

John Donald O'Shea

Norman Maine Publishing

Copyright © 2009, John Donald O'Shea

**ALL RIGHTS RESERVED**

*Rogues Along the River* is fully protected under the copyright laws of the United States of America, and all of the countries covered by the Universal Copyright Convention and countries with which the United States has bilateral copyright relations including Canada, Mexico, Australia, and all nations of the United Kingdom.

Copying or reproducing all or any part of this book in any manner is strictly forbidden by law. No part of this book may be stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form by any means including mechanical, electronic, photocopying, recording, or videotaping without written permission from the publisher.

A royalty is due for every performance of this play whether admission is charged or not. A "performance" is any presentation in which an audience of any size is admitted.

The name of the author must appear on all programs, printing, and advertising for the play. The program must also contain the following notice: "Produced by special arrangement with Norman Maine Publishing Company, Sarasota, FL."

All rights including professional, amateur, radio broadcasting, television, motion picture, recitation, lecturing, public reading, and the rights of translation into foreign languages are strictly reserved by Norman Maine Publishing Company, [www.NormanMainePlays.com](http://www.NormanMainePlays.com), to whom all inquiries should be addressed.

**Norman Maine Publishing  
P.O. Box 1400  
Tallevast, FL 34270**

*To my cast  
who worked very hard  
and who put on  
a really fine production*

*And to  
Mardelle Hayes  
who has been my friend  
and costumer  
for show after show.*

Rogues Along the River was first performed at Seton Catholic Junior High School, Moline, IL, on March 7, 2008: John Donald O'Shea, director; Mardelle Hayes, costumes.

**PHINEAS FOURBERIE:** Axel Box

**MARY GOODPERSON:** Rowan Crow

**PHOEBE FORTHRIGHT:** Clare VanEchoute

**RUNNING RIVER:** Erik Mickiewicz

**MERRIWEATHER MARESNEST:** Garrett Larsen

**GELASIUS GULL:** Charlie Garrett

**CONSTANCE COZEN:** Andrea Clark

**GOMER GUDGEON:** Shawn DeFrance

**GERTRUDE GUDGEON:** Ashton Snyder

## Rogues Along the River

**MELODRAMA.** Phineas Fourberie, the villainous banker of Polecat Point, has hatched a plot to wed the virtuous Mary Goodperson so that he can reclaim his safe, which was washed downriver in a flood and which he believes is stuck in a muddy riverbank on Mary's property. However, Phineas' plan gets mucked up when a couple of Shakespearean actors arrive and concoct a scheme to con Phineas out of his money. But unbeknownst to them, Mary's uncle has devised a plan to swindle the actors. And to top it off, two river folk arrive with their sights set on robbing the bank and running off with Phineas' safe. In the end, with all the drama, double-dealing, and bad acting, there's only one thing left to do—join forces, start up a repertory theatre, and perform melodramas. After all, there's already a resident villain, a virtuous heroine, a charming curmudgeon, and a couple of river folk ready to play the comedic roles!

**Performance Time:** Approximately 90 minutes.

## Characters

(5 M, 4 F)

**PHINEAS FOURBERIE:** Villainous banker determined to wed Mary Goodperson; wears typical villain's attire including a black stovepipe hat, an Abe Lincoln-type coat, and white socks for humorous effect.

**MARY GOODPERSON:** Virtuous heroine of Polecat Point; wears a high-necked long dress and granny boots.

**PHOEBE FORTHRIGHT:** Mary's dear aunt; wears a high-necked long dress and granny boots.

**MERRIWEATHER MARESNEST:** Mary's uncle, a charming curmudgeon and a con man; dresses in the manner of a proper gentleman with a plain light-colored suit, a white shirt with a pointed collar, and a string tie; displays an obvious pot belly.

**GELASIUS GULL:** Shakespearian actor and con man who lives by combining the histrionic arts with the art of the scam; wears slacks, a sport coat, and a string tie.

**CONSTANCE COZEN:** Gelasius' beautiful wife who works as a Shakespearian actress and con artist; wears a fancy blouse with lace and a skirt or a long dress.

**GOMER GUDGEON:** Poor, uneducated river rat and robber; has an unkempt appearance and carries a hobo bag; wears a flannel shirt, jeans, a rope belt, and boots.

**GERTRUDE GUDGEON:** Gomer's wife and accomplice and the "smarter" of the two; wears a flannel shirt, jeans, a rope belt, and boots.

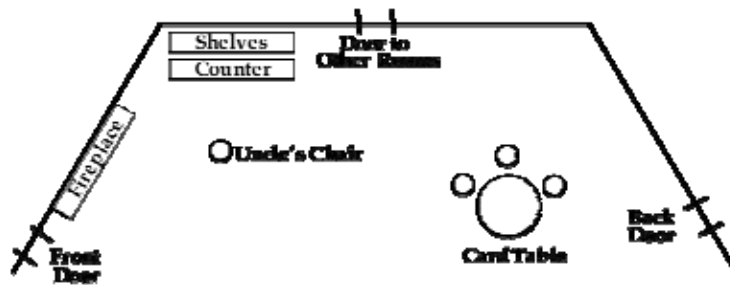
**RUNNING RIVER:** Chief of the Illini Indian tribe and Mary's friend; Harvard graduate who delights in playing the role of a stereotypical Hollywood Indian; wears jeans or leather pants, a flannel shirt, leather vest, moccasins, and an Indian headdress.

## Setting

Mississippi River town of Polecat Point, IL.

## Set

The large main room of Mary Goodperson's house has a card table and three chairs and an armchair. There are shelves and a counter USR and a fireplace with mantel SR. The front door is DSR, the back door is DSL, and a door leading to the other rooms is USC.



## Props

Sign that reads, "Hiss!"	Legal documents
Sign that reads, "Boo!"	Check
Sign that reads, "Oh, Brother!"	Pen
Sign that reads, "Five Weeks Later!"	Woodpile?
Sign that reads, "Shame!"	Briefcase
Sign that reads, "It is Not Polite to Boo a Lady"	Suitcase
Sign that reads, "I Can't Remember Who Is Supposed to be the Villain!"	Large framed portrait of Merriweather
Sign that reads, "Hallelujah!"	Deck of cards
Sign that reads, "Kiss!"	Tomahawk
Sign that reads, "Really Big Kiss!"	2 Carbet bags
Sign that reads, "Hiss-Boo"	4 Sealed decks of cards
Dust rag	Bowl of strawberries
Letter	2 Hobo bags
Hat, for Phineas	3 Pistols
	Letter of credit
	Flask
	Glass
	2 Dollar bills
	Large safe
	Money
	Broom

**NOTE:** Signs should be at least 36" x 24".

## Sound Effect

Steamboat whistle



"Know you not,  
my love,  
that  
"the whole world  
is a stage...?"

## ACT I Scene 1

*(AT RISE: Lights down on main stage. Spot on Phineas, who is seen outside Mary's house along the riverbank below the stage. As Phineas delivers the following speech, he moves purposefully about to address the entire audience.)*

PHINEAS: The fickle finger of fate has not been kind to poor Phineas Fourberie. There was a time, not very long ago, when I, the said Phineas F., ranked as first citizen of the affluent riparian town of Polecat Point situated, as it was, at the majestic confluence of the mighty Mississippi and Polecat Rivers. By industry—meticulously admixed with a modicum of duplicity—I had fashioned for myself a princely portfolio, which consisted of extensive real estate holdings, proprietorship of the Lucky Lady Saloon and ownership of the First Citizens' Bank of Polecat Point. Additionally, my bank stood poised to foreclose on every mortgage in the district. Then in a fortnight, my fortune was all swept away. All lands in which I held interest are now in transit to New Orleans along with the Little Golden Egg, which had been my saloon. I am left with but a brick bank building perched precariously on the remnant of the river shore. My humble, but somewhat ostentatious abode, along with those of my unhappy neighbors, has been swept into the river, including the great iron safe, which held the entire Fourberie personal fortune...\$100,000. Indeed, all that remains of our erstwhile river town is the homestead of the fairest flower of the river, the beauteous Mary Goodperson. But I am not without hope. I am confident that my safe will eventually be found stuck in the mud that has recently been deposited along the shoreline of little Mary's property. Unfortunately, when that happens, under riparian law, my safe, together with the fortune enclosed, will belong to Miss Goodperson. And

“good person” or not, given my somewhat cynical view of human nature, I am not willing to trust that Goodie Goodperson will be able to rise above the rule of finders-keepers. Therefore, a heartbroken Fourberie must find a way to insure that what was mine will henceforth be mine.

*(Stage Manager crosses below the stage carrying a sign that reads “Hiss.” Lights up. Mary Goodperson’s house. Aunt Phoebe is dusting the card table DSL with a dust rag. Mary enters UC.)*

MARY: Good morning, dear Aunt Phoebe.

PHOEBE: Good morning, Mary, dear. Did you sleep well?

MARY: Indeed, I did. *(Mary gives Phoebe a peck on the cheek.)* I find the sound of the river depositing rich silt along the edge of our property most restful. I can’t recall when I last slept so soundly. And yet I cannot help but empathize with the pitiable plight of our neighbors who have had the homes and fields borne away by the torrents of spring.

PHOEBE: Nor can I. I fell asleep on my knees last night praying for their deliverance and thanking the Lord for ours.

MARY: I cannot help but feel a sense of guilt for our good fortune and their dire difficulties. I cannot help but wish that there was something we could do.

PHOEBE: Feel a little sorry for yourself. While the river has provided you with an expanded front yard, it has in the rear reduced your farm acreage to the point I fear that we will not be able to obtain a sufficient yield to meet even our own modest familial needs. We may have been spared by the flood only to face starvation.

MARY: Then let us take it as a sign from heaven that we must find a new means of sustenance—one that will sustain us as well as benefit the distressed denizens of the district.

PHOEBE: Yes, let us be merciful so that in the hour of our need we too might find mercy. What do you propose?

MARY: This house is large. I propose we convert it to an inn and trading post.

*(Wearing Indian regalia, Running River enters from the back door.)*

RUNNING RIVER: *(Like Hollywood Indian.)* How! Running River come. Big Chief Running River come to see little Mary Goodperson!

PHOEBE: John Running River, what in the world are you doing in that get-up? And why are you talking like that?

RUNNING RIVER: *(Normal voice.)* An artist offered to pay me 25 dollars if I would pose in traditional Indian attire. Before I could get back to my camp, the flood waters came up. All my clothes and other possessions are headed downriver.

MARY: And you have been left with only the clothes on your back? Oh, John, I'm so sorry for you!

RUNNING RIVER: Don't be. I don't get to wear this outfit very often, and you'd be amazed at how profitable it can be to be mistaken for a benighted savage.

PHOEBE: *(Sternly.)* John Running River, what's that supposed to mean?

RUNNING RIVER: It means, dear friend, that I particularly enjoy hoodwinking scalawags who scheme to hoodwink me.

MARY: John Running River, I'm ashamed of you!

RUNNING RIVER: I don't see why. Doesn't your Bible say, "Do unto others as they would do unto you"?

PHOEBE: Yes, but that's not what it means.

RUNNING RIVER: I know, but the last time we Indians tried to be good neighbors, we ended up with 26 dollars worth of beads while a bunch of Dutch wheeler-dealers ended up with Manhattan Island. All joking aside, are you two all right?

MARY: We're fine, but our poor neighbors—

RUNNING RIVER: I see that. But most of your farm is gone, too. Will you and Phoebe be able to get by? Is there anything I can do to help?

PHOEBE: Perhaps you can. Mary wants to turn this house into an inn and trading post.

RUNNING RIVER: You'll make more money if you sell wood and liquor. The boats need wood to keep their boilers going. When the steamboats stop to wood up, their crews like to "wood up," too, if you know what I mean. You'll make a fortune.

MARY: (*Appalled.*) Selling wood is a good idea, but absolutely no liquor!

PHOEBE: (*To Running River.*) After all, we are the founding members of the Polecat Point Temperance League.

RUNNING RIVER: As well as the last two, it would appear. As I have no such scruples, would you object to me selling "firewater," as the natives say, on your behalf?

MARY: Indeed, we would. We are doing this to help our poor, unfortunate neighbors, not to further complicate their lives.

PHOEBE: (*To Running River.*) Our goal is to provide temporary lodging and the necessities of life so they can begin anew.

RUNNING RIVER: I am as unfortunate as anybody. Provide me with food and a place to sleep, and I'll help you get the business going.

MARY: Oh, John, would you really? That would be such a help.

(*Running River crosses to Mary.*)

RUNNING RIVER: You've got a deal. (*Shakes her hand.*) I need some money. I'm going to go next door and make a withdrawal from Phineas' bank. (*Running River crosses to front door, and then turns back to Mary.*) Make a list, and I'll go upriver and bring back what you need to get going. And I'll get some new clothes for myself at the same time.

PHOEBE: (*Half-joking.*) Actually, I think the costume you're wearing now is absolutely wonderful. Do you think it might be better for business? After all, this is the West. It's what the people on the riverboats will expect.

RUNNING RIVER: (*Amused.*) Right! Whatever you say, Kimosabe. (*As he starts to exit, Phineas enters and almost runs into Running River.*) Phineas, I was heading over to your place to make a withdrawal.

PHINEAS: (*Brushing him off.*) My assistant will be happy to take care of you. (*Running River exits.*) Good morning, Miss Goodperson. And good morning to you, Widow Forthright.

MARY: And good morning to you, Mr. Fourberie.

PHOEBE: Good morning, Phineas. To what do we owe the honor of your visit?

PHINEAS: I come on a personal matter. (*To Phoebe.*) I was hoping for a private minute with Miss Mary.

(*Phoebe starts to exit USC.*)

MARY: (*To Phoebe.*) Pray, stay, dear aunt. I would tell you all in any event.

(*Annoyed, Phineas crosses to Mary.*)

PHINEAS: I have come, dear Mary, in the hope of renewing my offer of marriage. You have intimated in the past that your penury and my vast wealth stood as obstacles to our union. I am hoping that now—as I, too, am destitute—that you might deign to reconsider? (*He drops to one knee to propose.*) I have loved you with a puissant passion ere since I've reached puberty. Dear Mary, dear little Mary, I once again implore that you be mine.

(*Stage manager pops up at SL corner holding a sign that reads "Oh, Brother!" Mary draws back.*)

MARY: Phineas, dear friend, your offer comes so abruptly, I hardly know what to say...

(*Phineas scoots over to her on his knees.*)

PHINEAS: Then why not say “yes”?

*(Phoebe quickly closes the door.)*

PHOEBE: Phineas, I’m afraid I have bad news for you. Mary has recently reconsidered, and, engaging in the woman’s prerogative, has decided that she would now prefer to be wedded to a man of means.

*(Phineas stands.)*

PHINEAS: *(To Mary.)* Does that mean I am again rejected?

MARY: I’m afraid so. I am afraid I can never be yours. But as you are already here, I should like to take up a business proposition with you.

PHINEAS: *(Aside.)* The hussy has peremptorily rejected my proffered protestations of love, but now she has the audacity to request a benefaction from me? *(To Mary.)* I should be delighted to entertain any proposition you might advance. *(Aside.)* It costs nothing to listen...nothing to be polite.

MARY: I would request an advance of 2,000 dollars. I wish to convert my home into a general store and inn for the purpose of assisting our less-fortunate neighbors through these adversities.

*(Phineas takes Mary’s hand.)*

PHINEAS: In that case, as I am your neighbor, would you not consider assisting me by becoming my wife? After all, who has experienced more adversity than I?

*(Mary withdraws her hand from his as if it were a trap and backs away.)*

MARY: I will speak plainly, Mr. Fourberie. In the past, I have watched as you—in what appeared to be rapacious

fashion—amassed a small fortune for your personal benefit. *(Escapes by crossing past Phineas and Phoebe DSR.)* I could never marry a man who puts his personal welfare... *(Turns back to him.)* ...before the needs of a suffering humanity.

PHINEAS: I will not deny what you say. I have, in the past, placed my own needs first. *(Aside.)* Ah-ha! An opening! *(To Mary.)* Perhaps if I demonstrated a new-found benevolence, you might reconsider your rejection?

PHOEBE: Don't get your hopes up.

*(Mary crosses to Phoebe and touches her elbow.)*

MARY: Please, Auntie. *(Crosses to Phineas.)* You have my assurance, sir, that I shall always keep an open mind.

PHOEBE: *(Aside.)* My naïve niece would be safer keeping a closed mind and open eyes. I have long since learned that one cannot put faith in snakes, skunks, and Fourberies.

PHINEAS: *(Aside.)* Now is the time for the spider to weave his web. For a paltry 2,000 bucks, I shall legally acquire either the beautiful Mary, her land, or both. One could hardly ask for more. *(Stage Manager crosses holding a sign that reads "Boo." To Mary.)* As I am a banker, you would, of course, expect me to prepare a standard mortgage with this property to stand as security for repayment of the loan?

MARY: Of course.

PHINEAS: Then I shall prepare the papers at once. I shall return forsooth. *(Starts to exit via the front door.)*

MARY: "Forsooth"? Do you not mean "forthwith"? Or perhaps "posthaste"?

PHINEAS: Ah, I stand corrected, dear lady. Incidentally... *(Removes a letter from his hat.)* ...this letter came to me. *(Crosses back and gives the letter to Mary.)* It bears your name, but my address. *(Exits.)*

MARY: Thank you, Mr. Fourberie.

*(Phoebe goes to the door and checks to make sure Phineas is gone.)*



PHOEBE: Wait. Has it been opened?

MARY: Not as I can tell. I fear, dear Aunt, that you are a portion too hard on poor Phineas. (*Opens letter.*) Why, it's from dear Uncle Merriweather.

*(Phoebe turns away and throws up her hands.)*

PHOEBE: First the flood. Next, Fourberie. Now Merriweather. Well, as they say, "Trouble always comes in threes!" I assume he has once again invited himself to stay?

MARY: Just for a month. He expects to arrive on June 5th.

PHOEBE: Why, that's six weeks from today. That will afford you time to prepare to be eaten out of house and home.

MARY: Why, Auntie, Uncle Merriweather is a wealthy but lonely old man with no immediate family.

PHOEBE: Indeed! And that is his justification for sponging off his extended family. He visits among his sundry nieces and nephews 12 months a year and never so much as offers a penny of reimbursement. I take that back. Whenever he lights, he presents his hostess with a recent portrait of himself.

MARY: We all know he's wealthy. The others do not object because they all expect to be remembered in his will.

PHOEBE: And remembered they shall be: "And to all my chump nephews and nieces, of whom I have sponged for these good many years, I make the following remembrance. Hi, you all." Whatever fortune the old miser has amassed, I predict he'll have it buried with him in his coffin.

MARY: Aunt Phoebe, I am shocked by your cynicism.

PHOEBE: (*Sarcastic.*) I suggest you freshen up Merriweather's favorite bed while I move his favorite chair to his favorite spot in front of his favorite fireplace. After all, we only have one month to get ready, and knowing dear Merriweather, he is apt to arrive at any moment. And we wouldn't want beloved Uncle Merriweather's favorite toes to get chilly

while sitting in his favorite chair in front of his favorite fireplace.

*(Mary exits USC. Phineas enters through the front door carrying a note and mortgage.)*

PHINEAS: Ah, Aunt Phoebe, dear lady, I have the note and mortgage for your signatures.

PHOEBE: I'll have to call Mary. She is the sole proprietor of the property. She will be the signatory. *(Calls.)* Mary! Mary, dear! Phineas is back with the paperwork!

*(Mary enters and approaches Phineas.)*

MARY: Dear Phineas, it is good of you to be so diligent.

PHINEAS: I have prepared, dear lady, a standard note and mortgage for 2,000 dollars. Just as soon as you execute the documents... *(Pulls out a check.)* ...this check will be yours.

MARY: Thank you. You're a good friend. I knew I could count on you.

*(Phineas guides Mary to the table, causes her to sit, spreads the documents on the table, and provides her with a pen.)*

PHINEAS: I have prepared this myself. You simply sign here... *(Indicates.)* ...and here. *(Indicates.)* You need not waste effort examining them. You have my assurance that there is no fine print.

*(Phoebe approaches and takes some of the documents to examine them.)*

PHOEBE: Just the same, I would like to look them over. *(Sits and reads the note and mortgage.)* Nothing amiss here.

PHINEAS: *(Points out a detail on the note.)* You will observe that the note does not, out of my great affection for Ms.

Goodperson, even contain the standard undertaking to pay my attorney's fees in the event Ms. Goodperson should default. It merely requires that the loan be repaid within six months at three percent interest. You may pay it off in full, or you may make partial payments. The choice is yours.

PHOEBE: I am amazed. And the mortgage seems equally fair and straightforward. *(Stands.)* I may have misjudged you, Phineas. Perhaps you are not the rapacious rascalion that you're generally reputed to be. Mary, I think it is safe to sign.

*(Mary signs.)*

PHINEAS: Thank you, dear Aunt Phoebe.

MARY: And thank you, Phineas.

*(Mary hands Phineas the signed documents.)*

PHINEAS: And, dear Mary, here is your check. *(Hands Mary the check.)* I would suggest you endorse it "for deposit only to the account of Little Mary Goodperson," and return it to me, whereupon I will forthwith deposit it into your account.

*(Mary endorses the check and hands it back to him.)*

MARY: Again, thank you, Phineas.

PHINEAS: Assisting you is always a pleasure, my dear. Now if you will excuse me, I will return to my bank and deposit the money into your account. I will, of course, provide a receipt. *(Exits. Stands just outside the door. Aside.)* Painless, wasn't it? Because I am a banker, you no doubt look upon me as the predacious sort. Nothing could be further from the truth. I deeply love my fellow men. And I am particularly fond of my fellow women—especially the vulnerable ones, and most especially, the most vulnerable and delectable Little Mary Goodperson. *(Stage Manager*

*crosses with a sign that reads, "Boo." Continuing as if having been annoyed by a mosquito.) I shall take the greatest delight in helping her to finance her new enterprise. Of course, if that venture flounders, I will then take an even greater delight in calling the note, foreclosing the mortgage, and throwing her out on her diminutive derriere. (Stage Manager crosses with a sign that reads "Hiss.") Now...to take all appropriate steps to insure success of my schemes...and failure of hers. (Villainous laugh. Exits. Blackout.)*

## Scene 2

*(AT RISE: Mary Goodperson's house, five weeks later. Running River, in an effort to stimulate business, is still wearing full Indian regalia. Stage Manager crosses carrying a sign that reads "Five Weeks Later." Mary is dusting UR with a dust rag. Phoebe is sweeping UL.)*

MARY: Dear Aunt Phoebe, it has now been a full month—indeed, a full five weeks since we opened our humble emporium and inn to the public. Alas, to date, we have had but a single customer.

PHOEBE: Without Phineas' daily patronage, we would not have had that.

MARY: Our shelves are stocked with the choicest goods, our rooms are bright and clean, and we've displayed cords of dry cedar logs along the river's edge. And yet not one steamboat, indeed, nary a canoe has put in. What could possibly explain this run of wretched fortune?

RUNNING RIVER: As I told you before, to be a successful wooding-up station—besides selling wood—you need to sell whiskey. The river men want to wood-up their bellies as well as their boilers.

MARY: Loyal friend, though the heavens may fall, we will do without demon rum!

*(Phoebe approaches the "window" and looks out on the wood pile.)*

PHOEBE: But we have dry cedar. Even in the absence of spirits, the riverboats should be wooding up. Our prices are no higher than those of other vendors. Something is amiss. *(Steamboat steam whistle is heard. Mary goes to the window and the women see an older man wading ashore carrying a suitcase and a briefcase.)* A riverboat! *(Crosses all the way DSL to see what's on the river.)* Perhaps the heavens have heard our

prayers. Perhaps the sound of the whistle portends a propitious change in our fortunes.

*(Mary hurriedly follows to look DSL.)*

MARY: Phoebe, dear, does the gentleman wading ashore not resemble dear Uncle Merriweather?

PHOEBE: I take back what I just said...it is Uncle Merriweather. Just what we needed! Another mouth to feed, complete with capacious stomach.

*(Excited, Mary goes to the front door.)*

MARY: *(Calls.)* Uncle! *(Uncle Merriweather enters, carrying a bag and a briefcase. )* Dear Uncle, how wonderful to see you!

MERRIWEATHER: Mary, dear, how's my favorite and most beautiful niece?

*(Merriweather puts his bags down and either gives Mary a kiss on the cheek or takes both of her hands in his.)*

MARY: I'm wonderful, Uncle, and delighted to see you.

*(Merriweather goes to his bag, opens it, and removes a package.)*

MERRIWEATHER: Here, dear, I've brought you a little gift. *(Hands Mary the package. The shape clearly suggests a picture frame. He approaches Phoebe DSL.)* And, Phoebe, how's my favorite sister-in-law?

PHOEBE: Until most recently, quite well.

*(Mary unwraps the gift.)*

MARY: Oh, Uncle, how sweet of you! A portrait of yourself.

MERRIWEATHER: You may put it with the others. *(Looks around for his portraits.)* By the way, where are the others?

PHOEBE: We had to package them up and put them in the attic to protect them from the recent flood.

MARY: Why don't I put this one in the place of honor on the mantel? *(Puts the portrait on mantel.)*

PHOEBE: I'm sure Merriweather will be delighted.

MERRIWEATHER: Things have changed. Last time I was here, this house was at river's edge. Now it sits well back from the river.

PHOEBE: The river changed course, cut a new channel, and washed away the homes and businesses of our unfortunate neighbors. All that remains of the once thriving town of Polecat Point is this house and Mr. Fourberie's bank.

MERRIWEATHER: I'm surprised you stayed...with the smallpox all about.

PHOEBE: Smallpox?

MARY: What smallpox?

PHOEBE: There has been no smallpox here.

MERRIWEATHER: Are you sure?

PHOEBE: Of course I'm sure.

MERRIWEATHER: But there are signs all along the riverbank beginning some ten miles upstream: "Travelers Beware! Black Death at Polecat Point," "Quarantine—Small Pox at Polecat Point," "Pestilential Plague at Polecat Point!" I had to prevail upon the Captain with all my well-known eloquence to even pull the boat close enough to the bank to allow me to disembark by jumping over the side. The river men are scared to death of this place.

MARY: But there's no plague here. Who would play such a practical joke?

*(Running River stands and assumes an Indian pose.)*

RUNNING RIVER: *(Like Hollywood Indian.)* Someone who not happy about you no selling firewater.

PHOEBE: *(To Mary.)* Someone who is trying to destroy the town.

MARY: But it's already destroyed.

MERRIWEATHER: Perhaps someone who is intent upon  
destroying your business.

MARY: But who?

*(Phineas enters through the front door.)*

PHINEAS: Good morning, dear ladies. I just stopped by for  
my diurnal visit. How is our little venture progressing  
today? *(Blackout.)*



### Scene 3

*(AT RISE: Mary Goodperson's house. Running River and Uncle Merriweather are playing cards. Merriweather sits in the chair UR of the table. Running River sits in the chair UL. Running River puts down his cards.)*

RUNNING RIVER: *(Like Hollywood Indian.)* Running River have three chiefs. Running River win.

MERRIWEATHER: Not so fast, faithful Indian companion. I have a flush. *(Proudly shows his hand.)* I win.

*(Running River looks at Merriweather's hand.)*

RUNNING RIVER: Flush? Phooey on flush! Running River think white man cheat. *(Produces tomahawk.)* Maresnest make new rules. Running River have three heap big chiefs. Maresnest has nothing. Maresnest has only two, three, five, six, and nine.

MERRIWEATHER: Note, faithful friend, that all my cards are hearts. Recall, great chief, that three-of-a-kind beats two pair. A straight beats three-of-a-kind and a flush beats a straight.

*(Running River stands.)*

RUNNING RIVER: White man's rules no good. *(Thinks.)*  
Then what beat flush?

MERRIWEATHER: A full house.

RUNNING RIVER: What makes house get full?

MERRIWEATHER: Three-of-a-kind and a pair.

*(Running River sits and checks his cards.)*

RUNNING RIVER: Me got pair, too. Me got two twos.  
*(Enthusiastically.)* Me got outhouse!

MERRIWEATHER: What? Let me see... (*Running River shows him the pair of deuces.*) Great Caesar's ghost, man! So you have! Kings over deuces! Why didn't you say so?

RUNNING RIVER: Me forget about *outhouses*. (*About to scoop up pot of money.*) You no win no more?

MERRIWEATHER: Not an "outhouse," you benighted savage. A full house beats a flush. Honesty compels me to admit that you win. The pot is yours.

(*Running River stands.*)

RUNNING RIVER: White man's *new new* rule good. (*Scoops up pot.*) Me take pot. You honest flim-flammer. Running River trust Merriweather Maresnest again.

(*Merriweather stands.*)

MERRIWEATHER: You will, of course, give me a chance to get even?

RUNNING RIVER: You wrong, *Kimosabe!* Running River quit while ahead. Running River take money. Running River go. (*Starts to exit.*)

MERRIWEATHER: Where is there to go? The whole town has washed away.

RUNNING RIVER: First to outhouse, then to bank. Save money. (*Exits via front door.*)

MERRIWEATHER: (*Aside.*) Something stinks in Polecat Point. You don't suppose that my aboriginal acquaintance has had a previous intimacy with the game of poker, do you? (*Thinks.*) Just to be safe, tomorrow old Maresnest will introduce a new deck of cards. And the temporary absence of my indigenous friend affords me ample opportunity to prepare for revenge or to—shall I say—shave the deck.

*(Merriweather sits down to shave deck. Stage Manager crosses carrying a sign that reads "Boo!" Gelasius Gull enters, carrying a carpetbag. Constance Cozen enters, carrying a carpetbag.)*

GELASIUS: *(To Merriweather.)* Good day to you, sir.  
*(Approaches Merriweather.)* Allow me to introduce myself. I am Gelasius Gull, thespian, theatrical manager, and citizen of the world. And this veritable Venus is my fellow player and traveling companion, Constance Cozen.

*(Merriweather stands.)*

MERRIWEATHER: On behalf of our charming hostess...  
*(With a flourish.)* ...I bid you welcome. I am Merriweather Maresnest, formerly an industrialist, and now by choice, a traveler and raconteur. I am delighted to make your acquaintance.

*(Merriweather shake hands with Gelasius.)*

GELASIUS: We are in search of lodgings and a well-cooked meal.

MERRIWEATHER: Where are you from?

CONSTANCE: From both everywhere and nowhere. We've come down the tributary, sir, playing all the myriad of towns that lined the banks of the malodorous Polecat.

GELASIUS: *(To Merriweather.)* Enriching the lives of the good citizens with vibrant vignettes from the works of the "immortal bard."

CONSTANCE: *(To Merriweather.)* "Macbeth," "The Merchant of Venice," and "Romeo and Juliet." *(As Juliet.)* "O Romeo, Romeo! Wherefore art thou, my Romeo?"

GELASIUS: *(To Merriweather.)* We tied our raft along the bank and disembarked here, hoping to find our next audience.

MERRIWEATHER: My friends, you have disembarked at the perfect place. The rooms are bright and fresh, the food

exquisite, and the companionship superb. (*Gestures for them to sit and join him in a game of poker.*) I don't suppose I could induce you to indulge in a friendly game of chance before dinner?

GELASIUS: I would much prefer to indulge in a spirituous libation.

MERRIWEATHER: Alas, our hostess is a temperance advocate and, as such, will not permit alcoholic beverages to be served on the premises.

GELASIUS: In that case, anything for the advancement of comradeship! Of course, as we are but inexperienced players, it would be incumbent upon a gentleman like yourself to acquaint us with the intricacies of the game.

*(Gelasius indicates Constance should join him. She crosses to the center chair, which he pulls back for her, and she sits down. Gelasius sits in the chair to the right, and Merriweather sits in the chair to the left.)*

MERRIWEATHER: Nothing would give me greater pleasure.

CONSTANCE: And, in return, as a demonstration of our appreciation, perhaps we could acquaint you with the technique of the theater. (*Cozening up to Merriweather.*) We have for some while been searching for a younger man to replace Gelasius.

MERRIWEATHER: (*To Gelasius.*) But what will become of you, sir?

GELASIUS: I am growing old, my dear Maresnest. Moreover, for some while I have aspired to have a go at the great comedic roles.

CONSTANCE: (*Stage whisper, to Merriweather.*) And I have aspired for the caress of a new leading man. Someone, shall we say, more masculine, more virile...indeed more like yourself.

MERRIWEATHER: As you so aptly say, anything for the advancement of comradeship. Of course, as I am but an

erstwhile titan of commerce, it would be incumbent upon a gentleman and a lady like yourselves to acquaint me with the intricacies of the histrionic arts.

GELASIUS/CONSTANCE: Nothing would give us greater pleasure.

GELASIUS: *(To Merriweather.)* Now perhaps, good sir, you would be good enough to introduce us to the game of poker.

MERRIWEATHER: I should be delighted, and in your honor, I shall break out a fresh deck of cards. *(Pulls out a new sealed deck.)*

CONSTANCE: Hold! I should be honored, my dear Mr. Maresnest, if you would allow me to furnish the deck. *(Pulls out a new sealed deck.)* I acquired it upriver as a gift from a gentleman, who like yourself, had also volunteered to introduce us to the game but who was forced to abruptly disembark from the steamship to tend to some pressing legal business in the company of the local sheriff.

*(Running River enters and sees that the game is about to start.)*

RUNNING RIVER: *(As Hollywood movie Indian.)* Running River play, too. *(Pulls out a new deck of cards.)* Running River good friend to white men. *(Crosses to group.)* To prove friendship, Running River make gift of cards.

MERRIWEATHER: *(To Gelasius.)* I don't suppose, sir, that you, too, have brought your own deck?

GELASIUS: I enjoy an occasional game of solitaire.

*(Gelasius produces a deck. Merriweather, Gelasius, Constance, and Running River all realize that everyone at the table is a card shark. They all take a good look at each other and have a good laugh.)*

CONSTANCE: *(To Merriweather.)* And what is your specialty, sir?

MERRIWEATHER: Shaving the deck. And yours, madam?

*(From the corner, Stage Manager raises the "Hiss" sign.)*

CONSTANCE: Dealing from the bottom. Gelasius, here, excels in palming aces. How about you, Chief?

*(Stage Manager hurriedly switches to the "Boo" sign.)*

RUNNING RIVER: How much you pay to find out?

*(Stage manager hurriedly switches to the "Hiss" sign. Constance stands.)*

CONSTANCE: It appears, my friends, that we have here a plethora of rooks and a paucity of pigeons.

*(With a flourish, Phineas enters.)*

PHINEAS: I bid you all a good and glorious afternoon. On a day such as this, even the most prosaic banker is called to soar above the river among the eagles.

RUNNING RIVER: *(To others at table, indicating Phineas.)*  
Pigeon! Heap big Pigeon!

*(Blackout.)*

## Scene 4

*(AT RISE: Mary Goodperson's house, later that afternoon. Mary is UR of table. Phoebe enters, carrying a bowl of strawberries.)*

PHOEBE: A brief trip to pick strawberries makes all too clear how our town came to receive its appellation. It also leads me to surmise that some unwary critter failed to perceive the vital difference between a tabby and a polecat. Incidentally, speaking of skunks, to what do you suppose do we owe the honor of Phineas' daily visitations?

*(Phoebe hands the bowl of strawberries to Mary.)*

MARY: I fear poor Phineas is a lonely man. I am certain he comes by each day hoping I will give him the answer he must know I can never give.

PHOEBE: A vulture waiting to swoop. He circles this house, keeping a sharp eye on our venture. You don't suppose he is waiting for us to fail?

MARY: Dear Auntie, why must you always forefeel the worst. Before the recent flood, Phineas was universally acknowledged as the district's first and most affluent citizen. To a man of Mr. Fourberie's means, the modest mortgage on our humble homestead is but a trifle.

PHOEBE: But will we be able to repay this trifle?

MARY: Alas, dear Aunt, I fear not. *(Sits to sort the berries.)* The dearth of business, occasioned by the haphazard posting of those warnings along the river, has cut us to the quick. For a period of six weeks we have had nary a penny's worth of revenue.

PHOEBE: Haphazard, phooey! I fear the posting was not in the least inadvertent.

MARY: Surely, you do not insinuate sabotage. Who could possibly have had a motive to do such a deed so dastardly?

*(Merriweather enters from USC door.)*

MERRIWEATHER: Someone, my dear, who was intent on making sure your venture would fail.

*(Mary stands.)*

MARY: *(Shocked.)* But who could be so malevolent?

MERRIWEATHER: You obviously have an enemy, my dear.

MARY: Dear uncle, I have devoted my life to the service of my fellow man. You are shaking my faith in the inherent nobility of mankind. You are stripping away at my very foundations.

PHOEBE: For heaven's sake, Merriweather, this child hasn't an enemy in the world.

MERRIWEATHER: Perhaps the word "enemy," is too strong. But there is certainly someone out there who means for this enterprise to fail—if not out of enmity for Mary then for some other reason. Is there a competitor nearby?

PHOEBE: Not that I've heard tell of.

MERRIWEATHER: The proprietor of an inn? A general store? A wooding station?

MARY: There were before the flood right here in Polecat Point. But since the flood, no.

PHOEBE: The businesses of any antediluvian competitors are by now in New Orleans.

MERRIWEATHER: *(To Mary.)* Has anyone ever shown an interest in buying your property?

MARY: Only Phineas, but not since he gave the mortgage.

MERRIWEATHER: You say Fourberie holds the mortgage on your property?

PHOEBE: Yes, he loaned us 2,000 dollars to start our little business.

MERRIWEATHER: Then in the event of your default, Phineas stands to benefit by foreclosure?

MARY: I never considered that possibility, but, yes, indeed.



PHOEBE: That would explain his sudden interest.

MERRIWEATHER: He drops in each day to spy...to see how your little business is doing. How is your little business doing?

MARY: Not well, I fear. Mr. Gull and Miss Cozen are our first customers, and in my eagerness to accommodate them, I did not take the precaution of securing payment in advance.

PHOEBE: It appears evident that until we had Running River take down the signs of pox and plague, travelers feared to put in. For the first six weeks of our venture, we have been wholly without income.

MERRIWEATHER: How much are you charging the gregarious Gelasius and the charming Constance for their room and board?

MARY: A dollar a day each.

MERRIWEATHER: (*Calculates.*) That's fourteen dollars a week. When's your mortgage due?

PHOEBE: It was due six months from the day funds were advanced. We have 20 weeks left to repay the two thousand.

MERRIWEATHER: Twenty weeks. That's a hundred dollars per week. (*Calculates.*) At 14 dollars per week, it appears, my dear, that you will have a 1,720 dollar shortfall.

PHOEBE: Is there a chance you might help by paying for your keep?

MARY: Auntie, I am surprised at you!

MERRIWEATHER: Surprised is not the word. I'm shocked!

MARY: But wait! I have not as yet expended the whole of the funds. I still have 750 dollars in my account at Phineas' bank.

MERRIWEATHER: So, unless you can come up with a thousand dollars in four and a half months, the mortgage will be foreclosed and your friend Phineas will take title to and possession of your property.

PHOEBE: To avoid that unfortunate happenstance, Merriweather, why don't you advance Mary the money you propose to leave her in your will to cover the deficiency?

MERRIWEATHER: (*Sharply.*) Now why would I do that? Do you realize the folly of what you are proposing? If I did that, I would deprive Mary of the inestimable opportunity of standing on her own two feet and making her own way in the world as a strong, modern businesswoman.

PHOEBE: Because, my dear brother-in-law, if Mary fails and the mortgage is foreclosed, you will have the inestimable opportunity of finding new lodging, and your next landlord might expect you to pay cash on the barrelhead for your room and board.

MERRIWEATHER: A dismal prospect, indeed. You almost make me wish I could help.

PHOEBE: Of course you can help. Are you not rolling in money? Are you planning to take it with you when you go?

MERRIWEATHER: My dear lady, you're operating under a deplorable delusion. The forlorn fact is that I am altogether impoverished. I haven't a cent. Five years ago, I lost every penny I had.

MARY: But you are widely reputed to be worth millions.

MERRIWEATHER: As indeed I was. But that was before I sunk the totality of my fortune into the construction of a certain new barge canal. Sadly, before the dismal ditch could even be flooded, a railroad had been constructed on a parallel route. No water ever poured into the ditch...only the wealth of improvident investors. So you see, my dears, you are entertaining a veritable prince of paupers. (*Aside.*) A heartrending tale, don't you think?

PHOEBE: You've accepted hospitality allowing your host relatives to labor under the misimpression that you were rolling in wealth and that each would be rewarded in your will for their largess.

MERRIWEATHER: I never uttered a word to that effect. It was merely the hopeful supposition my hosts were more

than delighted to draw. And as they were bemused by the prospects, I saw no reason to burden them with the unvarnished truth.

*(Stage Manager crosses carrying the sign that reads "Boo.")*

PHOEBE: Merriweather Maresnest, you are a hoodwink.

MERRIWEATHER: Your reprobation is entirely apt. But in point of fact, I more than make up for my economic shortcomings by regaling my hosts with an abundant allotment of charm. And do not my talents as a raconteur inject excitement into your otherwise prosaic lives?

PHOEBE: Do you mean to say that you intend to sit idly by and watch your beloved niece suffer financial destruction?

MERRIWEATHER: I don't recall saying anything of the sort.

PHOEBE: What then do you propose to do?

MERRIWEATHER: I intend to sit back and observe. *(To Mary.)* First, we must confirm that old Fourberie does indeed intend to acquire this property by the vehicle of mortgage foreclosure. *(To Phoebe.)* Then we must ascertain why any sane man would want the property.

PHOEBE: My guess is that he is using the property as leverage to compel Mary to marry him.

MARY: If that's his scheme, it will be an easy thing to persuade him that he has embarked upon an improvident course. Or, if you will, that he is paddling up the wrong stream.

MERRIWEATHER: What do you mean?

MARY: To Phineas, I shall become the shrew on the slough.

MERRIWEATHER: A prudent thing to do!

PHOEBE: Very true.

*(Gomer Gudgeon and Gertrude Gudgeon enter from the front door. Both carry pistols in their belt and a hobo bag.)*

GOMER: Pardon us, folks. I'm Gomer Gudgeon and this here be my wife.

GERTRUDE: *(To others.)* We're sorry to be interrupting, but can ye tell us where'n the sheriff's office be at?

GOMER: *(To others.)* Pirates done robbed us, and we need to find the sheriff.

PHOEBE: The sheriff's office is at the county seat. He's probably there.

GOMER: Where'n that at?

MARY: The county seat is at Beaverboro. It's about a day's journey upriver.

GOMER: Ya mean we already done passed it?

PHOEBE: I'm afraid I can't say. Where'd you start from?

GOMER: Either Davendorf or Bettenport. I ain't quite shure.

MERRIWEATHER: Do you mean Davenport or Bettendorf?

GOMER: Yup, or maybe it ware somewhere else.

MERRIWEATHER: Then, my good people, you floated down the Mississippi. Beaverboro is up the Polecat.

GERTRUDE: I ain't ne-er heard of any Polecat River.

GOMER: Whar's the Polecat River be at?

PHOEBE: The mouth of the river is just about 50 rods south of here. South of this house.

GERTRUDE: Which way is south.

MERRIWEATHER: Upriver is north.

GERTRUDE: Thet's not what I asked ya. I asked you ware's south be at, and, instead, ya tell me ware north are.

GOMER: You folks will have to excuse Gertrude, here. She's a good wife, but ever since she were dropped on her haid, she's not very good at directions no more.

MARY: *(To Gertrude.)* You were dropped on your head when you were a baby? How terribly sad.

GOMER: It warent when she was a baby, ma'am. She got dropped when I done tripped over the threshold the day we was hitched.

MERRIWEATHER: How about you?

GOMER: I were dropped, too. My mama did it. But I don't think it ware on purpose. But I still know where north is. It's jest south that kinda confuses me up.

PHOEBE: (*Points Gomer in the proper direction.*) South is that way.

GERTRUDE: Thank you, ma'am. I think I got it. So, we go south to the mouth of the Polecat River.

MARY: Correct.

GERTRUDE: Then what way do we go?

MERRIWEATHER: When you're at the mouth of a river, there's only one way you *can* go.

GOMER: Right... (*Thinks.*) So which way is thet?

GERTRUDE: (*To Merriweather.*) Is thet up or downriver?

MARY: When you are at the mouth of a river, the only way you can go is up!

GOMER: But what if'n you go down?

MERRIWEATHER: Then you'll be going down the Mississippi.

GERTRUDE: What good's a river if'n ye cain't go down it?

MARY: When the time comes, we'll get your boat—

GERTRUDE: Raft.

MARY: Raft...going in the right direction.

GOMER: Don't think so.

PHOEBE: For heaven's sake, why not?

GERTRUDE: 'Cause thet's why we need the sheriff. That's what them filibusterers stole.

PHOEBE: They took your raft?

GOMER: Yup. Ye got a bank in town?

MERRIWEATHER: What do you need a bank for?

GERTRUDE: To put our money in.

MARY: We do have a bank.

GERTRUDE: Where it at?

MARY: (*Points.*) Right next door.

GOMER: Thank ye. Thet's mighty convenient.

MERRIWEATHER: (*To Gomer and Gertrude.*) But why did they steal your raft and not your money?

GERTRUDE: Maybe 'cause we looked too bedraggled to have any money. Or maybe 'cause we was too smart to tell 'em they were dumb.

GOMER: When we didn't tell 'em, we wasn't fibbing, was we?

MARY: Why don't you folks get comfortable. We'll get you a good meal, and then you can decide whether you want to stay for the night or move along.

*(Blackout.)*

## Scene 5

*(AT RISE: Mary Goodperson's house, just before dinnertime. Constance is sitting in the chair left of the table. Phineas is outside the front door about to enter.)*

PHINEAS: *(Aside.)* For some while, as you by now have gathered, I have had a yen to marry the fair Mary. I am wholly dazzled by her beauty. And yet, as a prudent investor, I believe it would behoove me to ascertain whether the dainty damsel can cook. I think too much of my stomach to hazard the matter to chance. It is for that reason that you see me here now. I have decided to eat out tonight. Then again, being here a second time affords me the additional opportunity of passing along the riverbank to see if perhaps all or part of my safe might by now have been exposed by the fickle flow of the river. As an added bonus, the arrival of the winsome Miss Cozen adds a splendid opportunity for masculine amusement. *(Stage Manager crosses and displays the "Hiss" and then quickly replaces it with the "Boo" sign. Phineas enters through the front door. To Constance.)* My dear Miss Cozen, I bid you good evening.

*(Constance stands.)*

CONSTANCE: Mr. Fourberie, I'm delighted to see you again. *(Crosses to him.)* I was hoping we might have a private moment together.

PHINEAS: *(Sensing a damsel in distress.)* Nothing would give me greater pleasure. And, please, my dear, call me Phineas. Or if you desire to be less formal, "Phinny."

*(Holding him off, Constance takes a step back and then crosses past him to DSR.)*

CONSTANCE: I'm afraid I could never call a man of your mien "Phinny." Phinny bespeaks a quality of playfulness. I cannot imagine you frolicsome.

*(Phineas approaches her.)*

PHINEAS: There may be more whimsy in me than you perceive, my dear Miss Cozen.

*(Constance crosses past him and moves to DSC.)*

CONSTANCE: We shall keep it within. "Phineas" will have to do.

*(He pursues her.)*

PHINEAS: Of what, dear lady, did you wish to speak?

*(She flees DSR.)*

CONSTANCE: As you learned at first encounter, Gelasius and I are professional actors who have the misfortune of playing the squalid towns along this great river.

*(He pursues her.)*

PHINEAS: I should revel in seeing you on the stage...or anywhere else for that matter.

CONSTANCE: *(Holds her hand up as a stop sign.)* If you please, Phineas, the proposition that I was about to make was entirely of a professional nature.

PHINEAS: *(Retreats.)* I am chastened. *(Turns back to her.)* But you must excuse my behavior. I plead justification. I was intoxicated by your unmatched beauty. *(Aside.)* Of course, I am also intoxicated by Mary's unmatched beauty.



*(She sweeps past him to CS.)*

CONSTANCE: Then the proposition I am about to make should find favor with you.

PHINEAS: I am certain it shall. I am your servant. You have, dear lady, but to speak.

CONSTANCE: Very well, with your permission, I shall. *(Brief pause. Troubled.)* My devoted partner, Gelasius Gull, as you are no doubt aware, has been very good to me. I met him directly upon being orphaned. He has unselfishly taught me the trade of the actress. Throughout these last five years, he has mentored me, and cared for me, and been like a father to me. And therein lies the heart of the problem. As you no doubt immediately noticed, there is a marked disparity in our ages, which more and more makes playing romantic scenes with dear Gelasius increasingly implausible and worse than that, I am afraid, more and more improbable to our audiences. Gelasius has trained me to be perhaps the finest actress on the river, but now I fear he daily becomes a weightier anchor on my career.

PHINEAS: So what exactly are you proposing?

CONSTANCE: I should like, shall we say, to audition you to be my new leading man. There is a certain electricity about you, which announces to all who see you, the second coming of Edmund Kean, the epiphany of a new Edwin Forrest, the emergence of a younger Junius Brutus Booth.

PHINEAS: *(Aside.)* Ha! It appears old Phineas is not without perceptible attractiveness to even the most desirable members of the opposite sex. All the while that I have been throwing myself at the feet of Miss Goody Goodperson, other women, no less exquisite, have been admiring the palpable allure of "Phineas the Fair" from afar. This is a proposition that old Fourberie must hear out. *(To Constance.)* Is there a possibility that this novice to the theater might sooner or later emerge as your leading man...off as well as on the stage?

CONSTANCE: (*Coyly.*) In the theater, sir, all things are possible. But, wait, there is more to my plan. I am certain that a man of your conspicuous quality could never respect a woman who appeared disloyal to her benefactor. I would propose we should retain Mr. Gull's services. You will find he possesses, despite encroaching age, an impeccable sense of comedic timing. And, indeed, for some while, as you are already aware, he has aspired to pursue the great comedic roles...Pistol, Falstaff, and the others. Indeed, if I could, per chance, find sufficient funding, I would further propose to erect an opera house here in a revitalized Polecat Point.

PHINEAS: (*Aside.*) There is no better use for one's idle cash than to use it to weave a web about a delectable damsel. And the prospect of having one beauty in hand with a second in the bush is simply Elysian. (*To Constance.*) Let's not get ahead of ourselves, dear lady. There is a secluded grove not 50 feet from here. I suggest that we repair there, to *audition* each other.

*(Phineas and Constance exit. Gelasius and Merriweather enter USC.)*

GELASIUS: My dear Maresnest, you would be doing me the greatest of favors.

MERRIWEATHER: But I've never been on the stage. How can you be sure that I'll succeed?

GELASIUS: Because, sir, the theater has been my life. To that end, I have spent my years observing mankind, and as I observe you, it is apparent to me, that you possess singular talent. (*Backing off as if to admire.*) You, dear fellow, are, in my considered judgment, a born leading man. And I, of course, shall mentor and hone your histrionic talents.

MERRIWEATHER: But I shall have to displace you.

GELASIUS: Fear not! Besides spending a lifetime observing others, I have spent a like number of years observing myself.

Each morning, as I look in the mirror, it becomes more and more apparent that I grow longer in the tooth.

MERRIWEATHER: Then you mean to retire?

GELASIUS: Don't be absurd, my good man. I can no more depart the stage than a fish could depart this river. Acting is in my blood. Your accession to our little company will afford me the opportunity I have long desired...that of playing the great comedic roles.

MERRIWEATHER: But what of Miss Cozen? Would she accept the substitution?

GELASIUS: It is precisely for the benefit of Miss Cozen, my dear Maresnest, this change must be made. A beautiful ingénue will soon tire of playing romantic roles opposite a man old enough to be her father. Unless the change is made sooner rather than later, I fear my incomparable ingénue will bolt at the earliest opportunity.

MERRIWEATHER: But, in fact, I am only slightly younger than you.

GELASIUS: Ah, but you appear years younger. You are still virile and vigorous. (*Backing off as if to admire.*) In the vernacular of the river, you, sir, are a hunk.

MERRIWEATHER: I fear you are just saying that.

GELASIUS: Would I say it, if I didn't mean it? A gentleman, sir, does not indulge in hyperbole.

MERRIWEATHER: I must admit, I am deeply flattered. And I am intrigued by your plan to build your theater here in Polecat Point. It would allow me to remain close to my beloved niece. This new venture bids fair to keep me young.

GELASIUS: Then you agree?

MERRIWEATHER: Contingent, of course, upon a satisfactory resolution of financial considerations. After all, I am a man of business.

GELASIUS: Of course. I propose we keep them to the minimum.

MERRIWEATHER: Quite correct. Unnecessary details are for the lawyers, not for gentlemen.

GELASIUS: (*Calculating.*) I am estimating it will take between 2,000 and 3,000 dollars for us to build and furbish our opera house. I thought, perhaps, in consideration of my undertaking to teach you the tricks of the profession, you might advance the capital.

MERRIWEATHER: How generous of you. You afford me a splendid opportunity. But I could not possibly deprive you of such an incomparable investment opportunity.

GELASIUS: What precisely do you mean?

MERRIWEATHER: I would propose to bring 2,000 to the table, and I would propose that you should do the same.

GELASIUS: (*Taken aback.*) But my dear Maresnest we need at most 3,000, not four.

(*Merriweather crosses to Gelasius.*)

MERRIWEATHER: I have learned, my dear Gull, that it is a wise precaution to have a bit of extra cash on hand.

GELASIUS: Your reasoning, sir, is unassailable. But am I...that is, are we to be afforded no consideration for tutoring you in the craft?

MERRIWEATHER: You, sir, overlook the business expertise I bring to the venture. Just as you have devoted your lives to the theater, I have devoted mine to the world of commerce. I would, therefore, propose to handle the cash, and to manage the financial affairs of our enterprise while you serve as theatrical director. As you know, my good Gull, there cannot be a successful theatrical company without proper management.

GELASIUS: By Jove, Maresnest, I must, for a second time, admit your logic is unassailable. I believe we've reached full accord. Would you prefer that we reduce our agreement to writing?

MERRIWEATHER: Between gentleman, I believe that would be superfluous. I am certain a handshake will suffice.

GELASIUS: My thought exactly.

*(Geladius extends his hand to shake, but Merriweather draws back.)*

MERRIWEATHER: In that case, I shall restate the agreement. *(Thinks.)* The general partnership of Gull, Cozen, and Maresnest is hereby formed to build a new opera house in Polecat Point. Maresnest and Gull shall each furnish two thousand dollars initial capital. Gull shall serve as President and theatrical director, Maresnest as treasurer and business manager. Profits shall be split equally between Gull and Maresnest.

GELASIUS: *(Holds up his hand in stop sign.)* You forget Cozen. Her beauty is her capital, and that precious fund more than equals the value of your business expertise and my theatrical experience.

MERRIWEATHER: And Cozen. In that case, should she not be present?

GELASIUS: She trusts me implicitly. I hold her power of attorney. Her presence, therefore, would be superfluous.

MERRIWEATHER: In that case, shall we shake? *(Offers his hand.)*

GELASIUS: There is one other minor matter. *(Pause.)* I believe it would be prudent to bank our capital and surplus funds next door.

MERRIWEATHER: Agreed. And as business manager, I will naturally have control over the account—

GELASIUS: *(Holds up his hand in stop sign.)* That, no doubt, is the usual practice. However, in this case, since we have the sole experience in theatrical matters, I was about to propose that I should control our accounts.

MERRIWEATHER: Certainly a novel approach. However, to eliminate any possibility of unjust suspicion, I would propose that in this particular case, that both your signature and mine should be required upon any check or withdrawal from the account.

GELASIUS: *(Thinks.)* A bit cumbersome, perhaps, but certainly a prudent precaution. I agree. Are you now prepared to shake?

MERRIWEATHER: Indeed. *(They shake hands warmly.)* And now, if you will excuse me for a brief minute... *(Exits via front door.)*

GELASIUS: *(Aside.)* The fish has taken the bait. Now, as soon as the beautiful Constance wheedles two grand out of "Phineas the Fogbound," she will deliver it to me, and I, with matching capital in hand, will induce the decrepit Maresnest to part with his cash. The requirement of a second signature is but a slight impediment, which shall be quickly overcome by the deft hand of the old master. *(Shows off his hand. Villainous laugh.)* Ha, ha, ha!

*(Stage Manager crosses and holds up a sign that reads "Hiss!")*

MERRIWEATHER: *(Outside the door. Aside.)* The dull Gull has gone for the gimmick. Now to set the hook for poor floundering Phineas. With a cunningly counterfeited letter of credit in hand, I shall repair early tomorrow morning to the First Citizen's Bank of Polecat Point, where I shall borrow 2,000 dollars from unsuspecting Phineas Fourberie. With cash in hand, I shall then have the necessary tool to induce the greedy Gull to part with his matching funds. There is, of course, the obstacle of a counter signature. But if a man has the necessary wit to endorse his own name, there is no reason whatsoever why he cannot write that of another. *(Villainous laugh.)* Ha, ha, ha!

*(Merriweather exits. Stage Manager crosses in opposite direction with a sign that reads "Boo!" Blackout. Intermission.)*

**[END OF FREEVIEW]**