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"Arthur and Paul"

by

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Translated by Peter Linka

"First of all there was the act,
Which became the hatred that
Then became pure love, whereat
The world ceased to be intact."

Attila József

TIME

April 19-20, 1891

PLACE

Africa.

The edge of the Abyssinian Highlands ... the Seyblak village hospital where Rimbaud lies with a synovial tumour in his knee.

The location and the bulk of the characters are real. The fact that Rimbaud and Verlaine actually met in Africa is unknown. It is, in fact, literary fiction. In theory, it could have occurred.

[Translator's Notes](#)

[A XIX century dirty, run-down "hospital room" with a single bed near the window. The bed has two crutches hanging on hooks underneath it. There is a small white hospital table with a small stool next to it on the other side of the bed. The room has two doorways, one covered with a curtain and leading to a bathroom-type area, the other has a door and leads to the rest of the hospital. The playing area is in relative darkness. As the audience enters, ARTHUR lies in his bed asleep, covered by a single bed sheet which extends up over his head. Because of the intense heat outside the curtains on the window are normally closed. Once the audience are seated the sound of singing, drums and tribal music can be heard from outside. The lights

over the audience fade and the hospital room becomes brighter. LENI enters, casting a glance at her patient who seems sound asleep and enthusiastically runs to the window, pulling the curtain aside to see the events of the celebrations outside. ARTHUR awakes, uncovers his head, looks around, spots LENI looking out the window next to him, moves, extends his arm, and tries to reach under her nurse's uniform. She's a little too far away from him. He quietly struggles to get closer and tries again. This time, he manages to reach up her thigh. LENI gives him an almighty whack on the hand.]

- LENI: What are you doing, Bwana? Keep your hands off! That's all over now that Menelik is Emperor!
- ARTHUR: What's Menelik got to do with that little black coffin you've got hidden up there?
- LENI: Just that, Bwana! We won!
- ARTHUR: You *won* ?
- LENI: Yes, our people did!
- ARTHUR: Oh, your *people*! You mean those screaming locals out there with rings in their noses and war paint on their arses?! ... Are they your people, Leni?
- LENI: Bwana is foreign. You don't understand. You'd better behave yourself or they'll come in here and get you ... they're shooting whites now!
- ARTHUR: And I'm white, am I? Look at me! I'm almost black! I live in filth, I drink your atrocious concoctions and reach up your stinking thighs. Do I don't even vaguely resemble a whiteman anymore?
- LENI: Bwana is only dark from the sun.
- ARTHUR: [*pointing to his chest*] Here! In here, Leni ... this is where the sun is!
- LENI: There's no time for this now. I have to take care of your knee and get my tribal dress ready for Menelik's inauguration. So stop wasting time!
- ARTHUR: Your tribal dress? ... So you're going to be naked, are you? You, who worked all those years in Marseilles ... what the hell have you got to do with them anyway?
- LENI: [*closes the curtains and sits on the end of ARTHUR'S bed*] My heart belongs to them. My heart is black.
- ARTHUR: What on earth possessed you to come back to this stinking fleapit?

LENI: Because they didn't like foreigners in Marseilles and ... [*with emphasis*] they're not too popular here now either!

ARTHUR: Does that mean I can't climb in your window at night any more?

LENI: [*stands and moves away*] No! I've become self-conscious!

ARTHUR: It's the end of the world! ... I won't be able to feel you out from among the other three nurses in the dark any more!

LENI: No! And don't carry on like this! I know, that in all your searching, you didn't always make it as far as me. [*with a smirk*] Anyway, I'm on my own now ... the others went off to fight in the revolution, and you won't be going anywhere because Doctor Tent is going to cut your knee open.

ARTHUR: You call that drunken butcher a doctor?

LENI: He studied medicine in your country, Bwana, and this is a hospital! He's the only doctor here, so you have to respect him!

ARTHUR: [*turning to LENI, away from the door*] This is a shit-hole in Africa; not a hospital, but a flea-hatchery! [*TENT enters, but ARTHUR doesn't notice him*] ... a rat-sanatorium where your precious doctor strives to help his patients pass over to the other side as quickly as possible so he can overcome his supply shortage!

TENT: Now, now, Bwana! You're lucky I didn't hear that last remark. [*TENT goes to ARTHUR'S bed and reaches for the bed sheet covering his bad knee. ARTHUR grabs TENT'S hand. TENT pauses and waits for his troublesome patient to let go. ARTHUR allows his doctor to proceed but not to uncover his mid section.*]

ARTHUR: Don't tell me you've become self-conscious as well?

TENT: Menelik is Emperor now! He's black.

ARTHUR: Yeah? Well I knew him when he was only a king, and he owes me 4,000 thalers!

TENT: No matter. The white rule is over! [*TENT finishes with the knee, circles the bed and goes to the window.*]

ARTHUR: For how long? Three days like the last time? Then the Brits'll come marching back on in again and put an end to your beloved Emperor!

TENT: You're wrong, Bwana. This battle was the last.

ARTHUR: You bet it was! ... Menelik's Last Stand! [*laughing, then suddenly*] I'm gonna write that mongrel a letter!

[*ARTHUR reaches under his bed for his bag. He takes out a*

folder crammed with papers. TENT opens the curtain. He and LENI watch the celebrations outside.]

TENT: I wouldn't write that letter if I were you, Bwana.

ARTHUR: Why not?

TENT: Because you've received one.

ARTHUR: [*surprised*] From Menelik?

TENT: No. From the French Academy. They're pleased to have located Monsieur Rimbaud ... to finally know where their great poet has been hiding.

ARTHUR: [*stunned by what he has just heard*] Is that what they wrote? ... Where's the letter?

TENT: Indeed ... that's what they've been writing.

ARTHUR: What do you mean, "That's what they've *been* writing"? How many letters have they sent?

TENT: [*looking outside, to LENI*] They're bringing the holy harp now. Beautiful, isn't it?

LENI: It was much nicer last year.

ARTHUR: Give me that letter! ... NOW, TENT!

TENT: [*turning back to ARTHUR*] Why? I told you what was in it. What more do you want? They ask that you return to France and write once more. ... I told them that was impossible. I wrote that ... for medical reasons, you were unable to travel.

ARTHUR: [*stunned*] You replied to *my* letter?

TENT: Of course I did! I know good manners. One should always reply to letters. You were delirious at the time ... with a high fever. But there's no need to worry. Apart from yourself there are only three people here in Seyblak who speak French: Leni, the Emperor and myself. Leni has already read the letter and I don't think the Emperor has time for it at the moment.

ARTHUR: Yeah? Well he's gonna have time for this one! He owes me 4,000 thalers!

[ARTHUR throws his bag back under the bed, frantically begins to sort his paperwork and write his letter to Menelik.]

TENT: *[looking out the window, to LENI]* The people are jubilant, aren't they?

LENI: Yes, very much so.

TENT: *[nodding, but cynically]* They think they're free!

LENI: *[confused by his tone]* Is that a problem?

TENT: No ... *[philosophically]* As long as they never realise true freedom is something they'll never know ... it's not a problem.

LENI: *[pointing to ARTHUR]* What are we going to do with him? He's white. They'll kill him.

TENT: Not while he's in here they won't. They regard this hospital as a sacred place ... and he got a letter! That makes him an important person! You only have to hold up an envelope with a stamp on it to one of the tribal chiefs and they immediately start to dance and sing ... I think it's because of the stamp. For some reason they're afraid of them!

LENI: Do we still have to cut his knee open?

TENT: Yes.

ARTHUR: *[throws his file of papers back into his bag and folds his letter]* You're not cutting open anything! I'm going to go see Menelik! Right now!

TENT: You won't even make it as far as the door ... but you can try if you wish.

ARTHUR: *[Looking toward the door, he realizes the doctor is right.]* Then you'll take my letter to him! I demand it!

[TENT shrugs his shoulders.]

ARTHUR: *[in a demanding tone]* Leni!

LENI: I'll think about it.

ARTHUR: Patriots! Yesterday it was, "Yes, Bwana! Whatever you say, Bwana". Do you think just because your civilised, white governor has been replaced by some hairy gnome from Borneo, you've become enlightened? *[he shows a sign]* HUH!

TENT: Don't make signs at us, Bwana! The Mau Mau's won! ... And Bwiti will soon be declared the official, national religion.

ARTHUR: *[laughs]* Mau Mau! What a name! The *national* religion ... MAU MAU!

TENT: *[seriously]* You live as long as you stay in here. If you go outside

they'll hack you to pieces.

ARTHUR: And tonight, you're gonna hack my knee apart in here, so what's the difference? I've travelled all over Africa and *you* want to tell *me*, a gun-runner, where I can and can't go?! ... Do you know why Menelik owes me that money? Because I supplied the guns for his revolution. I made all the deals! And now he's won. So he has to pay! You baboons have got me to thank for your freedom! ... Understand?

TENT: I'd instill a Bwiti sainthood on you Bwana, right here and now, if it wasn't for the fact that everyone knows you also supplied our enemies with guns.

ARTHUR: Yeah! So what am I? A Mau Mau patriot? I supply anyone who orders from me. I'm a merchant!

TENT: In the letter they wrote that Bwana was a poet.

ARTHUR: I've yet to thank you properly for that letter, Tent!

LENI: And if you're a poet, you could write us a tribal song. Right doctor?

TENT: [*TENT closes the window draws the curtains and moves towards the door.*] No. I'm going to cut his knee open, and the day after tomorrow we'll send him to Aden. From there they'll ship him back to France.

ARTHUR: You're not sending me anywhere! I'm staying right here and waiting for my money. In the meantime I'll recover.

TENT: Hardly. [*he turns to leave*]

ARTHUR: What?

TENT: [*he turns back to ARTHUR*] You won't recover.

[*TENT leaves.*]

ARTHUR: What does he mean? Why won't I recover? ... I got a chill in my joints, that's all. I was lying in a muddy ditch for two days before they found me. [*yelling towards the door, after TENT*] I'll decide whether or not I'm going to recover! ... [*LENI goes to ARTHUR'S bed to change the bandages on his knee. ARTHUR speaks to her in a softer tone.*] Leni! Listen to me. Take this letter to Menelik. It's very important.

LENI: What will you give me for it?

ARTHUR: [*taken aback by her cheek*] How do you want it, in kind or cash?

LENI: [*with more cheek*] Cash!

ARTHUR: Four thalers.

LENI: All right, I'll take it. But only out of love.

ARTHUR: What love?

LENI: The love we share.

ARTHUR: Oh, right! Turn around.

[LENI sighs as she turns away. ARTHUR reaches into his nightshirt, takes out a small leather pouch hanging around his neck, takes four coins from it and returns the pouch to its original place.]

ARTHUR: You can turn back now. *[giving her the money and the letter]* Here you are.

[LENI takes them, goes to the door and opens it to make way for the bed during the following.]

LENI: First I have to move you out to the treatment room. Your leg has to soak in solution for four hours before Doctor Tent can cut into it ... and in the meantime, I'll take your letter for you.

[LENI returns to the bed and raises ARTHUR'S waist in an effort to adjust his sheets.]

LENI: DON'T TELL ME YOU DID IT IN BED AGAIN?!

ARTHUR: I yelled my lungs out but you were all too busy with your stupid revolution! I tried making it out, but I couldn't!

LENI: It wasn't the revolution! I was bathing the patient with the plague! *[sighs]* It doesn't matter. I'll change your mattress outside. *[She reaches down for his bag but he snatches it from her, hugging it like a child. She strokes his head and pushes his bed out.]*

ARTHUR: Stupid little whore. *[yelling]* And I want some rice-wine! Understand? ... I want rice-wine tonight!

[For a few moments the scene is empty. The sound of tribal music can be heard from outside. TENT and LENI bring in a temporary bed, something like a camping stretcher, and place it on the other side of the window. They leave. A strange figure soon appears in the bathroom doorway. He has on white canvas trousers, slippers, a nightshirt, a white safari hat and bandages covering his head. Only his nose and eyes are visible. He stands, slightly bewildered, holding his case, white shoes and white

tuxedo jacket. LENI enters with bed linen and a pillow for the new arrival. She closes the door behind her and commences to make the "bed".]

LENI: Are you the ... Frenchman?

PAUL: Yes. Is this the hospital?

LENI: [*nodding in acknowledgment*]

PAUL: [*looking around*] Is this what you refer to as a hospital?

LENI: We're only doing this for the money. Doctor Tent told you it's not ethical.

PAUL: I know, I know.

LENI: And you didn't pick a very good time to come, either. We won the revolution! Whites aren't liked around here at the moment.

PAUL: Now is the time I had to come!

LENI: [*sighing*] Fine. Did you give Doctor Tent your entry permit?

PAUL: Yes.

LENI: I still don't understand why you want to ...

PAUL: You don't need to understand a thing.

LENI: And I don't know what the Bwana will say to having someone else in the room with him ...

PAUL: Don't you worry about what Arthur says ... just leave that to me. I hope you didn't tell him I was coming!

LENI: No, you sure gave us enough money for that! And we didn't have time to either ... we won the revolution!

PAUL: Yes, so I've heard! [*he slowly crosses the room to his bed*]

LENI: I've made your bed. You received burns to your face and stomach in the fighting ... that's what we wrote on your card.

PAUL: [*patronisingly*] What luck! ... People around here know how to write!

LENI: Don't make fun, Bwana. I grew up on the streets of Marseilles and the Doctor studied at the university there ...

PAUL: [*a bitter laugh*] The streets of Marseilles, what a fine institution! [*he puts his belongings down next to his bed*] ... Where's Arthur?

LENI: His leg is soaking. Doctor Tent's going to cut his knee open tonight to see whether or not he'll live ... but we told him it wouldn't be till tomorrow because he yells so much.

PAUL: [*surprised*] He yells?

LENI: Yes, because he's a poet. At least that's what they wrote from Paris. ... He got a letter. That doesn't happen very often around here!

PAUL: And where is his bed?

LENI: It's out with him. It's the Doctor's invention ... he put wheels on the legs so we could move it around easily!

PAUL: How wonderful! They finally invented the wheel out here, too, did they?

LENI: [*ignoring his remark*] How long will you be staying?

PAUL: One day. I've wasted too much time already because of your insipid revolution. I had to stay in hiding for a week. It cost me a fortune!

LENI: I still don't understand any of this.

PAUL: [*looking at his bed, in disgust*] Do I have to lie in this?

LENI: [*making a joke*] It would look pretty silly if you spent all day standing on it!

PAUL: [*lifting the blanket*] How dreadful!

LENI: Are you a relative of his?

PAUL: In a sense ... yes.

LENI: Then you should speak with him. Tell him not to grope the nurses any more because we've become self-conscious since the revolution. If the men in our tribe find out, they'll kill him. This isn't a joke now that Menelik is Emperor.

PAUL: You mean ... he fondles the native women?

LENI: Oh yes! Bwana likes to frolic very much! ... Lie down now. I'll leave you alone. If you need anything, just yell.

[*LENI leaves. PAUL is left alone. He takes his hat off and lies down on his bed. The singing from outside becomes louder.*]

SCENE TWO

[*Almost three hours later. PAUL is asleep as LENI pushes ARTHUR in on his bed. ARTHUR is holding a piece of paper. His bag is on the bed next to him. He is surprised to see the*

stranger in his room.]

ARTHUR: Who's this?

LENI: Quietly! He's asleep.

ARTHUR: How dare you put a stranger in my room!

LENI: He's white, Bwana! ... His face and stomach were burnt in the fighting.

ARTHUR: So? What's that got to do with me? Put him somewhere else!

[PAUL wakes up and looks at ARTHUR.]

ARTHUR: *[to PAUL]* I want to be left alone!

LENI: We can't put him anywhere else because of the patient with the plague ... and besides, there's no room.

ARTHUR: Then put him out in the street ... let the revolution take care of him as well!

LENI: He's French, Bwana!

ARTHUR: *[taken aback]* French? ... Then maybe he can stay ... for a while anyway. ... What's he doing here in Seyblak?

LENI: He's a tourist.

ARTHUR: Ah! So he's into something shady, is he? No matter. If he leaves me in peace, he can stay.

PAUL: Don't worry, I won't bother you.

[PAUL'S voice catches ARTHUR'S attention.]

LENI: You hear, Bwana? He won't bother you.

[Silence.]

ARTHUR: Are you really ... French?

PAUL: Yes.

[In the meantime, LENI has pushed ARTHUR'S bed into place and now adjusts his mattress.]

LENI: And if you need to go again, yell louder next time. We don't have any more clean mattresses.

[*LENI leaves.*]

ARTHUR: Stupid little whore.

[*Silence.*]

PAUL: I fell asleep. I never thought I'd be able to sleep in such a filthy place.

ARTHUR: So you're French, are you? ... From where?

PAUL: Paris.

ARTHUR: And does it hurt that much?

PAUL: What?

ARTHUR: It looks as though you've been crying under those bandages ... they've soaked right through.

PAUL: It hurts. My face was burnt.

ARTHUR: [*waving the piece of paper in the air*] This came from there, too! Paris! ... Did you bring it?

PAUL: No.

ARTHUR: I received a letter! ... Do you know what a big deal that is around here? A letter with a stamp on it! These baboons respect the stamp of all things, no one knows why. [*with grandeur*] To receive a letter from the French Academy! Have you ever received a letter from the French Academy?

PAUL: No.

ARTHUR: Eighteen years! ... I've been rotting here in Africa all these years and now: [*reading from the letter*] "Dear poet! At last, we know of your whereabouts, and that you are not well. ... French literature!" Do you hear? The French Academy has written me a letter. That rat, Tent, gave it to me to read as an anesthetic, but it would have been better if he'd have just burnt it! [*he stares at PAUL and after a slight pause*] I don't like you. Are you a gun-runner?

PAUL: No.

ARTHUR: Of course you are. You tried to sabotage my deal with Menelik, with those cheap single-shot-breech-loaders of yours! And now you've got the gall to lie here next to me! Well, I can't get up any more but I can

still beat your head in!

[*ARTHUR waves his crutches around vehemently.*]

PAUL: Don't wave those things at me, I've never seen a gun in all my life!

ARTHUR: No, eh?

PAUL: No.

ARTHUR: Well, I have. [*he throws one of his crutches at PAUL*] Once from really close-up. A pistol! ... and the bullet as well. The bullet was inside me.

PAUL: I see you survived it.

ARTHUR: Yeah, I survived. I could have been worse off though! ... It was my best friend that shot me. ... I've traded all over Abyssinia; through fifty of these baboons' revolutions, on streets, alleys and caravan trails. I've been shot at over and over, but they never once managed to get me, not one of them! Can you explain that?

PAUL: You're a poet. Perhaps you have an explanation.

ARTHUR: [*a beat*] Poet?! Where did you get that from?

PAUL: You read it to me before, from your letter.

ARTHUR: Of course ... and you believed me? In your opinion, is this what a French poet looks like?

PAUL: No ... I don't think so.

ARTHUR: [*reading from the letter again*] Come home! Return! RETURN TO WHAT? ... The salons? The literary journals? ... Do you know why this paper stinks so much? ... Because I threw up over it outside before, that's why! It wasn't deliberate though, it just came up all by itself! That reminds me ... unless it's absolutely necessary, don't eat whatever it is they bring you as an excuse for food around here. After all this time I still can't stomach their atrocious slop. It makes me sick. It grew hairs on my innards! But you can't shave on the inside! Right?! [*laughing*] ... What's wrong? Didn't you like my joke?

PAUL: It wasn't funny.

ARTHUR: But from now on, I'm going to ask for a double helping rather than read letters like, "Dear Poet ..."

PAUL: Were you really a poet back home?

ARTHUR: Never! ... No longer at this address! Return to sender! [*he throws the*

letter away] And you? What about you? What do you do ... back HOME?

PAUL: I'm a wine merchant.

ARTHUR: Then you couldn't have known Arthur Rimbaud.

PAUL: No. I know just about every wine merchant in France but I've not come across that name before. There's a Remborid from Provence. He's famous for his Riesling.

ARTHUR: [*looking suspiciously at PAUL*] Why are you lying to me?

PAUL: The fact that we're in this room together doesn't give you the right to badger me.

ARTHUR: Then you *are* a gun-runner! But you'll regret being put in the same room as me! I talk aloud in my sleep!

PAUL: [*seriously*] So do I.

ARTHUR: I rant and rave, and knock everything about. It's because of the fever! I might even dream that I strangle you in the middle of the night! [*as he speaks, the pain in his leg becomes worse*] And these women! [*a burst of laughter*] What am I saying? These beasts in their filthy uniforms actually like me ... because I sneak into their room at night and lie on whoever I reach first! They like it if a white man snuggles up to them. But I'll tell you a secret, Frenchman ... I have them in my dreams! Some people are sleep-walkers, well ... I'm a sleep-fucker! What do you say to that? Believe it? No? Well, you'd better! ... But I never remember a thing! I only find out when they come and tell me about it the morning after. I couldn't stand licking their putrid bodies while I was awake! ... Well, *this* is the poetry around here! See? Real art! ... When you unconsciously make love to one of these sweaty black beasts in your dreams! [*as the pain becomes unbearable*] LENI! LENI!

LENI: [*rushing in*] MENELIK'S COMING! The Emperor and his entourage are on their way here!

ARTHUR: Give me some more! It hurts! It really hurts! DO YOU HEAR? My knee! The pain's unbearable! If you don't give me some right away I'll strangle this Frenchman!

LENI: [*moves over to calm a startled PAUL*] Don't worry. This happens to him every hour or so. [*to ARTHUR*] I'll bring you some right away, Bwana.

[*LENI leaves.*]

ARTHUR: *[yelling after her]* Did you take him my letter about the money? ... Did you take it to him?

[LENI returns with a coconut shell containing a concoction.]

LENI: Of course I did! That's probably why he's come. Here, drink this, Bwana.

[ARTHUR greedily drinks the concoction. LENI leaves. ARTHUR'S body suddenly cramps-up. He convulses fiercely as his eyes almost pop out.]

PAUL: *[horrificed]* ARTHUR!

ARTHUR: *[still in pain but slowly coming to his senses]* It's going ... it's going. ... These natives make incredible medicines. It doesn't hurt at all anymore. A few seconds and the pain's gone. ... Are you sure we're the more civilized, Frenchman? Not them?

PAUL: Medical science has developed a great deal in France also over the last eighteen years.

ARTHUR: We'll never catch up. They're thousands of years ahead of us. They know all there is to know already.

[ARTHUR slowly turns to PAUL, now opening his eyes fully.]

ARTHUR: What did you say before?

PAUL: I said, medical science has developed a great deal ...

ARTHUR: No. Before that.

PAUL: Before that? ... *[hesitantly]* I didn't say a thing.

[ARTHUR props himself up to get a better look at the stranger. There's commotion outside. LENI rushes in.]

LENI: My God! The Emperor! The Emperor's here!

ARTHUR: Big deal!

LENI: He's talking outside with Doctor Tent, but he'll be coming in here for sure. *[to PAUL]* Don't be afraid, Bwana. Menelik likes whites, only his people don't. He won't kill you ... at least I don't think he will.

ARTHUR: I've been waiting a long time to see this crook.

LENI: Oh, Bwana! Please watch your mouth.

[LENI leaves.]

ARTHUR: If I were you, sweetness, I'd watch after my own.

[TENT rushes in and hurriedly checks to see if things are in order for the emperor's visit. He stands aside the door.]

TENT: The emperor!

[MENELIK'S AIDE-DE-CAMP rushes in with his spear in hand and quickly searches the room for possible enemies of the emperor. When finished, he stands next to the door. EMPEROR MENELIK II enters in his finest tribal costume.]

MENELIK: There's such a foul smell in here!

ARTHUR: That's because *you* walked in, Menelik! Till now there was a pleasant French fragrance, but it's been drowned out by your putrid stench!

MENELIK: *[pointing to PAUL, he ask TENT]* Who's this?

ARTHUR: A French wine merchant.

MENELIK: *[to TENT, in disapproval]* The revolutionary tourist traffic has certainly grown here in Seyblak! *[TENT leaves, MENELIK turns and crosses the room.]*

ARTHUR: *[to PAUL]* I'd like to introduce to you, Emperor Menelik II! Yes, he's quite young. The first one died ... *[pointing to MENELIK]* He killed him! And this just keeps going on and on and on.

MENELIK: I didn't kill him, the people did. He made a pact with the whites.

ARTHUR: *[to PAUL]* Does his royal highness surprise you, Frenchman? He studied at the Sorbonne ... that's a university, not a winery. ... This great lump of a negro aristocrat is one of France's proudest prodigies!

MENELIK: I came here to see how my faithful ally is feeling! ... Bwana! We won! With your weapons. That's something to rejoice about.

ARTHUR: *[to PAUL]* He studied philosophy and law. And now he's concerned about how I'm feeling!

MENELIK: Poor Bwana. Tent tells me how ugly your knee is.

ARTHUR: *[to MENELIK]* With the bandages off, it's still not nearly as ugly as

your face, Menelik!

MENELIK: [*takes ARTHUR'S letter out*] Here's your letter. I hope you know what you can do with it. [*He drops the letter on ARTHUR'S bed.*]

ARTHUR: All I want is what's owing to me!

MENELIK: And what is that?

ARTHUR: [*turning once again to PAUL*] Do you know why, in the end, he never finished his studies at the Sorbonne? ... Because he was repeatedly caught trying to have his way with young white boys in the toilets!

MENELIK: [*firmly*] You asked me here to discuss a business matter. Well, I'm here!

ARTHUR: [*to MENELIK*] YOU OWE ME 4,000 THALERS!

MENELIK: [*with a smirk*] Really? I forgot! I've been very busy with the revolution.

ARTHUR: Revolution! All that murder still not causing you a problem then?

MENELIK: It's tough. I've a lot of enemies.

ARTHUR: [*reading from MENELIK'S letter*] I gave you 900 thalers, cash! The first shipment cost 2,704 thalers, the second 776, the third 361. And after you whinged about how bad things were going for you, I gave you an additional shipment for 1,987 thalers. You paid me 2,179. That leaves 4,148. Because you ordered in bulk, I'll waive the 148 thalers. That leaves 4,000. That's what I demand!

MENELIK: Demand? From whom?

ARTHUR: From Menelik the crook!

MENELIK: There's no such person. There is a MENELIK, THE EMPEROR! The First Lord of Abyssinia who has come to the hospital to visit his trusted ally who, if he steps out into the streets, will be strangled by the first black man he meets! They don't like whites around here any more.

ARTHUR: You won with my money!

MENELIK: The people won with their enthusiasm!

ARTHUR: With my guns!

MENELIK: With their relentless faith!

ARTHUR: [*to PAUL*] Do you see what the Emperor has hanging around his neck, Frenchman? A crucifix! Do you know what that means around here? No, of course you don't. ... They wear it because it brings them luck

while hunting. A superstition! ... A good luck charm guaranteeing luck on the hunt!

MENELIK: I don't understand your indignation.

ARTHUR: We tried to introduce civilization to them! [*to MENELIK*] If the Brits and the French hadn't have come here, you'd still be scrimmaging in the dirt sacrificing black objects to your animal gods!

MENELIK: The people say, "Christ is a French God." Isn't that enough?

ARTHUR: [*sarcastically*] Yes! But obviously not for elephant hunting!

MENELIK: [*firmly, crossing to the head of ARTHUR'S bed*] Our people have had to realize that only death and extinction await them in other lands. The buffalo and the elephant are like the white man ... huge, like Goliath ... but they cannot bring us salvation. The death of the buffalo and the elephant is nigh. The liberation will be final! [*he moves across to his AIDE-DE-CAMP.*]

ARTHUR: [*to PAUL*] See, Frenchman? David and Goliath! We gave them that! Tonight they'll make a sacrifice to Saint Anthony. You know Saint Anthony, don't you? Well, he's the God of fertility around here! And do you know why? ... Because in his dreams he made love to a woman called Beatrix from the Congo who then gave birth to nine children! ... So do you see now, Frenchman? ... Saint Anthony as a continually copulating statue!

MENELIK: That's enough!

ARTHUR: I taught the natives to plough, read and write! Then along comes a negro from the Sorbonne and incites them against one another, and *he* becomes Emperor! [*he laughs*] ... For two days, till the Brits get back!

MENELIK: [*with a confident smirk*] Tomorrow you'll swear an oath on the Bwiti.

ARTHUR: Bwiti? And what happened to the Saktism movement?

MENELIK: It's obsolete! Now you have to swear an oath on the Bwiti and to Bwanga, our almighty God!

ARTHUR: [*to PAUL*] Listen here, Frenchman! Do you know why they need this "Bwiti" at the moment?

MENELIK: [*trying to put a stop to things*] You go too far, Bwana!

ARTHUR: Because the "Bwiti" gives the natives the ability not to be hurt by the white man's bullets ... so they don't die from them! See? ... That's what this fugitive from the Sorbonne tells them. And do you know who came up with all this shit? EPIKILIPIKILI! ... That's his *name* ! I beat him up

in a pub in Aden when he was only eighteen years old. Today he's their high priest!

MENELIK: You make a pretty good living from your arms deals because of these beliefs.

ARTHUR: Yeah! Ever since you stopped working you've got no coffee, hides or ivory anymore. Instead, you go to war. I've no other option!

MENELIK: [*moving across the room*] You're a wise man, Bwana, and even though I despise you, I still need you. But you know the teachings of Kitawala which are now in force: "Times have changed. We can no longer comply with the laws of the world because complying with the laws of the white man is the same as complying with Satan."

ARTHUR: Will you do away with white law then?

MENELIK: We already have.

ARTHUR: [*after a short pause*] Then send your boy over here.

[*MENELIK signals his AIDE-DE-CAMP to his side and whispers in his ear. The boy goes and stands next to ARTHUR'S bed.*]

ARTHUR: Does he speak any French, Menelik?

MENELIK: No.

ARTHUR: Who is he?

MENELIK: My aide-de-camp. The best. Young, and handy with a weapon. He has a fine future ahead of him.

ARTHUR: A nice girlish face. That must be very much to your liking.

MENELIK: Indeed ... very much to my liking.

ARTHUR: Will you give me the 4,000 thalers?

MENELIK: No. Be grateful you were permitted to help us and that you may now swear an oath on the Bwiti.

[*ARTHUR unexpectedly grabs the boy, throws him across the bed and starts to choke him with his forearm across the boy's throat. PAUL jumps up instinctively but MENELIK pushes him back onto his bed.*]

ARTHUR: [*misinterpreting PAUL'S reaction*] Stay right where you are! I've become a lot tougher here amongst them, don't you worry about that!

Well, Menelik? I'm applying the new laws. I'll break your pretty boy's neck if you don't pay up!

MENELIK: *[smiling, with his hand firmly on PAUL'S shoulder]* You can't blackmail me. I'm the Emperor!

[ARTHUR puts more pressure on the boy who is desperately trying to get away. The events become increasingly heated. PAUL is almost sick from the sight.]

ARTHUR: Yeah? Well, I'll swear an oath to lawlessness and kill him if you don't give me the money.

MENELIK: Do so, if you can!

ARTHUR: *[applying more pressure]* Well, Menelik?

MENELIK: Never! You also supplied my enemies with weapons. I can't forgive you for that. There are morals in this world you know!

ARTHUR: *[yelling frantically]* ARE YOU GOING TO PAY, OR NOT?

[MENELIK stands, smiling, not giving an inch. ARTHUR throws the gasping boy to the floor in frustration. PAUL rushes out of the room to the bathroom, retching. ARTHUR stares after him.]

MENELIK: Tent!

[TENT enters. MENELIK points to the boy.]

MENELIK: Get him out of here! ... It was an accident. Fix him up.

[TENT stands, motionless.]

MENELIK: Did you hear what I said?

[TENT shrugs his shoulders, helps the boy up and looks at ARTHUR disapprovingly.]

ARTHUR: I'm a poet. I received a letter today from the French Academy!

[TENT carries the boy out.]

MENELIK: *[moves to ARTHUR'S bed]* Do you know how many of my enemies I've had torn to pieces by my animals? One more "poet" wouldn't make

the slightest bit of difference. You can't blackmail me!

ARTHUR: So why don't you have me torn apart as well? ... Because you're afraid of what the Brits or the French might do to you, that's why. You wouldn't dare kill a white man!

MENELIK: You're going to die anyway ... Bwana! *[laughs]*

[MENELIK turns and leaves. ARTHUR turns and throws his head into his pillow. The room fills with yellow light flooding through the walls and window. Strange hallucinatory music can be heard, as if in a dream. PAUL reappears in the bathroom doorway. He says the following without emotion.]

PAUL: Dear friend. I have your letter dated "at sea." You're wrong, this time. Very wrong. First of all, not a thing positive in your letter. Your wife won't come, or will come in three months, or maybe three years, how should I know? As for shooting yourself, I know you. You'll go around waiting for your wife and for death, wandering all over the place getting in people's way. My God! Haven't you realized yet that all this anger was as phoney on one side as on the other? Do you think life would be any more fun with other people than with me? Think it over! Of course not! I'm the only one you can be free with. And since I promise to be nice in the future, since I'm sorry for my part in these misunderstandings, since my mind, frankly, is quite clear, and since I am extremely fond of you, then if you won't come back, or if you don't want me to join you, you are committing a crime *and you will be sorry for it for MANY YEARS because you will lose all your liberty, and get troubles that may be worse than any you've gone through so far.* After that, remember what you were before you met me. I promise you, if your wife comes back I won't compromise you by writing. I'll never write again. The only honest words are: come back. I want to be with you, I love you. If you listen to this, you will show courage and a sincere mind. If you don't, then I feel sorry for you. But I love you, and we will see each other again.

[The music stops and the lighting returns to normal. PAUL slowly crosses the room and sits on his bed. ARTHUR sits up, stunned, staring at PAUL in silence.]

ARTHUR: What was that?

PAUL: *[without emotion]* A letter ... you wrote to me.

[With his back to ARTHUR, PAUL slowly removes the bandages from his head.]

ARTHUR: TENT! ... TENT, FOR CHRIST'S SAKE!! ... TEEEEENT!!!

[After a short silence, TENT enters.]

ARTHUR: Who is this man?

TENT: A wine merchant from Paris.

ARTHUR: What's his name? I want to know his name! NOW!

TENT: *[goes to the door]* Leni! Give me the Frenchman's entry permit!

[They wait as LENI returns with the card.]

TENT: *[reading from the card]* Paul Verlaine. That's what he wrote *[PAUL has removed his bandages. He stands and turns, displaying his face to ARTHUR for the first time. ARTHUR looks at him in astonishment]* ... Verlaine? The reigning prince of French poetry ... *[he smiles]* Well, well, well!

ARTHUR: GET OUT! ... Out.

[TENT reluctantly leaves. Silence.]

ARTHUR: *[not looking at PAUL]* Did you bring me the Amharan Dictionary?

PAUL: *[looks at ARTHUR, somewhat bewildered]*

ARTHUR: Did you go to my mother's ... before you came?

PAUL: Yes.

ARTHUR: I wrote and asked for an Amharan Dictionary, the language of the local natives. I wanted to learn it. She must have received my letter! *[looking at PAUL]* Why didn't she send it with you?

PAUL: You almost killed a man before ...

ARTHUR: It's not the first time.

PAUL: ... here in front of me, with your bare hands.

ARTHUR: I've toughened up a lot, Paul. The air out here is very good.

PAUL: You're a murderer, Arthur!

ARTHUR: He's a black! They've shot at me a hundred times before on the caravan trails and I returned their fire every single time. And I scored a hundred

and *one* bloody times! ... Because they don't know how to fire a gun, they're happy just to hear it go "bang"! ... Me though, I'm a civilised person. I know how to AIM!

PAUL: Don't you understand what I'm talking about?

ARTHUR: No! On June 10, 1873 you shot a bullet into me. From right up close. Remember?

PAUL: No!

ARTHUR: They spent two hours removing it in Saint Jean's Hospital. I spent the whole two hours dreaming. I dreamt about you then, Paul ... and I can tell you exactly what: We were crossing the channel on a ferry and you tried to convince me not to go to London ... to jump overboard with you ... to jump in the water and swim to America. You'd help me if I couldn't make it. And I said, "Don't you remember how many places we begged for the money to buy the tickets? What will become of our tickets, Paul?" That's what I dreamt.

PAUL: [*bitterly*] I've had dreams since then, too. Lots of them!

ARTHUR: Your dreams! ... Before you shot me, you even strangled your wife!

PAUL: Arthur!

ARTHUR: All right, you were lucky, she didn't die ... Mathilde was a beautiful woman. It must have been a great delight strangling her back then! You'd been reading a lot of Shakespeare in those days. Remember?

PAUL: It was because of you that my marriage with Mathilde broke up!

ARTHUR: Poor Paul. And is it all right now?

PAUL: Yes.

ARTHUR: Are they here with you as well?

PAUL: I came alone!

ARTHUR: That's impossible! You were never capable of travelling anywhere on your own. I'll bet they'll be here tomorrow. They'll be coming after the poor prince of poetry so no harm comes to his delicate little head!

PAUL: They're not coming! Understand?! And don't you dare mention Mathilde's name again!

ARTHUR: Well, well! Peace at home once more! Don't tell me you've married her again?

PAUL: Not yet. But I'd like to.

ARTHUR: You'd like to? I thoroughly understand. Mathilde's from a fine family. She's a wonderful woman. And your son? I heard his name was Étienne. ... Bring them out here too, Paul. Seyblak will be full of Frenchmen. We'll form a "Little France" out here. ... Mathilde can take turns giving birth to our dependants!

PAUL: I told you not to mention her name again! And I wouldn't dream of bringing her out into this filth ... amongst these barbarians!

ARTHUR: Don't tell me you don't like it here? There's plenty of sunshine, the rains always fall at the right time of year and the natives are friendly. Not bad if you ask me! ... In August 1877 ... how's that? I'm still pretty good with dates, aren't I? ... In August 1877 I travelled north, up through Norway, almost as far as the North Pole. Did you know that?

PAUL: Yes, with a travelling circus.

ARTHUR: No. I only went as far as Stockholm with them. From there I went alone, on horseback and sleighs, all the way along the fjords. Then, somewhere, way up north, I sat down on the end of the earth. There was nothing there but ice, snow and rocks ... and brilliant sunshine ... but from under the water ... it was as if the light was coming from under the sea! ... I wanted to write the last French poem of all time, right then and there. But the ink in my pen froze. So I wrote it in the ice instead! It doesn't melt very often up that way. If you ever pass by there, you could have a look ... if you're interested at all in our, "Dear Poet." My guide, a friendly Eskimo, asked me what I was doing. I told him I was writing a poem. "Here? Why?" He was right! That place was pure poetry itself! It was pointless trying to add anything to it, or even trying to explain it. Those Eskimos were exceptionally friendly. My guide was especially so ... just like ... just like you were once with me ... Paul!

PAUL: You know how to make everything sound so disgusting. You were always like that.

ARTHUR: Is this why you came all the way out here? You could have told me that in a letter. You travelled six weeks on steam-trains and caravan trails just for this? What a sacrifice! ... I think I'm starting to like you again, Paul! I swear, I think I'm falling in love with you!

[Silence. ARTHUR speaks sincerely for the first time.]

ARTHUR: Why did you come here?

PAUL: The word in Paris was that you were on your death bed, that you were very ill.

ARTHUR: This isn't the first time. Why didn't you come before? ... But if you *have* come all this way to see me this time, then perhaps I really am about to croak!

[PAUL kneels next to ARTHUR'S bed. ARTHUR tries to keep as far from him as possible.]

PAUL: It's been eighteen years since we last saw each other!

ARTHUR: Surely I must be right on death's doorstep if some strange power, some almighty force has brought you all the way out here! Some holy reverence! ... In the end, I'll wind up going to confession and taking holy communion! If there is a God above, I thank you for finally bringing my Paul back to me!

PAUL: Don't poke fun, Arthur!

ARTHUR: The mercy of the Lord is never-ending! Till now, He has allowed me to hide, but He has finally taken pity on me!

PAUL: Have you got a fever? Should I call the doctor?

ARTHUR: THERE'S NO DOCTOR HERE, PAUL! ... Stand up! ... STAND UP, DO YOU HEAR?!

[PAUL doesn't understand, but stands anyway.]

ARTHUR: Sing the national anthem for me!

PAUL: I'm not going to sing for you!

ARTHUR: PLEASE! I want to make a confession while you sing! Will you do it for me? ... Please?

[PAUL can see ARTHUR is in increasing pain once again so, to keep the peace, he starts singing the French National Anthem. ARTHUR goes on.]

ARTHUR: Who do you think I was trying to get away from? ... Who do you think I was fleeing from, from Norway to South Africa? ... And why did I take on construction work in Egypt and Cyprus? Can you tell me? ... Who was the cause of me not being able to see my mother all these years? Who was it that forced me out of Paris where my consciousness began? ... And why, do you think, am I rotting here in the company of a self appointed alcoholic doctor and a few bald orangutans? CAN YOU TELL ME? ... And now you've got the gall to come here because they say I'm dying! Have you come to bury me, Paul? WHY?

[PAUL is desperately singing the national anthem. ARTHUR watches him.]

ARTHUR: LENI!

[LENI rushes in. She is stopped by the sight of PAUL singing at the top of voice. She looks to ARTHUR.]

ARTHUR: You didn't tell me this Frenchman was deranged. He's singing the national anthem for me!

[ARTHUR and LENI burst out laughing. PAUL suddenly rushes at ARTHUR who pushes him away. PAUL falls back on his own bed.]

PAUL: And me? What about me? At least you could run away! I had to stay there!

LENI: What is it now, Bwana?

ARTHUR: I have to go again, but this time I don't want to do it in bed. Is the pot out there?

[LENI nods and helps ARTHUR out of bed. ARTHUR takes one of his crutches from under the bed. LENI helps him out to the bathroom. ARTHUR goes out alone. She waits in the room for him. PAUL goes on, embittered.]

PAUL: At least you could travel. But you left me there with my friends ... who all spat on me. I roamed the streets of Paris for eighteen years and never once felt at home! Mathilde and I tried to start over again. Then Étienne was born. I was overjoyed! I had a son! And damn it, he resembled you, Arthur! He looked just like you. So I left them again. ... I couldn't bear to see your little face staring at me from the cot every night.

ARTHUR: *[from outside]* I'm done.

[ARTHUR enters on one crutch, holding the pot. LENI takes it from him and helps him back into bed.]

PAUL: After you left I started drinking. A lot! And my poems were lousy. The Academy still liked them. They kept publishing my work but it wasn't even worth as much as what this nurse is holding in that pot at the moment! I was finished! So which one of us destroyed the other?

Huh? ... You brought me here! ... Yes, you! Because I was forever looking for you. On the streets, in the pubs, everywhere! And in all the searching I burnt out inside, I became exhausted!

[LENI moves to take the pot out, but ARTHUR stops her.]

ARTHUR: Leni! Do you know who this Frenchman is?

LENI: A wine merchant.

ARTHUR: No! He's one of the giants of French poetry. Paul Verlaine!

LENI: I have to take this out now, Bwana.

ARTHUR: Wait! And who am I? Do you know? I'm one of the midgets of French poetry. But the inevitable has finally taken place. Because it is written! He came here, therefore I defeated him! David has finally pissed all over the great Goliath! Understand?

LENI: *[confused]* I grew up in Marseilles, Bwana, but I'm sorry, they never taught me poetry there. *[to PAUL]* But I'm pleased you're here, if you really are such a great poet ...

ARTHUR: The greatest, Leni! I can assure you.

LENI: Can I take this out now?

ARTHUR: *[letting her go, kindly]* Go, take it. *[LENI walks towards the door but ARTHUR stops her before she gets there.]*

ARTHUR: Be careful with it now!

[LENI looks back, shakes her head and leaves.]

(Production cut to page 28, line 11.)

PAUL: Are you deliberately trying to make a fool of me?

ARTHUR: Yes! I'm avenging the last eighteen years.

PAUL: No one told you to take on the world.

ARTHUR: Tell me, Paul. In your opinion, what should someone do when his best friend shoots him? Wait for him to do it again?

PAUL: I never bothered you after that. I left you in peace.

ARTHUR: I didn't bother you either.

PAUL: But I didn't tell you not to write! You could have at least written! At your mother's, in Cyprus, Egypt or anywhere!

ARTHUR: Written? ... Written WHAT?

PAUL: Poems!

ARTHUR: POEMS?! ... Do you know what your problem is, Paul? You've got a guilty conscience! Do you think I had some almighty, great poetic reason because of which I didn't write? ... I had to make money so I wouldn't die of hunger ... me here and my mother at home! I sold coffee, guns and slaves to stay alive! So what the hell are you going on about? ... You must feel pretty sorry for yourself. And so you should! Your reputation made it all the way out here. My mother wrote that you were virtually living in the pubs and getting into drunken brawls on the streets while they were still bestowing laurels upon your saintly poetic head! Do you know anything about hydrography?

PAUL: No.

ARTHUR: [*he reaches under his bed for his bag and scrimmages through it*] "Industrial Chemistry"? Wagner's book. Three franks seventy. I know every word of it!

PAUL: That's not what I was talking about!

ARTHUR: [*now throwing some of the books around the room*] "Instructions for the Preparation of Voyages." Interested? It's here in my case.

PAUL: No.

ARTHUR: "Treatise on Topography and Geodesics" by Colonel Salnewue. Have you read it?

PAUL: NO!

ARTHUR: Monge's immortal work, "Metal Construction".

[*During the following the pain in his knee becomes worse.*]

ARTHUR: "The Wheelwright's Manual", "The Tanner's Manual", "The Perfect Locksmith" by Berthand. "Mine Management" by J.F. Blanc. The "Glazier's Manual", "The Brick Maker", "A Handbook of All-Metal Smelting", "Candle-making", "A Guide to Weapon Manufacturing" and the ones no one ever sent, no matter how much I asked for them, "The Guide to Designing Diving Equipment", a "Manual of Telegraphy", "The Little Cabinetmaker" and "The House Painter"! Why? ... Why didn't anyone send them to me? ... LENI! IT HURTS! DO YOU HEAR ME? IT HURTS AGAIN!

PAUL: Arthur!

ARTHUR: That's the word! That's the first word I ever heard you say ...

[LENI rushes in with a coconut shell. Her hands are covered in blood. ARTHUR hungrily drinks the contents of the coconut shell and eventually relaxes somewhat.]

LENI: I gave you more this time, Bwana. You're going to need it for the operation.

ARTHUR: Why are you covered in blood?

LENI: We're operating ... and I have to get back.

ARTHUR: Go then! I'm better now. Thank you.

[LENI leaves]

(Production cut from page 26, line 31.)

ARTHUR: And all this ... because you once reached into my trousers. *[PAUL moves to speak]* Don't! Don't get hysterical! Just listen! ... The young poet ... who ever so humbly went to the great master with all his hopes and dreams! He took his poems to him! Remember? ... Remember what his hair was like? Curly, thick and abundant! And that girlish face! ... He worshipped the master! He wanted to be just like him! Not like Baudelaire. No! Baudelaire was too cold, empty and dark! ... But Verlaine! Yes! He was full of passion! ... He hung on the master's every word.

[PAUL moves to say something.]

ARTHUR: NO! DON'T! Don't lie. Don't say a word! Just listen! ... And the master didn't just acknowledge his poems! Oh, no! He didn't want to simply pave the way for the young, talented writer by helping to have his poems published in the papers. OH, NO! He didn't want to merely pass on to him and teach him the profession as was customary. Nooooo! ... He not only wanted to share his soul with the polite, girlish-faced boy ... he wanted to give him everything! ... His mind, his body, his entire being! His big bed! ... Could a child-poet have asked for anything more? ... Thank you, Paul! Looking back now, I want to thank you for those few wonderful months. When you first stroked that young boy he became so totally yours ... just as you wanted it! If my leg wasn't so sore at the moment, I'd fall to my knees and kiss your hand. But I can't. I'd scream if I had to kneel down now ... but I don't want to scream, Paul ... I want to LOVE!

PAUL: You've become a disgraceful, foul animal. A common gun-runner! They warned me, but I didn't believe them. You're common and you

smell! You weren't even good as a poet. Someday, someone, is going to thank me that you never wrote again. There wouldn't have been a need for it anyway!

ARTHUR: My poor Goliath. Has something upset you?

PAUL: If I had a gun now, I swear, I'd shoot you again!

ARTHUR: [*reaches into his bag, pulls out a pistol and offers it to PAUL*] You're in luck! I'm a gun-runner! You want to buy one?

PAUL: UNTIL NOW OUR RELATIONSHIP WAS SACRED TO ME!

ARTHUR: Sacred? Come on, Paul! Don't you think this is all getting to be a bit much? [*throws the pistol back in his bag*] The problem is, you've become a romantic in your old age. Did you seriously think that if you came here I'd look at you with my big innocent eyes and say, "Thank you, Paul! Let's start over. Take me home. I want to die at home, in your garden, amongst your roses saturated with the syrup of your poems ... amidst Mathilde and Étienne's protective glances ..." Fuck the whole lot! Understand? And you can tell the Academy that too! If I could, I'd throw you out the window to those cannibals in the arena outside so that perfume of yours, which I can smell from here, could mingle with the odour of your rotting flesh! Yes, Paul! ... You're so cleanly shaven today. And that fragrance? What is that beautiful fragrance you have on?

PAUL: I'm still a human being. I shave! [*sniffing*] And there was a time when even you liked this fragrance.

ARTHUR: Oh, don't cry, Paul. It's taboo around here. The natives never cry because it means they want to die. The others take them up high on a cliff somewhere and push them off.

[*Silence.*]

PAUL: [*quietly*] I simply wanted to see you again.

ARTHUR: You're right, Paul. Let's cry together.

[*LENI enters.*]

LENI: We have to cut your knee open in here, Bwana. We can't go into the operating room because of the patient with the plague. The French Bwana can go outside if he wants.

[*LENI takes TENT'S shabby instruments from the table drawer, drags the table next to ARTHUR'S bed, places his leg on it,*

removes the bandages and generally prepares for the "operation".]

ARTHUR: The French Bwana isn't going anywhere. He'll stay right here and watch.

PAUL: No. I'll go outside.

ARTHUR: NO! You're staying right here and you'll watch! ... if it really was sacred to you, you'll watch ... but if you were lying again, you can leave.

[PAUL hesitantly sits back on his bed. TENT enters.]

ARTHUR: Well, Tent? Have you had enough to drink for the operation?

TENT: Three glasses. Is he staying? *[ARTHUR looks at PAUL]*

PAUL: Yes.

TENT: Fine. But it won't be pretty. I have to cut it right open to see the tumour inside.

ARTHUR: Stop your moaning and get on with it!

[LENI and TENT prepare. MATHILDE and ÉTIENNE appear in the doorway with their cases.]

TENT: What's going on? Who are these people? ... This isn't a side show! Get out of here!

PAUL: *[stunned]* MATHILDE! I forbade you!

[MATHILDE and ÉTIENNE stand stupefied by what they see in the room.]

ARTHUR: Mathilde! You finally made it! And this! This must be your son ... Étienne!

TENT: I'm sorry, Bwana. In Marseilles we would have used an anesthetic for this, but we don't have any here.

ARTHUR: Don't worry about it, Tent. Just get on with it! ... Is this your son, Paul? How handsome! He really is a beautiful boy ... Étienne! ... That's your name isn't it? Étienne!

[TENT cuts into ARTHUR'S knee. MATHILDE shudders as she

clings to her son. ARTHUR cringes from the pain. He reaches out towards PAUL. PAUL moves towards him, slowly and uncertainly. TENT cuts further into the knee. The tribal music becomes louder as the lights fade.]

END OF ACT ONE

ACT TWO

SCENE ONE

[That evening. TENT stands at the open window. Tribal war music can be heard from outside. PAUL is sitting on his bed. Neither ARTHUR nor his bed are in the room.]

- TENT: They're about to begin the Emperor's inauguration ... again!
- PAUL: What was his leg like, Tent?
- TENT: He's only got a few days ... two weeks at the most. We'll transfer him to Aden and then home to France so he can be buried there.
- PAUL: *[to himself]* My God ... two weeks!
- TENT: Cancer! ... They call it Remi-Rumi here. ... I know it sounds silly in French ... like some card game.
- PAUL: *[sits in silence]*
- TENT: There'll be a big celebration tonight ... provided the Brits don't disrupt it again. You both have to swear an oath on the Bwiti otherwise our tribesmen will come in here and tear you to pieces.
- PAUL: Tell me something Tent, why did you come back from Marseilles?
- TENT: This is my home. ... Simple, no? ... No one liked black doctors very much in the hospital at Marseilles. They preferred us to be orderlies ... that was all right. They didn't like us there and now the French aren't very popular here in Seyblak. *[silence, in a different tone]* You have a visitor.
- PAUL: A visitor? Why didn't you tell me?
- TENT: I like to keep people waiting. It gives me a feeling of importance. I told her I was doing the rounds. ... It's your wife.
- PAUL: My wife? ... Maybe you could do the rounds a little longer then.
- TENT: I'll show her in.

[TENT draws the curtains closed and leaves. MATHILDE enters. She looks around. PAUL stands next to his bed. They

stand, looking at each other for a while.]

MATHILDE: Where is he?

PAUL: They're soaking his leg. It has to soak in some oily solution for several hours.

MATHILDE: Will he survive?

PAUL: The soaking?

MATHILDE: I'm pleased to see you're in good spirits.

PAUL: No. He's going to die.

MATHILDE: Then there's nothing preventing us from packing and going home.

[LENI enters and crosses to PAUL'S bed.]

LENI: *[to Paul]* Excuse me, Bwana.

MATHILDE: *[To LENI]* What do you want?

LENI: *[to PAUL]* I have to wash your clothes.

MATHILDE: Why on earth do you have to wash them now?

LENI: We're washing everything ... because of the patient with the plague ... in boiling water!

MATHILDE: But we're leaving tonight.

[LENI pays no attention. She takes PAUL'S jacket and shoes from next to his bed and leaves.]

MATHILDE: There's a ship leaving for Aden tonight.

PAUL: No one asked you to come after me, Mathilde. In fact, I forbade it.

MATHILDE: If we make it to Aden in time, we can be home by the 14th of July!

PAUL: I'm fine here, thank you.

MATHILDE: We travelled six weeks, Paul!

PAUL: I've already told you ...

MATHILDE: Six weeks in this heat, malaria and filth! I thought that might mean something to you.

PAUL: It does Mathilde, believe me.

MATHILDE: Six months ago you begged me to take you back again.

PAUL: And you did. Thank you.

MATHILDE: Then what's all this about now? ... What went on between the two of you here? What's he done to you?

PAUL: He was crude, rude and abusive. He accused me! ... He blames me for everything.

MATHILDE: Well then?

PAUL: Well what?

MATHILDE: Are we going?

[*Silence.*]

MATHILDE: Even Étienne has forgiven you.

PAUL: He has? You could have at least told me that before I left France!

MATHILDE: All these years I had no one besides him. I waited all this time for you to come back to me and write; to be a great poet once again.

PAUL: But Mathilde, I've *been* writing. I wrote continually on the ship on the way out here, and I was writing here too, this morning.

MATHILDE: I spoke with your publishers, Paul. They're waiting for you to return. You haven't been drinking for six months and I'll bet you've got a bottle of that rotten absinthe with you again!

PAUL: No, I haven't, Mathilde. I swear! I didn't drink a drop on the entire trip.

MATHILDE: You were sober all the way?

PAUL: Yes.

MATHILDE: Then what are you doing here? Why do you want to stay?

PAUL: To say farewell.

MATHILDE: To say fare ...?

PAUL: I'll be going home with *you* Mathilde, and he won't be coming with us any more.

MATHILDE: [*ardently*] Are you sure? ... Are you sure he's going to die?

PAUL: [*nodding*] Yes. According to Tent ...

MATHILDE: Then there is a God up above!

PAUL: Even if he doesn't, he'll have no place in our new life.

MATHILDE: Do you really mean that?

PAUL: Yes.

MATHILDE: Then why aren't you packing?

PAUL: [*after a pause*] I'll pack later.

MATHILDE: And how long will this latest great resolution of yours last?

PAUL: [*simply*] A long time. Forever! ... I'm sorry I caused you so much pain.

MATHILDE: Don't blame yourself, Paul. You're a poet!

PAUL: All these years I thought there was someone, a being I was one with; someone I was searching for, who sent me messages from afar wherever he went. ... I had to travel all the way out here to find that being exists no longer! There's nothing left to tie me to this animal here!

MATHILDE: Then perhaps it really was worth it.

[*ÉTIENNE rushes in.*]

ÉTIENNE: [*to MATHILDE*] I asked you not to go out alone! They're shooting at whites! Why didn't you tell me you were coming over here?

PAUL: Your mother wanted to talk with me.

ÉTIENNE: Is that so? Did you tell him to pack?

MATHILDE: Yes. He was just about to start.

ÉTIENNE: Well it's about time! If we miss tonight's boat we won't make it home till after July 14.

PAUL: We won't miss the holiday, Étienne, I promise you.

ÉTIENNE: This is going to cost you yet! I left the university for three months to go after my non-existent father who'd gone halfway 'round the world to visit his *long lost lover!*

MATHILDE: Étienne! Please!

ÉTIENNE: I've accepted the fact that you're not normal and that you're forever chasing after your young *boyfriend* ... but I'll never forgive you for the years at school when all the kids made fun of me: "Look! He's the great poet's son! His father's the one who likes young boys!" I wish you'd

both drowned in the channel when you went to London together for your little *honeymoon!*

PAUL: [*suddenly*] None asked you to come here!

ÉTIENNE: Unfortunately sons have to respect their mothers' little idiosyncrasies. ... I tried to talk her out of it, and for weeks she did nothing but cry. You don't imagine I'd have let her come all the way out here on her own, do you? She sold her furniture so she'd have enough money for the trip ... your books, and any other junk she could find! Did you tell him that? She put herself into debt just to see them cut a perverted, neurotic poet's knee open!

PAUL: [*with a touch of feminine hysteria*] Don't you dare speak of him like that!

ÉTIENNE: [*impersonating his father's feminine tone*] I'm sick to death of your feminine outbursts! Pack your bags and be at the harbour by eight! If you don't come with us, you're going to break her heart, AGAIN! And if you do, I swear, this time I'll break yours as well!

PAUL: Don't you get hysterical with me, Étienne!

ÉTIENNE: I got it from you, it's in me! I tried everything I could to rid myself of it ... of everything that's YOU! [*suddenly, realizing*] That's it! That's what was so strange about you! ... You've shaved! You shaved off your beard to make yourself look nicer for him! Where's the white tux you had on? Did you buy it on the way out here? ... You wanted to look pretty! ... For HIM!

MATHILDE: [*taking control*] Everything's settled! You'll pack and meet us at the harbour tonight, won't you Paul?

PAUL: Yes.

MATHILDE: Come along, Étienne!

[*MATHILDE and ÉTIENNE leave. A few moments silence. PAUL goes to his bed, sits down and rests his head in his hands. Eventually LENI pushes ARTHUR'S bed in.*]

LENI: I told you, Bwana! ... No!

ARTHUR: Come on Leni! ... Just once more before I kick the bucket!

LENI: No, Bwana! It's a crime now!

ARTHUR: [*to PAUL*] Have you ever heard of anything so ridiculous? It's now a crime for a white man to sleep with a black woman here! What kind of a place is this?

LENI: *[toying with him]* Try it with the camels, Bwana ... they're still allowed!

ARTHUR: You! ... If I could get up now! ... Just don't tell me it wasn't any good with me! I gave you some real French culture, you ungrateful little wench.

LENI: That's for sure! I've become thoroughly "culturalized" now!

ARTHUR: Then will you come back tonight? ... I'm all clean now. I've been soaking in that muck for hours.

LENI: *[it's obvious she'd like to]* I don't know. I'll think about it.

ARTHUR: I'll be waiting for you, Leni. We'll break a few laws tonight then! All right? *[LENI moves towards the door to leave.]*

ARTHUR: Leni! ... *[LENI looks back at ARTHUR]* You're beautiful!
[LENI smiles and leaves. ARTHUR watches after her.]

ARTHUR: Gauguin went half way 'round the world after one of those little black arses! It sure must have been worth it!

PAUL: *[quietly]* I'm leaving, Arthur.

ARTHUR: Have you packed?

PAUL: Not yet.

ARTHUR: And I thought I was going to die with you here by my side!

PAUL: There's a ship leaving tonight. Mathilde and Étienne are waiting for me.

ARTHUR: Mathilde! Of course!

PAUL: You're not going to die, Arthur.

ARTHUR: Maybe not. Till now I really thought I was going to though. But this oil, or whatever it is, does wonders. I don't feel any pain afterwards. ... Watch this!
[ARTHUR takes one of his crutches from under the bed. He climbs out of bed and struggles to walk a few paces with it.]

ARTHUR: See?! I'm not giving in that easily!
[ARTHUR suddenly falls to the floor. PAUL jumps to help him.]

ARTHUR: No! Don't help! I'll just rest a while on the floor here. Then I'll try again.

[*Silence.*]

ARTHUR: [*quietly, seriously*] I saw the inside of my knee today when Tent cut it open ... I'm going to die here in Seyblak, Paul. The only white man, without a single friend ... [*ARTHUR struggles to get up as he makes his way back to his bed.*]
(*Production cut to page 36, line 36.*)

PAUL: Don't say that, Arthur.

ARTHUR: ... no "Academy", no "Dear poet", no flag! They'll burn my body then ... into the ocean! Just the way I'd always wanted it.

PAUL: But you came up really well after the operation. You look fine!

ARTHUR: You're an idiot, Paul! ... When do you leave?

PAUL: Tonight.

ARTHUR: Of course. The Brits have banned all shipping. That's why you have to leave at night ... to get through their cordon.

PAUL: I didn't know there was a war here till I arrived in Abyssinia.

ARTHUR: They're not going to take this from Menelik lying down. In a couple of hours the Brits'll come marching right on in again!

PAUL: Then they can help you get out of here!

ARTHUR: Sure! If for no other reason than to maintain the existing good diplomacy between the Brits and the French. Right?

PAUL: Don't you believe in anything any more?

ARTHUR: I believe in you, Paul! You're a good poet.

PAUL: Don't you believe that if you come back to France you'll be able to write once more?

ARTHUR: When I'm dead? It won't be easy! ... But write? ... Yes ... that's something I'd still like to do.

PAUL: As soon as I get back, I'll arrange for the Academy to bring you home.

ARTHUR: For my funeral?

PAUL: Will you forget this nonsense about dying!

ARTHUR: A decent funeral. Who needs one? [*almost philosophically*] A French

poet on the Abyssinian plateau! ...
(*Production cut from page 36, line 09.*)

ARTHUR: See? We could live out here together! Not like before in London and Brussels where everyone was watching us ... no one would bat an eyelid here! If two white men sit down on the edge of the desert, away from the caravan trails, and one rests his head on the other's shoulder ... that's no more spectacular here than the wind playing with a few grains of sand. [*suddenly*] Tent! ... Tent!

[*TENT enters.*]

ARTHUR: Menelik said we have to swear an oath on the Bwiti.

TENT: If he said so, then so it must be.

ARTHUR: We want to be christened, both of us. Can you find us a priest?

TENT: [*with great respect for his patient*] From this morning, Bwana, I myself am a priest! But can't it wait till tomorrow?

ARTHUR: No, it can't! He leaves tonight. Can you do it for us now, Tent?

TENT: [*goes to ARTHUR'S bed, sits next to him and hugs him*] For you, Bwana, anything! ... Can I keep them?

ARTHUR: [*hugging TENT*] Of course you can! I told you, they're yours. [*to PAUL*] I gave him all my old poems this morning. He's already read them. He's a true critic.

TENT: [*enthusiastically*] You're a great poet, Bwana!

ARTHUR: See?

PAUL: Have you lost your mind? You gave them all to *him*? Your mother and I spent years searching for them. ... You brought them out here and now you're giving them to a *native*?

ARTHUR: That's the way it was meant to be, Paul! ... What do we need for the christening, Tent?

TENT: A crucifix, holy iboga and the sacred harp.

ARTHUR: What's that?

TENT: A harp? It's a musical instrument.

ARTHUR: I know that! I mean the iboga, or whatever ...

TENT: It's a plant. We soak it in water, then you drink ... the ibogaine! It causes hallucinations; you may even meet with Bwanga, our almighty

God! ... But it only lasts a short while.

ARTHUR: Then start soaking. He has to leave soon.

[*TENT leaves.*]

PAUL: I'm going to get your work from him!

ARTHUR: Leave it! ... a few worthless pages, that's all. I read through them again this morning while you were sleeping. ... Thanks for coming, Paul.

PAUL: [*doesn't understand the sudden change of tone*] Are you making fun of me again?

ARTHUR: Will you be my brother? If we swear an oath on the Bwiti together we'll be almost like blood brothers! Just think! Wouldn't that be better than being together all the time or writing to each other continually? ... I've got all your old letters here. I kept them all. I read through them again this morning. You truly did write beautiful letters, Paul!
(*Production cut to page 38, line 29.*)

PAUL: You did too, Arthur.

ARTHUR: No! I could never express myself as well as you. The words always poured out of me, but the passion only came later ... but you, Paul ... you could express things with a passion, right from the outset! And that was the passion that fifteen year old boy sensed in your poetry.

PAUL: That was the passion Mathilde was always going on about ...

ARTHUR: That was the passion which drove me to you in Paris. Remember? ... I stood in your parlour, my overcoat drenched, Mathilde went to get a towel, and you said, "Your poems, young man! The poems you sent me ... are not good," I felt the room spinning as you continued, "They are not good ... they are brilliant!" Admit it, Paul! That was a bit of a cliché, even for you. But I suppose a poet as great as you were could have been forgiven for that.

PAUL: Your poems were so pure. I could only speak of them in clichés.

ARTHUR: Of course. Of course, Paul. I didn't mean it as criticism. I learnt so much from you while you "showed me Paris" ... and all your "friends" ...

PAUL: Is this necessary now, Arthur? ... All the memories ... or are you just playing again? I can't work you out ... the African sun has singed you with a mask I can't see through!
(*Production cut from page 38, line 07.*)

ARTHUR: And when I visited the master in the creative solitude of the

countryside, you were sitting on your bed in a pair of black trousers...

PAUL: Stop it, Arthur!

ARTHUR: You were thin and pitiful. I approached you with a bundle of poems under my arm ... and like some whore from under the Seine Bridge you looked at me with tears in your eyes and said, "I've been waiting for you."

PAUL: [*broken*] My God! I can't escape from you, not even here! But this time I'm going to! I swear, I'm going to!

ARTHUR: Don't think for a minute I want to keep you here. You're lost! ... We lost each other long ago! And you'll be going home with Mathilde soon anyway.

[*TENT returns.*]

TENT: There's a problem. I forgot we need a black animal to stroke at the christening.

ARTHUR: Oh come on, Tent! Bring in Leni!

TENT: Leni?

ARTHUR: The Bwiti doesn't call for an animal, but a black *being*!

TENT: In actual fact, Bwana, you're right!

ARTHUR: Then Leni will do fine!

[*TENT nods in agreement and leaves.*]

ARTHUR: Open the curtains, Paul!

PAUL: But the heat will be unbearable.

ARTHUR: Don't worry about it.

[*PAUL opens the curtains. The music of the natives can be heard from outside.*]

ARTHUR: That's it! That's what I wanted to hear!

PAUL: I have to go now, Arthur. I have to leave soon.

ARTHUR: Wait!

[*LENI enters with a long, black, see-through curtain draped*

over her. She is holding two coconut shells. She stops just inside the doorway. TENT enters behind her holding a crucifix.]

LENI: [a little confused] Tent said I have to be the black being.

ARTHUR: Yes, you, Leni!

[TENT moves towards the window and hangs the crucifix over it, He then goes to the table and drags it between the two beds. He signals to LENI to give him the two coconut shells. She does so.]

TENT: Get up on the table, Leni! You're the black being! You're touched with the powers of the Bwiti.

[LENI gets up on the table.]

ARTHUR: Tent! Tell them to play louder because there's a Bwiti christening in here!

[TENT goes to the window and shouts out in Amharan.]

TENT: Matua huta bafata. Tutua huta, bafata! Bafata!

[The music becomes louder. TENT passes the coconut shells to ARTHUR and PAUL who are sitting on their beds, either side of the table. TENT goes through an intensive cleansing ritual, dragging his hands over his face and down his body, finally shaking the evil spirits from his hands. He repeats the ritual with LENI'S entire body.]

TENT: [to ARTHUR and PAUL] Touch the black being with your souls and repeat the following after me: "I wish to meet with you, Lord Bwanga! I love you, Lord Bwanga! I want to unite with you and the other brothers and sisters in spirit as we await the resurrection and coming of your only son. During the eclipse, a black dog will preach the return of the dead who will bring with them a better and happier land. I drink from your blood, Lord Bwanga. I eat your flesh". Now drink the holy ibogaine as you stroke the black being.

[ARTHUR and PAUL drink from the coconut shells as LENI dances on the table.]

TENT: And now, as we wait for the ibogaine to take effect ... dance, Leni!
Dance, dance!

[PAUL reaches under his pillow for a bottle of absinthe which he put there earlier. TENT sits on the stool.]

PAUL: This is from *our* God! I brought it for the trip. ABSINTHE!

[TENT grabs the bottle and merrily gulps from it.]

ARTHUR: *[laughing]* That's it Tent! You take an oath too!

TENT: My God! Absinthe! How long it has been! *[drinks from the bottle again]*

ARTHUR: Hey! Don't drink it all! Leave some for Leni!

[PAUL takes the bottle from TENT and passes it to LENI, who is totally engrossed in the ritualistic dance of the christening. ARTHUR reaches for the bottle and drinks from it. He signals to LENI to try its contents. As he passes the bottle to her he gets out of bed and stands next to the table on one leg, hugging LENI'S thighs. She spills the absinthe on her dress as ARTHUR tries to lick it off.]

TENT: How's the dancing Leni? Can you take any more? *[moves to the window]* Hey you outside! Louder! Louder!! ... Oh! They don't speak French. They don't even know what absinthe is! ... Barbarians! ... After the absinthe, I only want to speak French!

[The ibogaine suddenly takes its effect on PAUL. His face distorts and his entire body cramps up as he collapses, face down, on his bed. LENI and ARTHUR kiss wildly as they pass the absinthe back and forth into each other's mouths. They notice PAUL lying motionless.]

ARTHUR: Tent! What's the matter with him?

TENT: How should I know? I want some more absinthe!

ARTHUR: You're the doctor!

TENT: The holy ibogaine effects everyone in different ways. Maybe this Bwana really is meeting with Bwanga now!

[They all burst out laughing. LENI loses her balance and falls]

on ARTHUR'S shoulder who can't support her on his one good leg. They both fall onto ARTHUR'S bed. ARTHUR yells in pain as LENI falls onto his bad knee. She kisses it tenderly. PAUL clammers to the table and suddenly starts to yell. Saliva flies from his mouth.]

PAUL: AND BEHOLD, YOU ARE FREE. YOU EAT ALONE, KING OF THE TABLE ... WITHOUT ANYONE TO FLATTER ... WITHOUT THOSE WHO POISON THE MINDS OF KINGS!

[Outside, the music fades, an ovation, then suddenly, silence. ARTHUR stares at PAUL as LENI lies motionless next to him. PAUL stares across the table at ARTHUR as he goes on quietly.]

PAUL: Skating along exquisitely,
Such momentum, illusive and free!
Returning ever so gracefully.

[PAUL slowly circles his bed during the poem, as if in some sort of trance, but finishes the last verse standing opposite ARTHUR once more.]

Her young, feminine appeal,
Vivacious, radiant, full of zeal,
Supple and agile like an eel.
Enchanting, vivid images,
Wondrous torment for all voyeurs,
Like lightning, yet still harmonious.
At times, becoming invisible,
Speeding towards her goal so formidable,
Itself distant and invisible.
Invisible still, merely a blur.
Who knows what became of her?
Who knows what became of her?

[ARTHUR stares at PAUL. He goes to say something as LENI moves next to him. He signals for her to leave him alone. She senses the intimacy of the situation and quietly moves over to TENT who is now slumped, asleep on the stool. ARTHUR moves closer to the table during the following. It is as if only ARTHUR and PAUL are in the room.]

ARTHUR: *[simply, quietly, to PAUL]*

A September evening, sultry, warm;
one was sixteen, the other one year less,
slim, strawberry-cheeked, blue-eyed misses
who slept together in the student dorm.
For comfort's sake, each had torn off
her amber-scented shift. The younger lass
stoops, arms stretched; her tutoress
kisses her while cupping breasts grown warm
then falls upon her knees, goes wild,
and, mouth glued to the womb of that child,
darts her tongue in the dusky, blond-gold bush.
On dainty fingers the novice, meanwhile,
ticks off promised waltzes till, blushing,
she flashes an innocent little smile.
You wrote that, too, Paul ... Remember?

*[The two men stare at each other from either side of the table.
The situation is reminiscent of the time they spent together some
two decades ago when they shared the genius of each other's
work .]*

PAUL: I was a mystic, I am so no more,
(Woman has conquered all of me again)
Though I keep the complete respect I had before
For the ideal that I could not maintain.
But woman has conquered all of me again!
I went about praying the God of childhood times
(Today it's you alone who make me kneel).
I was full of faith, of hope as yet undimmed,
Holy charity, its fire celestial.
But today it's you alone who make me kneel!
Woman, through you, becomes again THE lord,
A lord omnipotent, tyrannical,
Who cunningly pretends all to accord
To gain a purpose diabolical ...
Oh, blessed time when I was mystical!

*[ARTHUR slowly gets out of bed, standing on one leg next to the
table. He leans across it and gently touches the face of his one-
time master. He suddenly pulls PAUL closer. The two men hug
and hold each other tight. ÉTIENNE enters.]*

ÉTIENNE: What's going on in here? What on earth are you doing?!

[ARTHUR notices ÉTIENNE'S presence, shoves PAUL away

and falls back on his bed. LENI sits next to him. He buries his head in her lap.]

ARTHUR: Leave me alone! My God, you're revolting! How many times do I have to tell you I can't stand you!

ÉTIENNE: [*upset, but not merely by what he sees going on in front of him*] The streets are littered with corpses ... blacks, yet everyone's singing and dancing. ... What kind of a place is this? ... The British have arrived ... but they're not shooting yet. Well, someone still is! ... Maybe they're shooting one another, who knows! ... And the two of you are hugging on the floor! ... Why doesn't someone just come in here and finish the both of you?! ... Mother was waiting down at the harbour! She was waiting for you! [*PAUL looks at his son, smiling, with a dazed expression on his face.*] Did you hear what I said? She was waiting for you! Our boat leaves soon ... the last one today! But we'll probably miss it now because she insisted I bring her back here. I took her down into the cellar for safety. ... I have to ask what your intentions are, because she wants to know. And I'm only asking because of my responsibility to *her*! If it was up to me I'd spit on you both! ... Poets! You writhe around on the floor here in each other's filth! ... I'm studying economics! I'm going to lead a normal, responsible life and do some good for mankind! Who needs your poetry anyway, your stinking verse, your perverted ideals? What do they count for when there's a hundred and fifty corpses between here and the harbour? And apparently *we* were the ones that introduced civilization to *them*! Like Monsieur Rimbaud here, for instance! NO ONE GIVES A DAMN ABOUT YOU TWO ANY MORE!

PAUL: [*calmly*] We're needed, Étienne. We have an audience. People still want to read our poetry. People like my friend Tent, the doctor here.

[PAUL points to TENT. As he does so, TENT falls off the stool onto the floor. He remains asleep, snoring.]

ÉTIENNE: Congratulations on a fine audience.

[Noise, the sound of natives and MENELIK'S voice from outside.]

MENELIK: Where's Rimbaud?

[ARTHUR pulls his pillow over his head as if he were asleep under it. MENELIK rushes in. He is somewhat on edge, not nearly as cool and confident as earlier. He is sweaty and his

clothes are shabby.]

LENI: Your highness!

MENELIK: [*pointing to LENI'S black dress*] What's this?

LENI: We just had a Bwiti christening.

MENELIK: And you were the black being? ... Clever! ... It's a pity the Bwiti's no longer our first religion.

[He goes to ARTHUR'S bed and kicks it.]

MENELIK: Are you awake, Bwana?

LENI: [*Trying to calm things*] He drank the holy ibogaine.

MENELIK: I don't care, I want to speak with him. [*he notices Étienne*]

MENELIK: Who's this? A Brit?

LENI: No, he's the French Bwana's son.

MENELIK: [*to PAUL*] Your son?

PAUL: Yes.

MENELIK: Fine.

[MENELIK kicks ARTHUR'S bed once more. He throws the pillow aside, grabs ARTHUR, raises him and slaps him around.]

MENELIK: Come to your senses, gun-runner. Do you hear?

ARTHUR: [*smiling, showing only passive resistance*] What? There's no more Bwiti? What's the new religion now then?

MENELIK: I haven't got time for this. The British are here!

ARTHUR: Did you bring me the 4,000 thalers?

MENELIK: There's no money. I need guns! Lots of them!

ARTHUR: Guns? There are no guns any more! Now there's only poetry. Right, Paul?

MENELIK: I know you've got guns hidden somewhere for an enemy tribe. You'll tell me where they are! Where exactly! Where are they hidden?

ARTHUR: You owe me 4,000 thalers!

MENELIK: You'll tell me or I'll ...

ARTHUR: Not till you pay up I won't!

MENELIK: [*let's go of ARTHUR in frustration, looks around and points to ÉTIENNE*] Is he your friend's son?

ARTHUR: Yes.

MENELIK: Come here, young Bwana, I want to talk to you. ... How did you get here?

ÉTIENNE: [*worried, unsure of the situation*] I escorted my mother here. ... I study economics ... at the Sorbonne.

MENELIK: Oh? At the Sorbonne? [*smiling at ARTHUR*] I studied there too!

[MENELIK suddenly grabs ÉTIENNE, forces him to his knees and holds him there with his forearm across the boy's throat. Then to ARTHUR.]

MENELIK: Where are they? If you don't tell me I'll kill your friend's son and then rape him as well!

[PAUL jumps to his feet.]

ARTHUR: First the money!

MENELIK: THE GUNS!

ARTHUR: THE MONEY!

PAUL: [*terrified*] He's going to kill him, Arthur! ... For God's sake! We became brothers under the Bwiti!

[MENELIK applies more pressure to the boy's throat.]

ARTHUR: The Bwiti's dead and gone.

PAUL: But he's my son!

ARTHUR: Stop your moaning! [*to MENELIK*] And you give me the money! I know you brought it with you!

PAUL: ARTHUR!

ARTHUR: Shut up!

MENELIK: [*gives in as ÉTIENNE shows no more resistance*] OH, FOR CHRIST'S

SAKE!

[MENELIK throws ÉTIENNE to the floor. He takes out a large leather pouch full of money and throws it onto ARTHUR'S bed. ARTHUR greedily grabs the pouch and reaches under his bed into his case, searching for something.]

MENELIK: You're lucky he's white and that the British are here! Otherwise I would have killed him.

ARTHUR: Here it is! *[giving MENELIK a piece of paper]* There's the map. The guns were in ten wooden cases but there's no guarantee you'll still find them there.

MENELIK: We'll meet again, Bwana!

ARTHUR: A satisfied customer always returns!

[MENELIK rushes out. LENI throws a pillow at ARTHUR in disgust. PAUL and LENI go to ÉTIENNE who is slowly coming-to.]

PAUL: You would have let him kill him?

ARTHUR: He's your son, why didn't you defend him?

PAUL: For 4,000 lousy thalers? ...

ARTHUR: Now, now, Paul! 4,000 thalers is a lot of money! I could even make it home on that much!

PAUL: Don't you even *think* of trying!

ARTHUR: I'll buy us all a nice big house in the countryside. The four of us can live there together. You, Mathilde, Étienne and me!

PAUL: *[helping ÉTIENNE up, to LENI]* Where can I take him?

LENI: To my room. ... There's nothing wrong with the young Bwana, he just got a shock. He's not used to the Emperor yet. Will you bring your wife up, Bwana? It'd be better than keeping her in the cellar.

PAUL: Mathilde? Yes! I'll bring her up too. Thank you, Leni.

[PAUL helps ÉTIENNE out the door. LENI follows them. TENT remains on the floor, asleep.]

ARTHUR: *[shouting after them as the pain in his leg slowly becomes worse]* The

holy family! Huddle up together! Huddle up together and tremble all night! That's all you deserve! ... What happened to his white trousers? Give them back to him! And your hat, Mathilde! You were always so proud of your hats! You could have at least honoured me with a new head-creation! But I don't count any more, do I? ... Go and huddle together! Lord! If only I could have been born a painter ... what a pitiful picture this would made! LENI! It hurts again! Do you hear? Bring me a coconut! It hurts! Tent! Wake up! It hurts! Leni! Paul! Mathilde! Étienne! Anyone ... ! BRING ME SOMETHING! ... IT HURTS!

[ARTHUR yells in pain as the lights fade. In the darkness, the sound of military commands, soldiers marching, planes flying overhead and cannon fire. A choir of commands in some indistinguishable language; perhaps French? English? Serbian? Romanian? Russian? Japanese? It's impossible to tell! ARTHUR thrashes around on his bed as if he were having a nightmare.]

SCENE TWO

[The following morning. The sounds of the previous night change to the distinctive cries of native birds in the morning. The lights come up. ARTHUR lies on his bed in a twisted fetal position with his pillow over his head. He is alone in the room. MATHILDE enters and stops in the middle of the room. She stares at ARTHUR, asleep on his bed. She looks tired, as if she hadn't slept at all.]

MATHILDE: I couldn't sleep a wink all night from all that noise.

[ARTHUR suddenly looks out from under his pillow, surprised to see MATHILDE standing alone in his room. He slowly sits up in his bed, starring at her.]

MATHILDE: Étienne cried all night. Paul did too. I had to console both of them.
[Silence. ARTHUR just stares at her.]

MATHILDE: Arthur, I came because ...

ARTHUR: *[without emotion]* Ethnic unrest! ... That's what the papers will call it back home. And no one will give a damn! It's all too far away. Or at least that's what they think. ... Ethnic unrest! ... Who gives a damn anyway?

[Silence. MATHILDE moves towards ARTHUR'S bed and sits down next to it on the little stool.]

MATHILDE: Let him go, Arthur.

[*ARTHUR remains silent.*]

MATHILDE: I stood by him while you were away. I love him, Arthur! ... Even when I found him lying drunk in the streets ... I took him home and looked after him. Then he left me again ... but he always came back. Once every six months he'd run off to your mother's looking for your old poems.

ARTHUR: Don't worry. They're all in a safe place now ... I gave them to a collector.

MATHILDE: He turned your old room upside down. He even tore up the floorboards once. He said you were too self centred to have burnt them. He was looking for the poems you wrote about him ... about the two of you and your relationship, but he couldn't find them.

ARTHUR: It's no wonder! I burnt those.

[*Silence.*]

MATHILDE: You've changed so much, Arthur.

ARTHUR: [*After a pause, he takes the leather pouch he got from MENELIK from around his neck.*] I suppose you had to sell everything to pay for your tickets out here. [*offering her the pouch full of money*] Here. ... Here's 4,000 thalers. It'll help get you home and buy all your things back.

[*MATHILDE doesn't take the money.*]

ARTHUR: Put it away! I got it out of that mongrel, Menelik, yesterday after you left.

MATHILDE: You can't buy me with that, Arthur!

ARTHUR: I'm sick to death of all your great French self-righteousness! Take the money! I'm going to die soon anyway ... [*He throws the pouch into her lap.*] And don't go taking any more long trips like this. They're not good for you ... Why didn't you leave on the boat last night?

MATHILDE: Because the British, or whoever, came ashore. At least that's what we were told. It only took them a few hours to deal with that Menelik character.

[*ARTHUR looks at her in silence.*]

MATHILDE: Let him go. I want to take him home. He proposed to me again before he left France. I want to be his wife again.

[PAUL was about to enter from the bathroom but stopped in the doorway, holding the curtain, when he realised only ARTHUR and MATHILDE were in the room. ARTHUR notices him, but MATHILDE does not. She has her back to the door.]

MATHILDE: He belongs to me now.

ARTHUR: Will you truly love him?

MATHILDE: Of course I will.

ARTHUR: Then will you tell him everything? Even the things he doesn't know?

[PAUL steps back, just behind the curtain, on hearing the last remark.]

MATHILDE: I want him alive, Arthur!

ARTHUR: It'd be a good test of your relationship, don't you think? Does he know why I withdrew the charges while he was locked up after shooting me ... why he was set free?

MATHILDE: No! I couldn't! Never!

ARTHUR: You should tell him you came to see me that night. ... Will you tell him that?

MATHILDE: NEVER!

ARTHUR: You begged me to help the great poet ... to get him out of jail! You said you'd give anything ... remember?

MATHILDE: You're vile! *[she stands and moves away from him to the head of the bed]*

ARTHUR: Really, Mathilde, you could have found a better expression than that! Vile? Why? All I did was ask you to stay with me until morning. And did you?

MATHILDE: Yes I did ... because you blackmailed me!

ARTHUR: Oh, you didn't need too much coaxing! I noticed it the first time we met, when the little poet had tea and biscuits at your house! I could see it all in your eyes back then!

MATHILDE: I liked what you wrote, and I ... I liked you. That's all.

ARTHUR: But when Paul was asleep in jail, I didn't force you stay with me, did I?

MATHILDE: It was nearly twenty years ago, Arthur ...

ARTHUR: We read poems together that night, remember ... between kisses, like young lovers ... remember?

MATHILDE: Yes! I remember! [*she moves to the window*]

ARTHUR: And do you remember who's poems they were?

MATHILDE: They were your poems, Arthur ... yours!

ARTHUR: SO THEY WEREN'T PAUL VERLAINE'S POEMS, WERE THEY? ... Besides, that would have been in bad taste, wouldn't it?

MATHILDE: You were so much like the person I would have liked Paul to have been.

ARTHUR: [*smiling and extending his arm to her*] That was a beautiful confession, Mathilde!

MATHILDE: It's of no relevance any more. It was a long time ago. [*she smiles for the first time*] But, you know ... there are times, moments, nights in one's life which we put away on a shelf ... like ... like bottled fruit in a jar ... [*she giggles like a young girl*]

ARTHUR: And that night ... was that night one of those?

MATHILDE: Yes, I think so.

ARTHUR: [*With his arm still extended, he signals for MATHILDE to come closer. She goes to him, takes hold of both his hands and sits down on the bed, facing him. They smile warmly at one another.*] That night ... you didn't come to me because of Paul, did you? ... You came because you wanted to be with me!

MATHILDE: THAT'S NOT TRUE! [*She tries to move away but ARTHUR has a firm grip on both her hands.*]

ARTHUR: All right. You did what you had to. And I took my revenge ... revenge for the shooting and the fact that he destroyed the poet in me forever. But you! ... You *enjoyed* my revenge! Are you going to tell him that?

MATHILDE: Why do you insist on tormenting me with all this? What do you hope to achieve? He's not going to find out, Arthur! EVER!

ARTHUR: He already knows!

MATHILDE: [*stunned*] Did you tell him?

ARTHUR: No ... *We* told him!

[ARTHUR signals towards the door. MATHILDE looks down in shame as PAUL steps into the room. He is now dressed in his white tuxedo jacket, pants and white shoes. MATHILDE lets go of ARTHUR'S hands, still sitting on the bed with her back to PAUL.]

PAUL: *[as if nothing had happened]* I've been to the British headquarters. They'll take all the Europeans home, even the French. Étienne's already packing. Go and help him! The British commander said to hurry because the Arabs may invade tomorrow. They'll take you by ship. ... Go! You're the last ones. They're waiting for you.

MATHILDE: *[She suddenly stands and faces PAUL.]* And what about you?

PAUL: I'm staying!

PAUL: *[moving towards ARTHUR]* Do you want to take Mathilde from me as well? My only hope of returning?

ARTHUR: Returning? ... Returning to what?

[MATHILDE moves to the window.]

PAUL: She was with me all the way. She even came out to Brussels after us with your mother. "Come home with me," she said. "I'll cure you. This is a disease, Paul! Poets are like this. You always need some little 'thing' to keep you writing." That's what she said. And I did everything I could ... and I went through AGONY!

ARTHUR: I know what it's like! ... I'm having the same trouble with my knee at the moment.

PAUL: Go on! Make fun! She offers me a decent life and then comes all the way out here after me with my son ... *[he suddenly looks at ARTHUR, horrified]* Could Étienne possibly be your son, Arthur?

ARTHUR: This isn't a Victor Hugo novel, Paul. No! He's not my son! You just have to accept the fact that even your kind can have children. ... Sure, it might have been a little surprising at first! Right, Mathilde? ... He's not my son, is he?

PAUL: But you ... you went away with me then. You went with me!

ARTHUR: Of course I did!

PAUL: Why?

ARTHUR: Because of your money! ... While we were living together in London ...

remember the long walks we used to take ... you fled to Brussels in one of your hysterical fits! So I sold your books and clothes. That's what I lived off for while. ... Well, I had to live off something!

PAUL: I never really did have any money.

ARTHUR: And then you shot me. If you'd had any money we could have settled things in a far more civilised manner!

PAUL: Won't you ever be able to forget?

ARTHUR: You want me to forget? Fine! ... I've forgotten!

PAUL: When I shot you ... it was like ... a caress ... like making love ...

ARTHUR: Perhaps the romantics were right then! Love really can be fatal!

MATHILDE: Don't you see what he's doing to you, Paul? Come to your senses! Aren't you sick of it yet?

PAUL: The revolution is over. And according to Tent, you're definitely going to die. He's going to have you shipped home for your funeral.

ARTHUR: I would have preferred to have had a priest with me until then ... but who needs one.

PAUL: I'll be waiting for you at home, Arthur. I'll bury you and then trample on your grave. I'll kick it up and rip it to pieces. I'll get a long, pointed stake and poke holes in the ground till they cover you completely.

MATHILDE: [*Takes PAUL'S case from next to his bed and moves over to him.*]
Come on Paul, lets go!

ARTHUR: Poor Paul. Such an effort. Will you still have enough strength for all that?

PAUL: I'll poke holes through your carcass, through your innards and all.
[*falling to his knees and going through the motions of the following*]
Then I'll get salt, mountains of it, and stuff all the holes full! I'm going to humiliate and degrade you after you're gone. That's why I want you to come home, that's why I'll be waiting for you, and that's ALL! ... [*he starts to cry, then, with a feminine sniffle*] To be cheated on, by the both of you ... together, at the same time!

ARTHUR: You're an hysterical little whore, Paul! If the poetry is ours, we can't be a part of humanity as well! Don't you understand? ... Take him, Mathilde. Take this barren, shaven wreck and look after him. Love him a lot.

MATHILDE: [*helping PAUL to his feet*] Thanks for everything, Arthur. The money as well.

PAUL: WHAT MONEY!

ARTHUR: Don't get yourself worked up over it ... you'll need it to publish your new book. You just keep on writing ... write lots, Paul.

[ÉTIENNE enters.]

ÉTIENNE: If you've settled everything, we can leave now. The ship's waiting for us.

ARTHUR: The Verlaine family respectably departs! ... TENT!

[TENT enters, partly covered in blood.]

ARTHUR: Help them take their bags down to the harbour. Then ask him for an autograph ... it'll be of some value yet.

[TENT remains motionless.]

ARTHUR: *[sternly]* I want someone to escort them because I can't walk!

TENT: But we're operating ...

ARTHUR: So? Leni can finish that on her own.

[Silence.]

PAUL: I'll be waiting for you in France, Arthur.

[MATHILDE, ÉTIENNE, PAUL and TENT leave. ARTHUR slumps down in his bed, exhausted. Silence. LENI enters with bloody rubber gloves on. She stands just inside the doorway. ARTHUR stares into space, not really communicating with her at all.]

LENI: Where did you send Tent, Bwana?

ARTHUR: To escort them down to the harbour. You just keep on working.

LENI: *[smiling]* But I'm finished. ... He died.

[Facing him, she unbuttons her uniform, her back to the audience.]

LENI: I said he would, right from the beginning, but Tent said a doctor from

Marseilles doesn't give up that easily ... [*her thoughts move to France*] God! In Marseilles there was even singing in the streets! ... They won't be back in a hurry.

[With her uniform unbuttoned, she lets it drop to the floor. Except for the bloody rubber gloves, she is now completely naked.]

LENI: The Bwanas have gone. The town is calm and Menelik is far away. The Arabs are coming. I can hear their drums, but they won't be here for a long time yet. ... So ... can we do it now?

ARTHUR: Haven't you got anything better to do?

LENI: No. I told you, the other patient died. There was fighting outside before, but there are no casualties. The tribes don't leave us any work nowadays. They shoot to kill. ... If someone is captured, they either escape, or they're massacred.

[Pause.]

ARTHUR: How much time have I got left?

LENI: Two days? Two weeks? Does it matter? [*pause*] Or if you want ... now. [*ARTHUR looks at her in fright, somewhat amazed at her last comment.*]

LENI: [*making her point clearer*] So ... can I lay next to you now?

ARTHUR: [*pulls his bed sheet across, making way for her*] Come on, Leni.

[LENI climbs into bed touching ARTHUR'S bad knee as she does so. He makes a sound, she realizes, and moves to lay her head on his chest. ARTHUR stops her, holding her head in his hands.]

ARTHUR: Leni, I said something before ... listen! ... "If the poetry is yours, you can't be a part of humanity as well!" ... [*almost in agony*] Do you understand that, Leni? ... Do you?

[He lets out a cry of pain as his head falls back onto his pillow. LENI tenderly strokes his face and rests her head on his chest as she holds him. The lights fade as the music becomes louder.]

THE END

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