

1000 MILES

by

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Based on the book "Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom"
by William and Ellen Craft
(published 1860; in the public domain)

CHARACTERS (2M, 2W)

Main:

Ellen Craft, an African-American woman in her 20s. Also a slave but is light skinned because she's the illegitimate daughter of her master and her mother, a slave. Ellen escapes slavery for she and William but also so their unborn children will not be slaves.

William Craft, an African-American man in his 20s. A slave who is seeking his freedom.

Supporting:

All played by two actors, ages 20s to 50s. These characters are Caucasian:

Mistress of the House -- Ellen's first owner
Cabinet Maker -- William's employer
Ticket Seller -- their first obstacle
Mr. Cray -- a visitor to the house where they are enslaved
Captain -- of the steamer they are first on
Slave Dealer -- a rough man who tries to buy William
Southern Military Officer -- who has suggestions
Landlord -- of a hotel in Charleston. Too helpful.
Custom House Officer -- an impediment
Steamer Captain -- who helps out
Old Gentleman -- who strikes up a friendship
Old Gentleman's Daughter -- his daughter who fancies Ellen in disguise
Elderly Lady -- who mistakes William for her own
Planter -- a possible confrontation
Yankee Officer -- a friend?
Conductor -- who has advice for William
Boarding House Owner -- who discovers the truth
Mr. Ivens -- a Quaker abolitionist
Reverend Theodore Parker -- who helps them

NOTE: to facilitate the changing from one supporting character to another, props or minimal amounts of clothing should be used to suggest the change and not whole outfits.

PLACE AND TIME

The United States of America in the 1840s

SET

The set, with its multiple locations, should be simple. Maybe just chairs and a table. The rest should be imagined. The flow of the play should not be impeded.

ACT ONE

One

1840s. Clinton, Georgia. A bedroom in the Smith estate. A young ELLEN combs the hair of the MISTRESS OF THE HOUSE, in her 40s. Ellen is light-skinned, being the illegitimate daughter of her white master and a slave woman.

MISTRESS OF THE HOUSE

When I tell you to bring the meat, you bring it.

ELLEN

Yes, ma'am.

MISTRESS OF THE HOUSE

It was dinner with Judge Lamar. He's very important. You are incredibly annoying for someone who is 15 or however old you are.

ELLEN

Yes, ma'am.

MISTRESS OF THE HOUSE

His wife thought you to be my daughter. I think she had too much alcohol.

Ellen doesn't respond.

MISTRESS OF THE HOUSE

Can you imagine that? You? My daughter? Just because your skin is light. Ouch!

She turns and looks at Ellen.

MISTRESS OF THE HOUSE

That hurt.

ELLEN

I'm sorry. The brush got caught.

MISTRESS OF THE HOUSE

See it doesn't happen again. You're lucky I don't send you to the sugar house for a beating.

ELLEN

Yes, ma'am.

MISTRESS OF THE HOUSE

Keep going.

Ellen brushes.

MISTRESS OF THE HOUSE

You know what they say?

ELLEN

No.

MISTRESS OF THE HOUSE

What the talk of the town is?

ELLEN

I don't go to town.

MISTRESS OF THE HOUSE

That's right. I don't want you going to town. I don't want them to see you.

ELLEN

Who?

MISTRESS OF THE HOUSE

Those people who live in town. Bad enough they get a glimpse of you here.

ELLEN

Why not?

MISTRESS OF THE HOUSE

Because I don't.

ELLEN

Why would they care?

MISTRESS OF THE HOUSE

They care. They always care. They care that your skin is as light as the sun on the ground.

ELLEN

It's not important.

MISTRESS OF THE HOUSE

What did you say?

ELLEN

I said, it's not important. No one cares about me.

MISTRESS OF THE HOUSE

They care. They care more about a slave than they do the white family who owns you. Only one thing worse than slaves. Gossipers. They have the mouths of the devil himself and are just as hurtful. I have my own children.

ELLEN

They are wonderful children.

MISTRESS OF THE HOUSE

You don't have to tell me that.

ELLEN

No, ma'am.

Ellen brushes.

MISTRESS OF THE HOUSE

They thought you were white.

ELLEN

Who?

MISTRESS OF THE HOUSE

The dinner guests!

ELLEN
That was not my doing, ma'am.

MISTRESS OF THE HOUSE
Why are you so white?

ELLEN
Ma'am?

MISTRESS OF THE HOUSE
Why are you so damn white?! Why is your skin pale, why is it even close to the color of milk? Why? Why aren't you dark? Your mother is dark.

ELLEN
I don't know.

The Mistress turns away. Ellen brushes.

MISTRESS OF THE HOUSE
You know the talk, the talk is my husband is your father, that is the talk.

ELLEN
Just gossip --

MISTRESS OF THE HOUSE
That your mother, who is standing right now in my kitchen, laid down with my husband behind the corn crib and out you popped like a weasel.

The mistress suddenly turns and grabs the brush.

MISTRESS OF THE HOUSE
Why are you so white?

ELLEN
I don't know.

MISTRESS OF THE HOUSE
Why?!

ELLEN
Because God made me that way for a reason.

The mistress stares at her.

MISTRESS OF THE HOUSE

And what is that reason?

ELLEN

Only He knows and since He knows, He must've had a reason.

The mistress turns away.

MISTRESS OF THE HOUSE

I have given you away.

ELLEN

What?

MISTRESS OF THE HOUSE

You are leaving tonight.

ELLEN

But where am I going?

MISTRESS OF THE HOUSE

My daughter Eliza now owns you. You are my wedding present to her.

ELLEN

But my mother, my family --

MISTRESS OF THE HOUSE

They will stay here. You will go away. Far away where no one wonders why your skin shines like a pearl. Now I expect you to be silent.

Ellen holds back the tears.

MISTRESS OF THE HOUSE

Brush.

Ellen brushes.

Two

Macon, Georgia. The Collins' estate. Ellen, now in her 20s, enters, screaming. WILLIAM CRAFT, an African-American slave in his 20s, runs out and chases after her. She laughs and dodges him. He feints for her and misses. She laughs again. He feints and this time catches her, bringing her to the ground where they kiss.

ELLEN

We should go back.

WILLIAM

It's just getting fun.

ELLEN

People are going to wonder.

WILLIAM

They already wonder why we aren't together yet.

ELLEN

Because we're not.

WILLIAM

How long have we known each other?

ELLEN

I don't know. Several years?

WILLIAM

That sounds about right.

ELLEN

Since we were kids. When they brought me here.

WILLIAM

When I first saw you, I said she is a gift.

ELLEN
Is that what you said?

WILLIAM
Wrapped up just for me.

ELLEN
Too bad you'll never get to open me.

He laughs.

WILLIAM
I loved you from the moment you stepped into Macon.

ELLEN
William.

WILLIAM
Everyone knows.

ELLEN
How does everyone know?

WILLIAM
I told 'em. And I've been chasing after you ever since.

ELLEN
Too bad you're too slow to catch me.

WILLIAM
What's this?

ELLEN
Me feeling sorry for you.

He laughs and she smiles. He kisses
her.

ELLEN
Don't get ideas.

WILLIAM
I already have them.

ELLEN
Then forget them.

WILLIAM
Marry me.

ELLEN
What?

WILLIAM
Marry me.

ELLEN
We're slaves.

WILLIAM
So what? We can still get married and have acres of children.

Ellen grows distant. She gets up.

ELLEN
No.

WILLIAM
Ellen?

ELLEN
No, I won't, William.

WILLIAM
What's wrong?

ELLEN
I will not marry you.

WILLIAM
Why not?

ELLEN
I will not marry you.

WILLIAM
Don't you love me?

ELLEN

Yes. But I won't marry you. I won't have children with you. I won't.

WILLIAM

Why not?

ELLEN

The way we live.

WILLIAM

I know but still --

ELLEN

To have a child like this? That's not a life. That's not fair to the child. I will not give birth to a baby in this situation. I will not let them linger out a miserable existence.

WILLIAM

Hey now.

ELLEN

I will not let anyone own my child. They will not own my children. They will not do with them whatever they want. They will not make them fetch their shoes. They will not make them dig in the dirt. They will not send them to the sugar house for a flogging. They will not treat them like a broom or an insect to kill when they are bothering you.

WILLIAM

Ellen.

ELLEN

I won't have children to be sold to pay the mortgage.

WILLIAM

Then what are we going to do? Never marry? Let them deny us any pleasure? Let them take away everything from us that they can?

ELLEN

I can't do it.

WILLIAM

So it's our situation that's preventing our marriage?

ELLEN

Of course.

WILLIAM

Then we will change our situation.

Ellen laughs.

ELLEN

Just like that.

WILLIAM

I didn't say it would be easy.

ELLEN

Should we just go get our clothes and tell Mr. Collins at the house that we decided to leave so we could get married?

WILLIAM

We could.

ELLEN

I don't think he'd agree.

WILLIAM

Probably not.

She shakes her head.

WILLIAM

Ellen, I'm going to marry you and if it means changing our situation to do so, I will do it.

ELLEN

You will?

WILLIAM

Yes. Will you?