROWN
Start digging, boys.

Markham angrily tucks the map away, starts to dig. Suddenly he grabs Churcher's shovel and stops him.

MARKHAM
Wait! And we go reclaiming this treasure, but what about the voodoo curse? That thing's liable to fly back on us!

CHURCHER
Blast us! We don't need more bad luck. Get your West Indie Medicine Man on the job, Caleb!

He throws his shovel from him, stumbles.

BROWN
Ah, get yer lubbers' legs on ya, Freddy. Jimbo is already out there setting up his candles and necessaries.
(calls out)
King James! You made the way safe for us, you heathen?

From the dark comes a deep voice with West Indian accent.

KING JAMES (O.S.)
I doin' my part, Master Caleb.

CHURCHER
Fair gives me the shivers. How can he see in the dark?

KING JAMES (O.S.)
Got me cats-eye stone, good magic for the night.

Caleb Brown shoves his two pirate mates at their shovels.

BROWN
Dig!

EXT. BANKS OF DELAWARE BAY -- NIGHT

The pirates, hats and coats cast aside, scoop dirt in a hole three feet deep. Churcher keeps checking the gnarled tree.

The tree watches back.

BROWN

It's the blackest of black luck to
leave without your treasure, boys.

MARKHAM

It'll be here. You make your own
luck, Caleb. Peggity Hank learned
us that one.

CHURCHER

And what of his luck? Captured, and
hung to dry on Execution Dock. Our
ship gone, and where's another to be
had with just half a crew to take
it?

Churcher cries out, points at the tree.

CHURCHER

It's moving!

Brown holds out his lantern where Churcher points.

BROWN

Just the wind.

CHURCHER

It's not windy. H--Have your Medicine
Man set a magic fire on it.

KING JAMES (O.S.)

I can't be burning that there tree,
Master Freddy. It got a demon spirit
inside it. It got a Duppy.

BROWN

Did I tell you to burn it, you
Blackbird?

The tree waves its upflung branches.

CHURCHER

Eeeeeee! The evil thing is dancing
like Saint Vitus hisself!

A RIPPLE under the dirt plows from the tree to the pirates.

Churcher and Brown scramble out. Markham remains.

MARKHAM

Ain't no such tree what dances--

BROWN

Out, Seth, out! A-fore it gets you!

The ground heaves. Brown tugs Markham. A ROPY ARM reaches out of the dirt and clamps Markham's ankle. Markham SCREAMS. Brown yanks Markham free, but the boot remains.

MARKHAM

My gold buckles!

BROWN

Go! Go! Go!

The three pirates run O.S. King James flits behind them

EXT. BANKS OF DELAWARE BAY -- NIGHT

The three pirates tear madly across the bluffs, the lone lantern bouncing in Churcher's grip.

EXT. BANKS OF DELAWARE BAY -- NIGHT

Back at the abandoned hole, holding Markham's boot, sits the DUPPY, a hairless, bulging-eyed creature about four feet tall. It is thin except for a big abdomen. Its hands and feet are large and clawed.

DUPPY

(archaic accent)

Oh children! Them men can certainly show a clean pair of heels!

It pulls off the gold buckle, tosses it into its large, tooth-lined mouth, crunches.

DUPPY

Come them back, we'll have a right feast now, won't we.

EXT. BANKS OF DELAWARE BAY -- NIGHT

The pirates stop to breathe, watching behind them. King James catches up.

CHURCHER

I knew this would happen! A treasure's no good if'n you can't claim it back!

(to Brown)

Make your Magic Man fix it!

KING JAMES (O.S.)

Not my magic. Can't do nothing with a Duppy 'less you know his spirit ancestors.

BROWN

Well, Seth. Ye're the fella what had the sharp idear of putting a curse on! Protect the duff, you said! What now?

Pressed, rattled, Markham has a brainstorm.

MARKHAM

Why, we need us some cunning magics to control the situation.

CHURCHER

A Cunning Man? How, how will we pay him?

Markham and Brown wave him off. Brown leers agreement at Markham.

BROWN

Heh.

INT. MICKELWHITE COTTAGE - BEDROOM -- DAY

Early morning. Serena twists her hair up, ties it, covers it with a cap. Anders pulls on his shoes, stands, leans over for a kiss.

Just then, a tiny light POPS into existence next to Anders' ear. ORPHI was once a firefly but has been magicked into a familiar spirit.

Anders and Serena both jump at the sudden urgent WHINE.

SERENA

Something's calling you.

ANDERS

Can you hear that? The sound of a sylph is rarely noticed by the untrained ear.

SERENA

This untrained ear is fairly ringing with it.

Orphi buzzes insistently.

ANDERS

Yes, yes, Orphi. That's easily fixed.

Anders, kiss forgotten, exits. Orphi bobs along behind.

INT. MICKELWHITE COTTAGE - MAIN ROOM -- DAY

Only a few pieces of furniture near the fireplace and cooking hearth. At the other end of the room on a crowded worktable, Anders' alchemical paraphernalia bubbles away, books lay open.

Anders ambles to the table, picks up a shiny SPYGLASS, polishes it as he checks his experiments.

EXT. MICKELWHITE COTTAGE -- DAY

Serena feeds the chickens scratching around the doorstep. The tiny Mickelwhite cottage stands in a clearing with beds of herbs and vegetables, a small barn, a stack of firewood.

EXT. - BOSTON TOWN -- DAY

The three pirates walk the cobbled streets of Boston dressed in plain merchantmen clothes. Their unpowdered hair is cut and tied back. Their shoes, however, still have big buckles and tall heels.

They stop TOWNSPEOPLE to inquire about something. The people nod and point.

EXT. OUTSKIRTS OF BOSTON -- DAY

Mariah, now a young mother with a tired look, walks the long path to the Mickelwhite cottage. She carries a SQUALLING BABY in one arm and a basket on the other.

EXT. MICKELWHITE COTTAGE

Serena sees Mariah, puts away her broom.

SERENA

How do, Mariah. The young squire seems a bit peckish this morning.

MARIAH

Oh aye. It's his colic again. I need a bit more of Anders' philter.

Serena strokes the baby's ear. The baby quiets. Mariah hands him over gratefully.

MARIAH

Do you still steal away to see the ships in the harbor?

Serena shakes her head, cuddles the baby.

SERENA

There's so much to do when it's your home and your hearth. Did you have any concept?

MARIAH

But you found a husband. We thought you were bound for the frontier to fight red Indians.

Serena, wistful, hands the baby back.

SERENA

Go ahead in. I'll carry your basket.

MARIAH

Oh, that's for you. There's little money for medicines, but I had a bushel of those about the house. And I thought, why, Serena could make a fine jam for Anders.

Mariah and baby exit. Serena looks into the basket.

SERENA

(deflated)
Cranberries.

EXT. BOSTON TOWN -- DAY

WIDOW MANLEY (46) a prim, sharp-eyed gossip, works in her small front garden on a busy Boston street.

The three disguised pirates walk up.

MARKHAM

Pardon, Missus. Is this the way to Master Mickelwhite's?

WIDOW MANLEY

Come in off a ship, did you then?

The men nod.

WIDOW MANLEY

And you're seeking the best Cunning Man in Boston town?

CHURCHER

That's Master Mickelwhite?

WIDOW MANLEY

Aye, the best man for finding what's missing, maker of amulets, remover of curses--

MARKHAM

(to his cohorts)

Removes curses.

(to Widow Manley)

We come to make him a fine offer.

WIDOW MANLEY

Offer away. A more unwordly man for business you'll not meet. His poor wife has such a challenge with him--

The pirates trade looks. Caleb Brown points abruptly.

BROWN

--This be the road then?

WIDOW MANLEY

(huffily)

Aye. Afar out of town, though.

INT. MICKELWHITE COTTAGE -- DAY

Serena carries firewood to the hearth, looks to see if Anders notices. He's oblivious. She drops it and exits.

Serena enters again with more firewood. She drops this load. Anders finally looks up.

ANDERS

Serena?

SERENA

Yes?

ANDERS

Will you care to come observe as I filter this retort?

SERENA

Well, if we have a lesson now, then breakfast comes even later. Which shall it be?

Anders looks hungry. She has her answer, and it's what she expected. On her way back out, Serena pauses.

SERENA

Last night, I may have spoken too strongly. But Anders, won't you...?

ANDERS

Ah. Be more practical. I shall endeavor to do so.

SERENA

And I shall endeavor to get breakfast.

Serena exits again.

Anders picks up a jug, upturns it. Empty. Across the room sits a large pottery cistern. Anders mouths words, circles his finger to the sound of magical MUSIC.

The lid on the cistern raises up and hangs in mid-air. A spout of water spins up from the cistern like a charmed snake, arcs across the room to fill Anders' jug. The cistern lid plops back down.

Serena enters, picks up a ladle, opens the cistern. Of course it's empty. She shoulders a large bucket, exits.

INT. MICKELWHITE COTTAGE - MAIN ROOM -- DAY

Serena enters with the heavy bucket full, lugs it to the cistern.

Anders looks up from his notes. Helpfully he makes the swirling motion with his finger. Magical MUSIC. The lid of the cistern raises.

Serena hoists the heavy bucket; it slips and water drenches her, washes across the floor.

SERENA

Oh, Husband!

ANDERS

Eh?

INT. MICKELWHITE COTTAGE - BEDROOM -- DAY

Serena, in a different dress, hangs the wet one on a peg.

From O.S. comes muffled knocking. There's the sound of a door opening, then men talk.

INT. MICKELWHITE COTTAGE - MAIN ROOM -- DAY

Serena enters. Anders sits in a chair studying a document.

The three pirates in their merchantmen garb watch his every move. Brown is already deep into his phony story.

BROWN

--And as we're men of peace, with a good proposition in hand, Goodman Mickelwhite, here we are to parley with ye.

Brown notices Serena. He leers.

BROWN

Oh, pardon, Missus.

The other pirates look up sharply at Serena. Markham shoves Brown to remind him of manners.

ANDERS

Ah, gentlemen. My wife, Serena Mickelwhite. My beautiful Soror Mystica.

MARKHAM

Your --?

SERENA

It's an alchemical term for the female assistant. Anders' work demands a balance of the male and female.

ANDERS

Serena, this is Master Brown. A retired seaman, he says. And here are his partners, Frederick Churcher and--?

MARKHAM

Markham. And very pleased to meet you, Goody Mickelwhite.

ANDERS

They've showed me this charter. It's from the King, they tell me--

BROWN

--It is!

MARKHAM

--Sometimes I have to help my old mate Caleb. He does the best he can with the schooling he's had, which isn't much.

Brown puffs up in anger, to Markham's delight.

MARKHAM

(to Anders)

That there charter is to scavenge for buried treasure. It's signed by King Willie himself, all nice and legal like.

SERENA

Buried treasure?

Anders shows little interest, but Serena's eyes gleam.

ANDERS

Allowing for the king's right to one-fifth of any valuables found when reclaiming this so-called treasure.

BROWN

It's needing a dowser we are, Missus. We've had it confirmed that Peggity Hank Barlo's bunch buried an iron pot filled with gold bullion and Spanish pistoles in a certain inlet along the Delaware.

SERENA

Barlo? That dreadful pirate they finally hanged?

BROWN

Aye, terrible dreadful they say he was. And his crew with him.

CHURCHER

The witches of these parts aren't able to cross running water. We heard your husband was the best Cunning Man along the coast--

SERENA

--And so he is.

CHURCHER

So we come to ask him to take a short voyage with us on the Fortunate Osgood, docked just there in Boston harbor. His dowsing can tell us where to dig.

SERENA

This is a paying voyage?

She's been hooked. The pirates shift their attention.

BROWN

Well, we was thinking. Maybe a small deposit now but then one-twentieth of whatever we find. And it looks certain to make us wealthy men, Missus, that it does.

SERENA

A safe and tidy ship? The only risk is whether you find the treasure or not?

CHURCHER

Well, there's some voo--

Markham elbow-punches him.

MARKHAM

--Naught else to concern you. We've found a capital ship, and the deal with the Captain is all but done.

Anders abruptly rolls up the parchment, hands it to Brown.

ANDERS

No, gentlemen. I'm sorry.

SERENA

--Anders? Hear them out.

Anders stands, ushers the men to the door.

ANDERS

Oh, I've heard enough.

MARKHAM

Master Mickelwhite, think of the gold! A portion of it, all for you and your good woman.

ANDERS

Gold? Why, with a Philosopher's Stone, an alchemist may achieve all the gold he wants.

The pirates goggle at him like he's crazy. Markham falls to one knee at the doorway.

MARKHAM

Say you'll journey with us and use your cunning ways. We've come a long ways to find you, Sir.

ANDERS

Oh, I have a goodly idea just how far you gentlemen have traveled.

The pirates fidget, attempt to appear innocent.

ANDERS

You made the trip for naught, for I won't be able to help you with the dowsing.

SERENA

But--?

MARKHAM

It's the payment, isn't it? Oh, you drive a hard bargain, Master Mickelwhite. One-tenth. And not a bit more.

ANDERS

I must say no. You're free to take your parchment from King Willie, as you say, to another Cunning Man. I hear there's one in Philadelphia.

BROWN

Missus, make him understand that the riskier the trade, the sweeter the reward. Ye seem to understand the way of it...

Anders pushes the pirates out the door.

ANDERS

Neither my wife nor myself have anything more to consider. Don't let us keep you any further.

MARKHAM

But--?

ANDERS

Good day, gentlemen.

They stomp away. Anders closes the door.

SERENA

Anders! And what did you promise me just this morning?

ANDERS

It isn't practical to deal with men of that sort. And if it were, I'm not one for adventure as you well know.

He returns to his worktable, the matter over. But Serena seethes.

INT. MICKELWHITE COTTAGE - MAIN ROOM -- DAY

Anders sits at a small, cleared area on his worktable. Plates are set for breakfast. Serena offers a steaming dish. Anders digs in, happy. Serena waits a few bites...

SERENA

This morning? Those men? You were so inhospitable. What care they about your philosophies?

Anders gestures to show it's all in the past.

ANDERS

I mistrusted the feel of their parchment.

SERENA

That makes no sense! They offered treasure!

ANDERS

Our life is good as it is. A snug house, food on the table, the respect of our town.

SERENA

But if we had some money put away, we'd be more secure. Say, if things changed...

Serena rubs her belly, almost says more. Anders has his own thought, jumps up.

ANDERS

The book! The complete and unabridged issue of de Brahms sent me from Germany! Serena, shall I show you the Alchemical King and his Queen?

He grabs a heavy, ancient book lying open, holds it out.

INSERT

Line drawing of the smiling King and Queen of Alchemy, their index fingers almost touching. She stands on a globe. He stands in a fire.

SERENA

So there's the Soror Mystica.

ANDERS

The necessary balance of opposites.
The meeting of the physical and the
emotional. As you for me.

He leafs to another page.

ANDERS

And this. The Latin is more arcane
than I'm used to, but this formula
here...

(reading)

"Prepare thee three athanors--"

SERENA

Athanors?

ANDERS

A glass bottle. "--Three athanors.
And then you generate in each a
certain Earth by putting in them a
cup of Chaos."

SERENA

The primeval matter. Which no one
has ever seen.

ANDERS

I have no idea where one finds such
material. But once I've solved that,
my quest for the Philosopher's Stone
is--

SERENA

(touching the book)

How did you pay for this?

ANDERS

The silver from our cache.

SERENA

You spent our cache? Oh, Anders!

ANDERS

We shall make the money back easily.

Serena sinks to the ground in worry.

SERENA

I've tried to be a good wife, a homemaker. I've trusted the husband to provide security for the family.

ANDERS

With you doing dowsing too, we'll fund our cache twice as fast.

SERENA

With so much work, my mind is rarely my own these days. Let alone time to practice cunning skills. Ohhhh!

INT. MICKELWHITE COTTAGE - BEDROOM -- DAY

Serena enters, closes the door behind her. She bends down, lifts a loose floorboard, retrieves a small crock. It rattles with only a few coins. She looks inside and mourns.

INT. MICKELWHITE COTTAGE - MAIN ROOM -- DAY

Serena wraps a pie, places it in a basket. Orphi buzzes over.

SERENA

Shoo! Go on, you silly bug! You've the same sweet tooth as my husband.

ANDERS

Orphi is not really a firefly, Serena. Well, not any longer. He now embodies a sylph of the air--

SERENA

I'm on my way to visit Deborah for her laying-in.

(beat)

Try to leave the rest of the beefsteak pasty until I return.

Anders nods, distracted. As Serena exits he looks around.

ANDERS

You're taking the cranberry pie?

EXT. OUTSKIRTS OF BOSTON -- DAY

Serena hikes the dirt path to town lugging the heavy basket.

EXT. - BOSTON TOWN -- DAY

Cobbled streets, larger masonry homes in the town proper. Serena walks on. A FRIEND calls. Serena waves back.

The streets grow more crowded as she walks on. Lots of PEOPLE know and greet her.

INT. - HOLCOMB HOUSE -- DAY

DEBBY HOLCOMB (22), hugely pregnant, sits like a duchess in an upholstered chair. Her large house is well furnished and filled with female chatter. Many baskets and dishes stand on the dining table; thread and fabric heap everywhere.

FOUR GIRLS attend Debby slavishly, including cheerful ABIGAIL MANLEY (18), as yet unmarried and Serena's best friend.

Six OLDER WOMEN sit in a separate circle, sewing a rag rug. One is Goody Rice, Serena's mother. Another is Widow Manley, the mother of Abigail, who speaks to Serena's mother.

WIDOW MANLEY

And where's your girl, then? I haven't seen Serena in over a week.

GOODY RICE

I expect her directly.

WIDOW MANLEY

Who thought she'd ever settle down like that? Always such a romping molly.

Goody Rice, preening, doesn't pick up on any implied slight.

GOODY RICE

Marriage has made a woman of her. And still I tell her. Be softer, Serena. Stand you not so tall and speak you not so loudly.

The chatting girls don't notice Debby faint back in her chair.

EXT. - BOSTON TOWN -- DAY

But in the street, Serena stops as if listening. Runs.

INT. - HOLCOMB HOUSE -- DAY

Debby Holcomb moans, catching the attention of the girls. They shriek and flutter.

GOODY RICE

What? Is it the vapors? Give her some water!

The older women jump up, join the crowd around Debby.

ABIGAIL

Debby, you look a might white. Is your belly all topsy-turvy, dear?

Serena slams into the room, panting, drops her basket. She sees the agitated women. Her mother notices her.

GOODY RICE

Ah, here she is. My word, Girl! Must you be so rough?

WIDOW MANLEY

(to Abigail)

Open her a vinaigrette there and have her take a deep sniff. That collects the spirits just wonderful.

Serena strides to Debby, feels her brow.

SERENA

A vinaigrette will just make her stomach all the more sour.

Serena turns and hunts through things on the food table, comes back with a branch of thyme.

WIDOW MANLEY

No babies of her own yet, but she knows best?

GOODY RICE

Serena is a wonder. She helped me through birthing the five who came after her.

SERENA

Debby, Love, scratch your fingernails across this thyme. It has a scent much like lemons. See how nice?

Debby weakly scratches. Serena guides Debby's hand up.

SERENA

Put your fingers to your nose and
breath in, slow and deep.

Debby breaths in. Her eyes flutter open. Her color returns.

The young girls take over. No one has a thought for Serena's
healing insights, least of all Serena.

WIDOW MANLEY

Thyme, was it? Why that's clever.

Serena kisses her mother. Goody Rice tugs at the waistband
of Serena's dress.

GOODY RICE

Girl of mine, why ever did you not
wear your blue frock today? This
one's seams have gone all crooked.

Embarrassed, Serena tries to cover.

SERENA

Oh, I did washing this morning and
my other dresses weren't dry.

INT. - HOLCOMB HOUSE -- DAY

The women stitch a colorful rag rug, arranged in a circle
round it. They nibble at plates of food.

WIDOW MANLEY

Even with a servant--or two-- when
you've got your house, and your garden--

WOMAN#1

--And your fields, and your byre.

GOODY RICE

--And your man to tend to, and food
to fix. Wifely duties keep your
hands full, but when you've got a
babe as well--

SERENA

--It's too much! Why must we women
have it so hard?

The ladies gasp at her loud tone. Serena is abashed. Widow
Manley scoots near her.

WIDOW MANLEY

Those merchantmen have a job for Anders, did they?

SERENA

Aye. But he sent them packing. Not practical, he said.

WIDOW MANLEY

And them coming all this way! Is it work that he's afraid of?

ABIGAIL

(overhears)

Mother! What she and Anders have is unlike marriage as the rest of us know it. Serena is the womanly balance for his white magics.

SERENA

Maybe if I went down to the ship myself, and asked the merchantmen to come again--?

Goody Rice SHRIEKS in horror.

GOODY RICE

Oh, never! Never a woman goes down to those docks. Unless she is properly escorted, and even then... Oh, that's a den of ruffians!

WIDOW MANLEY

(just to Serena)

Being a good Cunning Man is not the same as being a good husband.

Try as she might, Serena can't deny it.

INT. - HOLCOMB HOUSE -- DAY

Serena kisses friends and family good-bye, puts the now-lighter basket over her arm.

EXT. - BOSTON TOWN -- DAY

Serena walks back the way she came. A long walk down cobbled streets. Past the edge of town.

EXT. OUTSKIRTS OF BOSTON -- DAY

Serena hikes the path through the woods. Meanwhile, she's the subject of conversation back at the party.

ABIGAIL (V.O.)

Oh, if Serena only had a horse. I wager she'd visit more.

WIDOW MANLEY (V.O.)

She wouldn't have to live so far out had she married another man!

GOODY RICE (V.O.)

Harriet!

EXT. MICKELWHITE COTTAGE -- DAY

Serena steps to the door of her home.

WIDOW MANLEY (V.O.)

The town built him that house, for no one in their right mind wants his kind next door.

From inside comes a crash of breaking glass.

ANDERS (O.S.)

(muffled)

Tarnation!

Serena throws open the door.

ABIGAIL (V.O.)

Truly, Mother? Why?

Inside the cabin, something sparks. Then BOOM! The cabin's paper windowpanes burst. The force of the explosion blows off Serena's cap. A tarry liquid splats onto her hair.

Finally, smoke flows leisurely out the door, covers her with soot. Serena's eyes blink whitely in her blackened face.

INT. MICKELWHITE COTTAGE - BEDROOM -- DAY

Serena cleans soot, misses some on her chin. Anders cajoles from the other side of the bedroom door.

ANDERS (O.S.)

'Twas a minor misjudgment in some particulars is all.

Serena tries to unbraid her hair. The tar has matted braids together.

ANDERS (O.S.)

I've wiped the soot off all the furniture. I'll oil more parchment for the windows today.

SERENA

Good.

A side braid is a mess. Serena takes out scissors.

ANDERS (O.S.)

Can I come in?

SERENA

No.

ANDERS (O.S.)

May I perform some act of penitence?

Serena holds the scissors to the braid.

SERENA

Yes. Go find the merchantmen and take them up on their proposition.

ANDERS (O.S.)

Eh. I wouldn't go down to the docks just for that.

Serena snips the braid, snips another.

SERENA

What if they came back to talk?

ANDERS (O.S.)

(a false promise)

Yes, if they came back I'd speak with them, yes. I'll go clean myself up at the barn cistern now, shall I?

His footsteps fade away. Serena unbuttons her sooty dress. She checks her one other dress. Still damp.

She yanks open the wardrobe, takes out a nightgown. No. She takes out her wedding dress. No. She pauses at other clothes in the wardrobe.

INT. MICKELWHITE COTTAGE - BEDROOM -- DAY

Serena in Ander's clothes. She rolls the sleeves, belts the pants. She's tall and slim for a woman, so they fit.

Serena picks up her hazelwood dowsing rod from the dresser, then sees herself in the small mirror.

Short hair falls around her face. Soot on her chin looks like a beard coming in. Serena has a brainstorm. With a sudden resolve, she picks up the scissors for the remaining braids.

EXT. BOSTON WHARF -- DAY

Taverns, warehouses and ship foundries squat over the landings of Boston Wharf. Jolly boats bob beside the docks. SWABS and MERCHANTS scurry about. DOCK CAPTAINS call out orders.

A few large ships are docked. Several more anchor out in the harbor, their sails at trim.

EXT. BOSTON WHARF - SPYGLASS TAVERN -- DAY

Serena, in men's clothes and cap, carrying a satchel, peers into the dark door of a grog house. LOUD MEN talk within.

She blackens her fingers with soot from a lantern to retouch her beard. Swaggers into the tavern.

INT. SPYGLASS TAVERN -- DAY

It's a mostly deserted seamen's bar, very dark. Only a few men drink this early in the afternoon and argue. The PUBLICAN (35) hurries by.

SERENA

Here! Sir!!

The arguing men look up, suspicious of her high voice. She casts it lower.

SERENA

I--I seek some passengers on the Fortunate Osgood. Do you know where it is?

The publican points out the door.

PUBLICAN

Aye, the Osgood. That's her, the likely looking, square-masted, three-rigger. Old Isaiah, her bosun, can get you aboard.

Serena follows his gesture.

SERENA
And is Isaiah here?

She's made a joke. Hoots of laughter.

PUBLICAN
Nay, Isaiah'd be the teetotaler buying
supplies down at the dock. Not a
man to sit and drink with us sinners,
hey boys?
(to Serena)
Look for the fiddlestick.

Serena nods and leaves as the drinkers shout at her.

ARGUING MAN #1 (O.S.)
Could he turn our water into wine,
we'd buy him a drink, eh?

ARGUING MAN #2 (O.S.)
Careful he don't convert ye!

EXT. BOSTON WHARF - DOCK -- DAY

Cranes swing heavy loads through open warehouse doors.
Overseers call out orders to the swabs, shirtless men with
tarred pigtails who do the scut work.

Serena picks her way amongst sacks and rope, scrutinizing
the men. A grubby, big hand comes from O.S. and grabs her.

BILLY
You a-searchin' for someone, Sonny?

BILLY (50), an old swab, grins showing missing teeth.

SERENA
I can find him, thanky.

BILLY
Look at the sweet skin on ye. If'n
it's a sea adventure you want, Ol'
Billy can find ye a berth.

SERENA
Thanky, but I'm here seeking
passengers aboard the Osgood.

BILLY
The Osgood?

He backs away.

BILLY

Say nothing of me to Isaiah, there's
a good lad.

Nonplussed, Serena continues her search.

SERENA

A fiddlestick. A fiddlestick--

A grizzled man with a pipe directs swabs on loading a large rowboat. ISAIAH (52) the Boatswain, turns to show an ornate cross stitched in gold on the back of his coat -- a fiddlestick in seaman slang.

SERENA

Oh! Bosun! Hoy!

He turns, not much impressed with what he sees.

ISAIAH

Aye?

Serena makes herself look more manly.

SERENA

I've got business with some aboard
the Fortunate Osgood. Can you get
me on?

ISAIAH

You on the Osgood?

SERENA

Aye, that...
(quoting from memory)
...likely looking, square-masted,
three-rigger out there in the harbor.
Are you her bosun?

Gunn appears mollified.

ISAIAH

I'll be going back in a quarter hour.
You got business on the ship?

SERENA

Master Brown and his partners will
be glad to meet up with me, I reckon.

At the name, Isaiah spits, sour again.

ISAIAH

Oh, Brown. Wait then.

EXT. BOSTON WHARF - IN THE WATER -- DAY

Serena and Gunn settle into the shore boat piled with provisions. Gunn begins to row. The boat jerks. Serena wobbles, falls back onto her seat.

ISAIAH

Look sharp, lad. You ain't a lubber, are ye? What'd you say your name was?

SERENA

Sam--Samuel, sir. Samuel Goldstone.

ISAIAH

Well, Sammie, you'll soon meet the finest merchant ship on either side of the Atlantic. Cap'n Buttons mans a trim ship, he does.

SERENA

Captain Buttons?

ISAIAH

Captain John Baldrige, a good old salt, even if he does relish his fancy dress a bit too much.

SERENA

Oh, and Brown and the others are in your crew?

ISAIAH

Nay. Those sons of rum-puncheons! Three scoundrels is more like, them and their Blackbird. They've been bartering with the Cap'n for passage.

Serena looks puzzled, but afraid to reveal more ignorance.

EXT. BOSTON WHARF -- IN THE WATER

The Fortunate Osgood rolls stately in the harbor, a sturdy and trim sailing ship about 120 feet long. The shore boat pulls alongside. Gunn gestures for Serena to go up the rope ladder.

Serena slings her satchel to her back and stumbles up.

EXT. DECK OF THE OSGOOD -- DAY

A clean deck. Ropes are tied back neatly. A few SEAMEN smoke and talk.

Serena clammers over the edge, takes a stand on the deck. The rocking of the waves keep her unsteady.

From O.S., Gunn blows his bosun whistle. Swabs scramble to throw ropes down to the jolly boat. Other swabs crank the boat up.

Gunn arrives on deck, loads then lights his pipe, bellows through the puffs.

ISAIAH

Brown! Master Brown! A lad aboard
wants to parley!

Brown comes up from below deck with Churcher following. They still wear merchantmen clothing and do not recognize Serena.

Serena steps forward, her hand out.

SERENA

Samuel Goldstone, sirrah. My sister
is Master Mickelwhite's wife. I
heard you had need of a Cunning Man.

The merchantmen ignore her hand, trade skeptical glances.

BROWN

Aye, it's a Cunning Man we need, not
a cunning boy. How old are ye, lad?
Thirteen? Fourteen?

CHURCHER

Check his whiskers, Caleb! If he's
over twelve, I'm a Dutchman!

SERENA

No, you misunderstand. They've sent
me here to ask that you return.
Present your proposition once more.

BROWN

And why would we do that? That
Goodman Mickelwhite was a-ravin' at
us like a thing possessed. We never
saw a bit of his magic. Likely he's
all hot work.

The swabs and seamen slow down to listen and watch.

SERENA

Not at all! Why, he's the best
Cunning Man on the coast! See this
fine thing?

She takes her dowsing rod from the satchel, holds it up.

SERENA

His handiwork. And he's magicked a
firefly for his assistant. He--he
taught me everything I know!

CHURCHER

Which wouldn't be much, you being
such a boy.

The swabs and seamen chuckle.

SERENA

That shows what you know about the
powers of a Cunning Man. Why, I
could grandfather you all two times
over, but why should I look it, eh?
It takes a good deal of Talent to
keep your appearance as young as
this.

(beat)

Now that I cogitate on it, we've got
business aplenty. No need to go
seeking more on the high seas--

As she talks, Markham comes up from below decks followed by a heavy-set man, CAPTAIN BALDRIDGE (53) aka Captain Buttons. Captain Baldrige wears a periwig, spotless breeches, and a greatcoat festooned with much trim and many buttons.

MARKHAM

--Nay, wait. Caleb, the Captain and
I have been talking. He's a sensible
man and asks not more than a two-
fifth portion to take us along that
bay we seek.

BROWN

Oh, such a hard deal, Seth. But I
fear we must take it.

The pirates make a show of how painful the deal is. Markham claps a hand on Serena's shoulder.

MARKHAM

And I say we let the blackamoor give the boy a test. That'll tell us whether we need to sit down and talk square.

The swabs hoot agreement. Brown goes to the hold and hollers down.

BROWN

Jimbo! King James! On deck! Yer master has a task for ye.

A heavy tread sounds on the companion-way.

A tricorne black hat appears, then shiny black hair oiled back into a plait, a dark face, a pristine white shirt, fawn breeches, white hose and buckled shoes. KING JAMES (28) is a black man more than six-and-a-half-feet tall. *

KING JAMES

You call me, Master Caleb?

BROWN

Samuel Goldstone, this here is our tame magic man. He's got such royal ways, he earned hisself the name of the last king but one. King James, or Jimbo to those what know him.

Serena is awed. King James stares at her.

MARKHAM

Now, King James hasn't the power to find what's buried. He has magic of a whole other sort.

BROWN

But we think he'll know enough to test yer flavor of magic. How about it, Jimbo? What'll the boy dowse for?

King James reflects a moment.

KING JAMES

Hmmmmmm. We must see Master Goldstone be knowing the scent of silver, I think. My pardon, Captain. I must borrow from your finery.

King James plucks a button from the captain's coat. The captain opens his mouth, closes it.

EXT. DECK OF THE OSGOOD -- DAY

Blindfolded, Serena stands awaiting a signal. From O.S., water slaps against the hull. The furled sails pop in the wind. Footsteps creak across the deck.

The tread stops. The men snicker. Brown removes Serena's blindfold.

BROWN
Dowse away, Sammie!

Serena holds the two ends of her dowsing rod. Nothing happens.

SERENA
I--I'll take another of the captain's silver buttons in hand, to help me concentrate my Talent on the invisibles.

King James plucks another silver button from the Captain's coat, hands it to Serena.

SERENA
And Captain, you must step away, please. The many silver buttons still on your coat may prove too attractive.

Captain Baldrige exits to the front deck.

Serena takes the silver button in her hand. She holds the working ends of the dowsing rod, turns in a circle, watching the end of the rod.

The end of the rod quivers. The sailors and swabs notice. OOOHHHH.

Serena is relieved, feeling something. She looks at the palm of her hand, then takes the rod in two hands again and concentrates.

Brown leans against the cathead wall, grinning.

Serena's rod quivers and stretches toward Brown.

Brown continues to grin.

Serena walks purposefully toward Brown. The dowsing rod bucks in her hand, almost turning upside down. It bows back like a rearing horse, points at Brown's head. He quits grinning.

Barely able to hold it, Serena drops one leg, causing the rod to flip back into a Y shape. She reaches up to Brown's frizzy ponytail, plucks out the button, holds it up.

EXT. DECK OF THE OSGOOD -- DAY

The seamen and swabs cheer. Isaiah looks pleased. King James lets out a rolling HA-HA-HAAAA. The disguised pirates trade glances.

CHURCHER
(quietly to Markham)
We need this magic with us!

MARKHAM
(to Serena)
Well, you're a good little Cunning
Man indeed.

Serena is exhilarated. She rubs her palms together.

SERENA
Thanky. So, will you return and put
your case before Anders--ah, my
brother--again?

MARKHAM
Certainly. Shall you take Sammie to
our quarters, Freddy? Show him the
King's charter that we have?

SERENA
Oh, I've seen--
(beat)
A charter from the King, you say?

(to Markham)
And you'll get a shore boat for us?

MARKHAM
Oh, have no fears.

INT. HOLD OF THE OSGOOD -- DAY

PASSENGER QUARTERS

In a tiny room with three box bunks and a table bolted to the floor, Serena peers at a parchment paper through the light of the porthole. Churcher jerks it from her hands.

CHURCHER
--And right there. The stamp of His
Majesty.

SERENA

'Tis a charter from His Majesty King
William III for scavenging rights on
any recovered treasure.

From above them, the bosun's whistle sounds a new tune.
Gears crank and canvas flaps. The rocking rhythm of the
ship changes.

The first lurch almost knocks Serena off her feet.

SERENA

Are--are we--?

Churcher just grins.

EXT. BOSTON WHARF -- DAY

IN THE WATER

The unfurled sails of the Fortunate Osgood spread in the
wind. The anchor hangs dripping from the bow. The ship
heads to open waters.

INT. HOLD OF THE OSGOOD -- DAY

PASSENGER QUARTERS

SERENA

Tell them to stop the ship!

Markham enters.

MARKHAM

You showed some fine Cunning Man
skills up there. And the thing is,
we feel you're the one for us.

SERENA

But it's Anders you need.

MARKHAM

He showed no enthusiasm for it, y'see.
I doubt he'd change his tone after a
dozen visits from us. You've proven
yourself as a man for adventure.

Just an excerpt! The feature-length script is 94 pages.