

The Azure Adder



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By Charles Demuth

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The Azure Adder

To R. E. L.

The Azure Adder

By

Charles Demuth



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THE AZURE ADDER

SCENE. *Studio of Vivian. Simplicity run riot is the keynote: white against white; white walls and little furniture. The furniture is painted gray, Vivian's gray—really white.*

TIME. *The ultra-present.*

(The curtain rises. For a minute or two the stage is empty. Then enter Vivian, through the door at the back of the stage, the only door in the scene. He wears the dress of the ancient Greeks and is evidently just coming from the bath, as shown by his damp hair. In one hand he carries a few narcissi, while with the other he tries to arrange the folds of drapery, which seem to hinder his movements. He arranges one or two flowers in a jar, before the "Nike de Samothrace," whispering: "Yes, narcissi, truly like Grecian things." He drops the rest of the flowers upon the floor, removes the robe and starts to comb his hair before a small mirror. This mirror is set in the back of a large framed photograph of the "Venus de Milo"

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that hangs near the door. Vivian turns the Venus photograph to the wall and we see the small piece of looking-glass. He finally rouges his lips as a finishing touch to his toilet. Putting on a coat but retaining the sandals, he moves towards the door; on the way he picks up a hat, which he puts on carefully. As he nears the door a knock is heard and the door is opened. Vivian takes on the look of being in the higher heights of thought. Two girls are discovered in the door-way. One, Yvonne, says: "Bon jour." The second, Alice: "Hello." Both enter. Vivian passes them in the door-way without speaking and softly closes the door.)

VIVIAN (*outside*). I'm going out. (*And more softly.*) Wait, wait.

(*The girls remove their hats. Yvonne sinks on the floor, in front of the couch.*)

YVONNE. Oh, I'm so tired. I painted for two hours yesterday.

ALICE (*sitting on the couch*). How you work—and you would have painted again to-day, if I hadn't stopped for you, no doubt.

YVONNE. Well, I was thinking about it.

ALICE. Ridiculous! Do you think that Beauty can be contemplated constantly? One either be-

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comes blind or mad—you painted for two hours yesterday—ridiculous!

YVONNE. I've seen nothing of yours of late. Don't you work; don't you paint, I mean?

ALICE. I'm waiting, waiting. For days, months really, I have felt as though—how shall I put it—as though the scales were about to fall from my eyes; at moments like these, as you know, when I really see the thing, I paint. Between times, I wait, I wait.

YVONNE. Couldn't you work and wait, too?

ALICE. No, I must save all my energy for these supreme moments, when I see Beauty in its essence.

YVONNE. Then you really work less than I thought.

ALICE (*in an awed voice*). Yvonne, how can you! I work constantly. The air is my canvas, my nerves are the brushes. I work? God, how I do work! To contemplate, to wait, to dream, is not this work?

YVONNE. I suppose so—but—

ALICE. Oh, I know—you all think, except George, that I do nothing. Well, rather that, if it were true, than what one generally sees on canvas, every year, at the Academies.

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YVONNE. You think then that it is better not to paint at all and wait as you say—than to do an inferior thing?

ALICE. Undoubtedly.

YVONNE. This waiting—what effect will it have—what will it do for you or for Art?

ALICE. I wait. “To feel is better than to know.”

YVONNE. If one really feels, perhaps, but to wait and wait and wait, you know what the end will be?

ALICE. I hope to become like Beauty, myself—a living creation, a work of art—even though I do nothing ever in paint.

YVONNE. Yes, that is the end—not really, however, because to change Life directly to Art means— (*The sentence is not finished, a knock being heard at the door.*)

ALICE. Here’s Maud; she said that she would meet me here and bring George. (*She goes and opens the door. Enter George with Maud, sister of Alice.*)

GEORGE. Hello. I’ve just received a wire from Uncle Billy; he’s coming to talk over the magazine with us.

ALICE. Will he back it?

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GEORGE (*looking at Maud*). He will if I can be with him and talk to him for a day or two, I think. (*They exchange meaning glances.*)

YVONNE. A magazine—you're starting one?

ALICE. Yes, I forgot to tell you about it. Something like the "Yellow Book." It will be covered in gray, though, printed on hand-made paper with especially designed type—four numbers a year. Have you thought of a name, as yet, for our child, the magazine, George?

GEORGE. Yes, it will be called the "Azure Adder." Gray and blue will be the colors of the cover. Blue the color of the Soul and gray the coloring of the Eternal Background!

MAUD. Wonderful—wonderful!

GEORGE. It will be, I hope. (*He then addresses the three girls, who are now sitting on the couch.*) Intense, too, I want it to be. The first look at its covers must create a mood for what one is to find indoors. The same as a perfect house affects one; the stones and vines of which, on the outside, tell of the truffles which are to be served by the mad butler at dinner, inside. (*To himself: I must remember that last; it's away above their heads, of course—it's one of my best.*) Blue and gray—the two unfinished colors, when arranged

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as my design, will call up the proper mood: a mood intense but languid, caring nothing for results. I hope to make this, this caring nothing for results, the aim of our child, the "Azure Adder." To teach the public, our public even, to be satisfied with the unfinished, the artistically unfinished; the thing which has no definite start or finish, but which is beautiful, beautiful, beautiful even in the shadow of its bud; a bud which can never open because—because—a worm is its heart! (*Yvonne changes her position on the couch.*) The size, too, of the book will help in creating the mood—seven by thirteen—and the paper on which it is printed, also, will help. A paper made in Japan, under water, which lasts only three years. It then falls apart, insuring our child only a future, no past, nor any permanency, except perhaps in the minds of its readers, perhaps, perhaps. The "Azure Adder" will have double pages like the books of the Japanese, printed on one side, so that the mere reading of it will be made difficult for the uninitiated—people whom it is not meant for anyway. The first number must strike the note—the ultra-future note—so I will give to our public my dance-poem, "The Candle and the Black Water Lily." A poem have I told you, which I hope to have danced sometime. It must be danced by one person while a

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chorus of men and boys chant the words, in place of music for the dancer. How it will appeal, simply alone, in the book, I don't know, without its proper atmosphere. It almost required a new language, I felt, when I wrote it. Still, it must be the first of our first number—ultra-modern and a new art—think, a new art! And the illustrations, what a chance you will be, "Azure Adder," for the artist illustrator! A sweep of a brush, a tone, a dot is enough for our purpose; when Beauty is sitting by the side of the reader. Yes, I see a revolution in book illustration, a glorious one, an upheaval, one never-to-be-forgotten revolution, which, looked back upon from the far distant future, will have at its base, forgotten or remembered, who cares, the "Azure Adder"!

MAUD and ALICE. Ah!

(Yvonne rises, walks towards the large window at the back, a sky-light really, opens it and leans out during the following.)

ALICE. If we can only get it started—we know very little about such work.

MAUD. That makes no difference. We all paint and all great art is one in its complete state. We can surely run a magazine. If only Uncle, George's Uncle Billy, will start it financially!

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GEORGE. Oh, he will, I'm sure. (*Smiles.*)

ALICE. Whose stuff will we print in it besides our own? If we could only get something from some of the great living ones! But we can't hope for more than one or two things from them, at most, perhaps nothing, unless we prove a great success.

GEORGE. You doubt our success? You lack egotism, my dear. I have already a poem, by one of our greatest living English poets. It's written in Italian.

MAUD. Of course it's beautiful.

GEORGE. Of course, everything of his is.

ALICE. Strange that he should send you a poem written in Italian. It's beautiful, you say—I didn't know that you read Italian?

GEORGE. I don't—Palidino read it to me. I asked him what it meant, what it was about. He said that he did not understand its meaning—but the sound of it, as he was reading it, was magnificent. It is a masterpiece! Its meaning is clear to me—Palidino understands nothing which is really fine. The poem tells by its sound that the poet writes of love, the love which is perfected by death.

MAUD (*to herself*). "The Triumph of Death."

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ALICE (*softly*). George, you are wonderful; it is fine to feel as finely as you do—I mean it, really I do, George.

GEORGE. You are beautiful. (*Pause.*)

MAUD. Still, it seems that we ought to have more people to write for us. I can think of only a few, one or two, who do good stuff, really fine things—impressions.

GEORGE. Oh, that will be all right. We have enough material for our first number. The demand will create the material. We will get plenty of stuff sent in from unknowns, I think, for our future numbers.

MAUDE. If not, we can all write things for it. I know that we all do write on the quiet while posing as painters! Don't you write, Yvonne?

YVONNE (*from window*). No, I only paint.

MAUD (*with a sneer*). But—oh, well—you do read Kipling and Whitman; that's the reason you don't write, I suppose.

(*No answer from Yvonne.*)

ALICE (*angrily*). Maud!

MAUDE. Yes, that is what I mean. Art is not the glorification of the beef-steak! "Good red blood" is what you hear their admirers talking

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about principally. "Healthy" is another one of their pet words, also "men and women." They are all meat—they forget the swaying sea-weed, the waxen asphodel, the rose which is sick.

GEORGE. Yes, you are right. If they had their way, nothing would remain but the normal. And as normal beings act usually in a commonplace and unchanging manner, birth, love, death, literature, would finally lose all material for existence and both schools would either cease or write literature about literature. A fine end this would be for their good, red blood. No fear, though; there are always plenty on the other side, like us, to make the scales balance, perhaps even tip our way. Meat, the glorified beef-steak, as you call it, Maud, has had its day. It has made a good fight throughout the centuries, but it is going, going—and to us—whom it called abnormal, sick, degenerate, will soon remain the field—yes, through what it called our weakness we shall conquer!

(Maud leans forward. Alice looks hurt. Maud is about to speak when a knock is heard at the door.)

MAUD. I'll go. *(Goes and opens the door.)*
Camele! *(She embraces and kisses Camele in the door-way.)* Camele!

(They come down to Alice and George. Ca-

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mele is carrying canvases, painting materials, a kimona and a suit case.)

ALICE and GEORGE. Hello!

GEORGE. Let me take some of your things. (*Takes her suit case.*) Lord, how heavy!

CAMELE (*sinking upon the couch.*) Heavy—I have everything in it that I own. I couldn't stand it any longer—last night it reached a climax—it's all over, my married life—all over, girls! I've left Jack! Last night he struck me! (*Sobs.*)

MAUD (*to George*). The glorified beef-steak variety—how common!

GEORGE. Common, perhaps. (*To himself: One can strike a woman for lots of reasons.*)

(*Yvonne comes from the window.*)

ALICE. Poor Camele—lie down. Let me take off your hat.

YVONNE. What can we give her? Let us make some tea.

MAUD. Yes, do. You and Alice make tea. I'll sit with her a while.

(*George, Alice and Yvonne busy themselves making tea at the extreme right, leaving Camele and Maud at the extreme left, on the couch. No one speaks for a moment.*)

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MAUDE (*sitting at Camele's head strokes her hair*). Poor girl.

CAMELE. Maud?

MAUD. Yes, dear.

CAMELE. You were right; Jack is a brute.

MAUD. All men are.

CAMELE. So you have often said, but I thought that he was different.

MAUD. Brutes, beasts.

CAMELE. But we were so happy at first—the first months—

MAUD. Really happy?

CAMELE. Yes, I was happy. I painted and Jack was with me between times—yes, I was happy and calm.

MAUD. You only thought so; I knew that it couldn't last. I know you too well.

CAMELE. Yes, you were right, I suppose.

MAUD. And what now?

CAMELE. I don't know—I broke with the family when I married him, as you know—now, I don't know.

GEORGE (*from the tea table, to Alice and Yvonne*). I'll go for some lemons. (*He goes out.*)

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MAUD. What a mistake to have married, Camele!

CAMELE. No, it was not a mistake. I'm not sorry even now. (*Sits up.*)

MAUD. Camele, Camele!

CAMELE. Well, it's the truth, I'm not.

MAUD. But what will you do—where will you live?

CAMELE. I don't know yet.

MAUD (*after a pause, in a pleading voice*). Come with us for a while.

CAMELE. Maud, all right—to-night—just to-night until I have time to think.

MAUD. As long as you like—Alice is used to me protecting widows and children. (*She puts her arm around Camele.*)

CAMELE. Just for a day or two; I'll hunt for a position to-morrow.

MAUD. You had much better write to your family. They'll forgive you when they know that you have left the brute. To think of him striking you! Where did he strike you?

CAMELE. Strike me? What do you mean—where did he strike me?

MAUD. Why, you said when you came in that Jack had struck you last night.

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CAMELE. How common of you, Maud—I thought that you would understand. I didn't know that any of you took things literally—you didn't used to, when I knew you before my marriage, and I knew you all very well.

MAUD. Very well, indeed—so he didn't strike you?

CAMELE. Yes, he did.

MAUD. Eh?

CAMELE. Yes and no. You see, Jack had been away for a week. I had been painting rather hard and was very interested in an arrangement of blacks I was trying to get. Subtle—blacks against blacks. It was coming along well; I liked it in parts very much. It was finished almost, yesterday, before he came home. Then, last night, he returned. I was tired, but decided to show him the canvas, as he asked what I had been doing. We went up to the studio. "Stand there," I said, and turned the canvas toward the light. It really looked good: the tone was the best that I had ever had in any of my canvases. He looked at it, and I at him. He seemed to understand, at last, my work, I thought. He had never done so before, which I realized only after we were married, and which came to worry me more and more. "You do like

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it?" I asked. "Yes," he said—"it looks like a Sargent!"

GEORGE (*returns*). Here are the lemons.

MAUD. You did right—come with us! To live with him now would be impossible. Strike you—he did more—he tried to kill you—your soul. He wanted you to go—he knew what he was saying and how it would affect you. How you must have suffered before the final crash of last night came!

CAMELE. Yes, and no, again. I don't believe that I hate him half as much now as I did last evening.

MAUD. Camele, he has spoiled you completely. To hear you say that, after what has happened between you, horrifies me.

CAMELE. You were never married.

MAUD. Meat! Meat!

YVONNE. Come, have some tea. Come, Camele.

(Maude and Camele, arm in arm, move towards the tea table, while George, followed by Alice, comes and sits on the couch. The others sit around the table.)

GEORGE. Why do you insist on following me?

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Stay with the girls over there—hear the joys of married life.

ALICE. Joys—I am more interested in knowing why you did not come to see me, as you promised last night?

GEORGE. I didn't promise—I said "probably."

ALICE. That's your word—but you usually come. Why not last night? You knew that I wanted to see you very much.

GEORGE. I had something to do. I couldn't get away.

ALICE. Then why not have telephoned to me. Maud had opera tickets given her—I missed "Tristan," waiting for you.

GEORGE. At last we have the real cause of your bad humor, which is not on account of my non-appearance but your missing "Tristan und Isolde."

ALICE. You know, George, that that isn't true.

GEORGE. You started this argument—why cry if you are hurt?

ALICE. Cry?

GEORGE. It's the same as crying—and tears, you know how I hate them.

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ALICE. Unless they be sprinkled on withered rose leaves, yes!

GEORGE. It's always the same thing; you constantly insult my taste and brain.

ALICE. No, not your real taste and brain—they are fine and great. I only insult the veneer. I try to show you yourself,—this part I will save for you and sometime return to its owner intact.

GEORGE. Save?—how can you save something which you have never had?

ALICE. That is my affair.

MAUD (*from the tea table, her voice raised in an exciting discussion*). Bernard Shaw—

GEORGE (*to himself*). Bernard Shaw? (*To Alice.*) Well, save yourself the trouble, I will never accept that from anyone—my real self. (*Nervously.*) Alice, don't bother about me—I don't want you to, do you understand?

ALICE (*laughs*). You dare to command me? Well, let us both play the same game. Tell me—why didn't you come to see me last night—what did you do?

GEORGE. I did nothing. I wished to be alone. Solitude and silence produce great art, I believe.

ALICE. Not when one is our age!

GEORGE. Alice, I don't understand you to-day.

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For some time I've been thinking that you were changing; losing the fine sense of appreciation which you have always had for so many things in life and in art. Now, I am sure of it.

ALICE. Don't you understand? Well, as I said—solitude is for the aged.

GEORGE. Solitude and silence, two wonderful words. What they call up in my mind! Solitude for the physical and silence for the mind. It is in these states that Art flourishes in its greatest form. Art is turning back to the works of the primitive artists, early Italians principally. And it is here that it should turn—it should turn back to Art and not to Nature, which only holds it back. And we who expect to figure in this new Renaissance must live as our masters, cloistered, alone, removed from the material, within ourselves—as Angelico or as Fra Filippo Lippi. For from the cave of Silence comes the flame of creation, and we who hope to receive a spark of this flame must worship in solitude, as monks and as nuns.

ALICE (*smiling*). But have I not heard something about a rope ladder in connection with Fra Filippo Lippi?

GEORGE. Legends—inventions of the common

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mind which sometimes are chronicled by still commoner ones—and thus accepted finally as facts.

ALICE. Truths, I should say.

GEORGE (*jumping up*). I am going out!

CAMELE (*in a boisterous voice*). Schopenhauer, I prefer De Mau— (*Her voice is lost as Alice's is heard speaking to George.*)

ALICE. Don't run away, George, I want to talk with you. I think that you are beginning to understand the change in me, the new Alice, let us say—and I want to make sure of it.

GEORGE (*sitting down*). No, I do not understand the new Alice.

ALICE. You will not, would not be nearer the truth, I think.

GEORGE. No, I do not is exactly what I mean.

ALICE. I will try again to show you then, George. (*She moves closer to him. George starts to move away from her but changes his mind evidently and sits still.*)

GEORGE. I'm ready for the revelation, Alice. Make it as long as you like. It will probably be our last real talk together.

ALICE. Why?

GEORGE. Because—because we have nothing

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in common—this new Alice pose—I can't think of it as anything else but as a pose has or will come between us and break up our friendship.

ALICE. And in breaking up our friendship it will produce something much finer.

GEORGE. Finer? that is the finest thing in life—friendship.

ALICE. It is the beginning only of the finest thing in life.

GEORGE. Alice, you don't mean to say—Alice!—Lord!—you're not making— (*She blushes and turns away her eyes.*)

MAUD (*from the tea table*). They give "Parsifal" next week. (*George tries to become composed.*)

ALICE (*speaking across the stage to the group*). I know one of the "Flower Maidens." I get "comps."

(*Alice glances at George, who has failed to become composed.*)

ALICE (*after a pause*). George?

GEORGE (*weakly*). Well?

ALICE. Do you like my pose as you call it?

GEORGE (*looking at her*). Is it a pose?

ALICE (*after they look intently at each other,*

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drops her glance). Yes. (*Meaning no!—and adds more excitedly.*) Yes, yes!—I was only acting to see what you would do. (*But she takes his hand.*)

GEORGE (*noticing it but showing no objection*). Alice, what is happening to us? Here we sit hand-in-hand! It's like bad vaudeville!

ALICE (*smiles*). I don't know—what do you think?

GEORGE. Don't ask me. I don't understand. I can't think. I don't know. Perhaps we are about to have a new George!

ALICE (*in a suppressed tone*). You understand!—a new George—you shall come to-night!

GEORGE. Yes!

ALICE (*looking away but tightening her hold on George's hand*). Mine.

GEORGE. What did you say?

ALICE. Oh nothing, nothing.

GEORGE. Alice—to-night. Now, let us go over to the tea table. Maud is watching us.

ALICE. Do you want to go?

GEORGE (*rising from the couch*). No.

(*Alice rises also, and they both move towards the table, George following. He carries their cups.*)

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MAUD. Well, have you been talking magazine—“Azure Adder“?

GEORGE and ALICE. Yes.

ALICE. We were arranging details. We will have all the titles of stories and poems printed in red. Don't you think that that will be good?

MAUD. Not red, blue I should say.

GEORGE. Well, in some color, red or blue.

MAUD. Blue is the better.

YVONNE (*rising*). I must be going—is anyone coming my way?

GEORGE. We all must be going, I suppose. I must go to the station and meet Uncle Billy.

(*Yvonne crosses the stage; the door at the back is opened suddenly and Jack, husband of Camele, is seen.*)

CAMELE (*starts up from the tea table and looks frightened, saying in a whisper to George*). Hide my suit case.

JACK (*in the door-way*). Oh, I beg your pardon—is Vivian in?

ALICE. Hello, Jack—come in. Vivian is out.

JACK. I wanted to see him. He wishes to rent the studio for several months, I hear.

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ALICE. You can wait for him, we are just about to leave.

JACK (*coming down stage, sees Camele at the tea table*). Hello, Cam, what are you doing here?

YVONNE (*from the window*). What a sun-set! Come and see. (*They all, except Camele and Jack, go to the window.*)

CAMELE. Maud asked me to lend her my kimona. She wants to do some Japanese dances—I brought it to her.

JACK. I didn't know that you were friendly since we were married, Cam. I was surprised when I saw you.

CAMELE. Don't call me Cam, Jack. Try to call me Camele, here. And make the "a" long.

JACK. Does it shock them? They make me—(*seeing her canvases and paint box*). What are you doing with your canvases and paint box?

CAMELE. I was painting in the park. The canvases—the canvases—oh, I was taking them to be framed.

JACK. All those?

CAMELE. Yes, it will be cheaper having them all framed at one time—don't you think?

JACK. I hope so. We are so hard up at present.

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CAMELE. Are we? Well, they can wait—the canvases, I mean.

JACK. I must have some clothes.

CAMELE. Again?

JACK. Again? Look at these.

CAMELE (*coming close to him*). You look all right, I think. (*She puts her hands on his shoulders.*)

JACK. Are you ready to go? I'll not wait for Vivian.

CAMELE. Kiss me, Jack.

JACK. What for—what's the matter with you? You look tired and pale.

CAMELE. Nothing—kiss me. (*They kiss. Maud, looking back into the room, sees them. She turns quickly, picks up her hat, puts it on and hurries out.*)

CAMELE. Let us go.

JACK. All right.

CAMELE (*putting on her hat*). I'm going. (*The others come from the window.*)

GEORGE. Yes?

CAMELE. Yes!

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JACK. Here's your kimona.

CAMELE. That is for Maud.

ALICE. Where is she?

CAMELE. She went out—she'll be back, I guess.

CAMELE and JACK (*moving towards the door*).
Good-bye!

ALL. Good-bye!

YVONNE (*following them*). Good-bye.

ALICE and GEORGE. Good-bye.

GEORGE (*after a nervous silence*). I'll see you to-night, Alice; now I must go to meet Uncle Billy.

ALICE. Then you can't see me to-night if he is in town. You will have to arrange about the "Azure Adder."

GEORGE. The "Azure Adder"—my life's work—my magazine. How I do wish to get it started! Think what it means! A perfect magazine given to the world after years of darkness. A book perfect in printing, arrangement and in illustration—as beautiful to look at as a masterpiece of painting or sculpture. What a standard it will create when it is published! It will stand alone—nothing but what will suffer when compared to it. It will be above other publications; above them as a golden star over

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a world of night and ignorance—all will be beneath it! And I who have conceived it will be lost in its splendor. Like a bumble-bee is lost in a lily of silver. Laboring, laboring on for it to the end, through old age, perhaps from beyond the grave. What a life—yes, “Azure Adder,” I give to you my time, my energy and my talents. (*He grows more and more excited and is now speaking to himself.*) I will make of you an aesthetic standard, an artistic gauge and a religion! A new religion whose one and only Goddess will be Beauty—Beauty veiled, alone and sterile! And we who work for you will be its first priests—the priests of a new religion! You know what that means? It always has meant, and will mean in this case, I hope, martyrdom and perhaps death! Death for our gracious goddess—to whom I give my mind and my body! Yes, great and awful goddess, they are yours! (*He stands, with his arms outstretched, against the door at the back.*) Do as you will! (*In a loud ringing voice.*) They are yours forever!!

ALICE (*smiling, walks up to him*). Thank you.

GEORGE (*in the same voice*). To you, great goddess, I give my mind and—

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ALICE (*facing him, puts her arms around his neck*). George!

GEORGE (*relaxing. In a softer voice*). Great goddess—

ALICE (*drawing him closer*). Now, George!

GEORGE (*wilting. His arms slowly closing around Alice. In a whisper*). Great goddess—

Curtain.

The January issue will present "Love of One's Neighbor," by Leonid Andreyev.
