

A Tale of Dark Imagination:

BERENICE

Adapted from the story by Edgar Allen Poe

Written By

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Cast of Characters

Dr. Joan Lassiter: A Psychiatrist

Egaeus: her patient

Elsenora: Egeus' Housekeeper

Horatio Glum: A mysterious stranger

Berenice: Egeus' cousin

The setting is the library in Egeus' manor house. It also serves as an asylum.

Berenice

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(As the lights come up we see an empty chair C.L of the chair is a reading table with several books on it. UC is an arched opening with an Iron bound door. DR. LASSITER enters with EGAEUS from the UC door and leads him to the chair C then turns to address the audience once more.)

DOCTOR LASSITER

Obsession, what is it? Obsession by its very definition is a state in which someone thinks about someone or something constantly and frequently, especially in a way that is not normal, We, all of us, have obsessed about one thing or another; our job, our appearance, someone we are attracted to, but none of us, I would hope, would go to the extremes of obtaining the object of their obsession as patient number 445 who took his obsession to a gruesome new level. My name is Dr. Joan Lassiter and I bring to this tribunal patient number 445 who in my personal and professional opinion is quite mad. But it is for the tribunal to decide this matter, so I leave him to tell you his tale. Once you hear it I believe you will come to the same conclusion I already have. The patient is clinically insane. *(she exits)*

EGAEUS

My baptismal name is Egeus, that of my family I will not mention. Our line has been called a line of visionaries and in many striking particulars, in the character of the family mansion, of the frescoes in the chief salon, in the tapestries of the rooms, in the fashion of the library and finally of the very peculiar nature of the library's contents there is more than sufficient evidence to suggest that we are indeed visionaries. It was in this very library my mother died and I was born. I awakened from a long night of what seemed, but was not, non – existence, into a palace of imagination; of the wild dominions of monastic thought. There in the library the reality of the world affected me as visions and visions only until the fateful arrival of the mysterious and later I came to realize the sinister Horatio Glum. At his arrival I was ill of health and buried in gloom.

(EGAEUS rises and crosses to the table. As he crosses the lights come up. Sitting at the table EGAEUS opens a book and begins to read when there is a knock at the door)

Enter.

A Tale of Dark Imagination: Berenice

(ELSENORA the housekeeper enters. She is a frumpily dressed woman of middle age)

ELSENORA

Forgive the intrusion, Master Egeus, but there is a gentleman here asking to see you.

EGAEUS

I do not receive visitors, Elsenora, you know this. I am not feeling well and have no desire for human contact.

ELSENORA

I told him that, Sir, but he will not go away. He is most insistent that he see you at once. He said he was a friend of your father, *(blessing herself)* God rest his soul.

EGAEUS

What's his name?

ELSENORA

He says his name is Horatio Glum. *(HORATIO enters and stands UC behind ELSENORA and EGAEUS. They do not notice him).*

EGAEUS

I don't know anyone by that name, nor I'm sure, did my father. Send him away.

HORATIO

(Moving to join ELSENORA and EGAEUS) Your father knew me well enough, Egeus.

ELSENORA

(Startled she moves to HORATIO) I thought I told you to wait in the hall. Master Egeus doesn't want to see you.

EGAEUS

It's alright, Elsenora, you can go.

ELSENORA

Yes, Sir (*She exits UC*).

EGAEUS

Now, Mr. Glum, what's this all about?

HORATIO

Business.

EGAEUS

Business? What sort of business could we possibly have with each other?

HORATIO

Some unfinished business between me and your father.

EGAEUS

You say my father knew you?

HORATIO

He did, very well.

EGAEUS

It's funny; I don't remember him ever mentioning you.

HORATIO

A few years back your father made a contract with me, but he took his own life before he could pay it off.

EGAEUS

I am painfully aware of how he died. Doesn't his death nullify any contracts he might have made?

HORATIO

Not in this case it doesn't; I have come here to solicit from his estate that which is owed me, and I have the contract to prove it. (*He brings out a rolled, yellowed*

piece of parchment and hands it to EGAEUS) you'll find everything you need at the bottom of the last page.

EGAEUS

(Studies the last page of the document) "If for any reason the first party dies before proper payment can be made the responsibility of the first parties' estate is to make payment in full.

HORATIO

That's your father's signature is it not?

EGAEUS

It is.

HORATIO

He is the first party of the contract. When he died all his debts were passed on to his estate. Now as the executor of his estate, Egaeus, it falls upon you to make payment in full.

EGAEUS

I shall need time to examine this contract in full as distasteful as it no doubt is if I know my father. *(The door UC opens and EGAEUS' cousin BERENICE enters.)*

BERENICE

Egaeus, Elsenora told me you had a visitor. She said he was a friend of Uncle's.

EGAEUS

I wouldn't call him a friend, Berenice. He has brought me a contract signed by my father. It appears my father was in business with this man *(he points to HORATIO)* his name is Horatio Glum, Mr. Glum, my cousin Berenice.

HORATIO

(Bowing) How do you do?

BERENICE

A Tale of Dark Imagination: Berenice

(Apprehensive) I'm quite well, thank you. *(To EGAEUS)* I'm a little confused, Egaeus, why has he come now? Your father died over a year ago.

EGAEUS

I'm not sure, Berenice.

HORATIO

It's all there in the contract.

BERENICE

Is this true, Egaeus?

EGAEUS

I don't know I haven't had a chance to look it over yet.

BERENICE

When you do, study it carefully. I don't want to see you get hurt.

EGAEUS

I'll be careful.

BERENICE

Promise?

EGAEUS

Yes, yes.

BERENICE

Good. *(She kisses EGAEUS)* Do be careful, Cousin. Good – day, Mr. Glum *(she exits)*.

HORATIO

Your cousin is very beautiful.

EGAEUS

Yes, Mr. Glum, she is.

HORATIO

Tell me about her.

EGAEUS

There isn't much to tell. Berenice and I are only cousins by marriage. We grew up together in these drab, foreboding halls I ill of health and buried in gloom; she agile, graceful and overflowing with energy. I live within my own heart and have dedicated my body and soul to the most intense and painful meditations- she roams carelessly through life with no thought of the shadows in her path.

HORATIO

Do you love her?

EGAEUS

I did - once.

HORATIO

And now?

EGAEUS

Now I hate her, Mr. Glum. All my life I have watched her grow becoming more beautiful with every passing day. The more beautiful she became the more my own health seemed to decline or so I thought. I felt a desire for Berenice, a desire that became all consuming. I wanted her, Mr. Glum. I wanted to possess her. To have what she had. But I knew it could never be. My body was wracked with a disease I could not explain and she..... she was perfect. My desire for her turned to hate because I knew I could never have her.

HORATIO

What if she was no longer perfect, what if she was more like you, could you love her then?

EGAEUS

Perhaps, then I would no longer feel inferior to her, but Berenice *is* perfect.

HORATIO

I can help you if you want me to, but the cost will be high.

ELSENORA

(Entering) Master Egaeus.

EGAEUS

(Annoyed by the interruption) What is it, Elsenora?!

ELSENORA

I don't mean to interrupt, Sir, but Dr. Lassiter is here to see you. I asked her to wait in the parlor. Would you like me to send her in here?

EGAEUS

No, I'll go join her in the parlor shortly. Thank you, Elsenora.

ELSENORA

Very good, Sir *(she exits)*.

EGAEUS

(Returning his attention to HORATIO) What do you mean? How can you help me?

HORATIO

That is not your concern. How I do it is irrelevant. Suffice it to say I can do it. The question is, Egaeus, do you want me to?

EGAEUS

I don't know.... I want to, Mr. Glum. Long have I wanted to hold Berenice in my arms, to feel her life coursing through her body; to know the joy of having a woman's love; if you can give me that no cost would be too great

HORATIO

Very well, and as a sign of good faith on my part I will not take payment until I have made Berenice like you. *(Taking out a rolled yellowed parchment)* all I need from you is your signature. *(He hands the parchment to EGAEUS who reluctantly takes it and signs it)* excellent! *(Takes the contract and tucks it away in the folds of his coat)* now I think you better go see what the good doctor wants.

EGAEUS

I had forgotten she was here, if you'll excuse me. *(He exits)*.

(After EGAEUS exits BERENICE enters)

BERENICE

Egaeus I.....

HORATIO

Hello again, Berenice.

BERENICE

Mr. Glum? I'm sorry I was looking for Egaeus.

HORATIO

Dr. Lassiter came to see him. They're in the parlor.

BERENICE

Oh, I see. What are you still doing here if you don't mind my asking?

HORATIO

I don't mind. Egaeus and I were just finishing up some last minute business arrangements.

BERENICE

I see, well then I'll just come back later *(She turns to exit)*.

HORATIO

You don't like me much do you, Berenice?

BERENICE

(Turning back to confront HORATIO) No, Mr. Glum I don't. It's strange isn't it? We don't know each other but for some reason I have taken a great dislike to you. Why do you think that is?

HORATIO

I don't have an answer for you, Berenice.

BERENICE

Good-day, Mr. Glum (*she turns to leave*).

HORATIO

A shame you are in such a hurry to leave, Berenice, I was hoping we could talk for a bit.

BERENICE

(*Turning back to HORATIO*) What could we possibly have to talk about, Mr. Glum?

HORATIO

Egaeus.

BERENICE

What about him?

HORATIO

He's not well is he?

BERENICE

No, Mr. Glum, he's not. Since Egeus was a child he hasn't been well.

HORATIO

What is his malady?

BERENICE

Dr. Lassiter says it is a form of monomania. Egeus often muses for long, unwearied hours with his attention focused upon a single item such as a flame of a candle, a fly on the ceiling, the flames of a lamp or the embers of a fire in the fireplace. Egeus calls them visions Dr. Lassiter says there is a chemical imbalance in his brain. All I know of the disease is that whenever Egeus has a seizure he is oblivious to everything else around him. Long have I wanted to do something to help him knowing full well there is nothing I *can* do for him.

HORATIO

You love him very much don't you?

BERENICE

Yes, Mr. Glum, I do.

HORATIO

Then I can help you if you let me.

BERENICE

I don't like you, Mr. Glum, why would I want your help?

HORATIO

Because I can do what I say I can do. You love Egeus and it is obvious you would do anything for him if you thought it could help him.

BERENICE

You are right, of course, I would. But how can you help me?

HORATIO

Do you want my help?

BERENICE

If it will help, Egeus, yes.

HORATIO

Very well (*pulls out a yellowed parchment*) All you have to do is sign here.

(Reluctant at first BERENICE finally takes the parchment from HORATIO and signs it. HORATIO quickly takes the contract and makes it disappear into the folds of his coat)

HORATIO

Egeus is very lucky to have you, Berenice. Very few women would sell their soul for the man she loves.

BERENICE

(Becoming frightened) What are you talking about?

HORATIO

A Tale of Dark Imagination: Berenice

(Moving towards BERENICE) You are very lovely, Berenice. It is no wonder Egaeus loved you like he did.

BERENICE

(Trying to get away from HORATIO) what do you mean like he did? He still does.

HORATIO

Tell me something, Berenice; why have you not married? Surely there have been young men other than Egaeus who've come to seek your hand in marriage.