

Salesman
2 Pages

JOHN.

If I wore a gold sword on a white verandah,
I would shock a simple heart with my heartless candor!

ALMA. Yes, that's how it goes . . . *(The music dies out. All over town the church bells begin to ring in various tones, some urgent, some melancholy, some tender, and horns are blown and things exploded or rattled.)* There. There it is, the New Year! I hope it will be all that you want it to be! *(She says this with a sudden warm sincerity, smiling directly into his face.)* What a strange way we've spent New Year's Eve! Going to a Mary Pickford picture at the Delta Brilliant, having a long conversation in a cold square, and coming to a strange and bare little room like a hospital room where a fire wouldn't burn, in spite of our invocations! —But now —it's another year. . . . Another stretch of time to be discovered and entered and explored, and who knows what we'll find in it? Perhaps the coming true of our most improbable dreams! —I'm not ashamed of tonight! I think that you and I have been honest together, even though we failed! *(Something changes between them. He reaches above him, turns out the light bulb. Almost invisibly at first a flickering red glow comes from the fireplace. She has lowered the veil attached to her plumed hat. He turns it gently back from her face.)* What are you doing that for?

JOHN. So that I won't get your veil in my mouth when I kiss you. *(He does. Alma turns her face to the audience. The stage has darkened but a flickering red glow now falls across their figures. The fire has miraculously revived itself, a phoenix.)*

ALMA. I don't dare to believe it, but look, oh, look, look, John! *(She points at the fireplace from which the glow springs.)* Where did the fire come from?

JOHN. No one has ever been able to answer that question! *(The red glow brightens. The scene dims gradually out.)*

EPILOGUE

The Square, before the stone angel. A Fourth of July night an indefinite time later. Another soprano is singing.

A young traveling salesman approaches the bench on which Alma is seated.

Plot

ALMA. How did you like her voice?

SALESMAN. She sang all right.

ALMA. Her face was blank. She didn't seem to know what to do with her hands. And I didn't think she sang with any emotion. A singer's face and her hands and even her heart are part of her equipment and ought to be used expressively when she sings. That girl is one of my former vocal pupils—I used to teach singing here—and so I feel that I have a right to be critical. I used to sing at public occasions like this. I don't any more.

SALESMAN. Why don't you any more?

ALMA. I'm not asked any more.

SALESMAN. Why's that? *(Alma shrugs slightly and unfolds her fan. The salesman coughs a little.)*

ALMA. You're a stranger in town?

SALESMAN. I'm a traveling salesman.

ALMA. Ahhhh. A salesman who travels. You're younger than most of them are, and not so fat.

SALESMAN. I'm—uh—just starting out . . .

ALMA. Oh. —The pyrotechnical display is late in starting.

SALESMAN. What—what did you say?

ALMA. The fireworks, I said. I said they ought to be starting. —I don't suppose you're familiar with this town. This town is Glorious Hill, Mississippi, population five thousand souls and an equal number of bodies.

SALESMAN. Ha ha! An equal number of bodies, that's good, ha ha!

ALMA. Isn't it? My name is Alma. Alma is Spanish for soul. Usted habla Español, señor?

SALESMAN. Un poquito. Usted habla Español, señorita?

ALMA. También! Un poquito.

SALESMAN. Sometimes un poquito is plenty!

ALMA. Yes, indeed, and we have to be grateful for it. Sit down and I'll point out a few of our historical landmarks to you. Directly across the Square is the county courthouse: slaves were sold on the steps before the abolition of slavery in the South; now gray old men with nothing better to do sit on them all day. Over there is the Roman Catholic Church, a small unimpressive building, this being a Protestant town. And there— *(She points in another direction.)* —There is the Episcopal church. My father was rector of it before his death. It has an unusual steeple. *(Her voice is rising in volume and tempo. One or two indistinct figures pause behind*

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