

The Voice In The Drum *A Dramatic One-Act Playlet* by George Woodruff Johnston

PERSONS IN THE PLAY

The Girl
The Man
Place—A City
Time—The Present
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(The scene is a tawdry, shabby sitting-room in an old-fashioned boarding-house. As the curtain rises a small, slim girl is vaguely seen rummaging in the table drawer. Next she abstracts a banknote from a dress coat and a crumpled wad of them from a white dress waistcoat, both thrown carelessly over a chair. Throughout all this she is hurried and frightened and works with a breathless intensity. Finally she dislodges a cane, propped against the wall, and it falls to the floor with a bang. Panic-stricken she darts hither and thither, seeking a way of escape, but there is none except through the doorway, beyond which movement is audible. In her desperation she switches off the lamp and crouches behind the table. A moment later the lights flash on and a man is visible, standing beside the doorway. He wears dress trousers, a white shirt and has a white neck-scarf loosely knotted about his neck. He holds a revolver. At the sight the girl gasps and covers on the floor. Detecting her presence the man levels his revolver at her hiding place.)



"Come out of that! Quick, or I'll fire!"

MAN—Come out of that! Quick, or I'll fire. (The girl clambers to her feet and stands behind the table, a picture of shame and terror. Stares at the girl in astonishment. Then lowers his pistol with a laugh.) Well, if it isn't a skirt! (As the man approaches her the girl, watching her chance, dodges around the table in an effort to run past him and escape through the door. Covers her with his pistol.) Halt! No monkey business! Up with your hands! (The girl lifts her hands awkwardly and only partially.) Way up! That's the stuff! Now come here where I can get a good look at you! (The girl approaches him slowly and affrightedly. As he starts to search her with his left hand, still keeping her covered with the revolver in his right, she flinches and draws back.) Keep still! Safety first, you know. Got such a thing as a gun on you?

GIRL (shriekingly)—No! Take yours away, please! It scares me!

MAN (lowers his gun, steps back a pace or two and looks her over from head to heel. His eyes are cold and cruel. There is always on his lips a faint, satirical smile. He speaks with a suave sarcasm)—Too bad! Never saw a gun before and it frightened her. Poor little thing.

GIRL (swaying from fright and exhaustion)—May I take my hands down now? They're tired.

MAN—I guess so. (He takes her chin in his hand and turns her face abruptly to the light.) I've seen you somewhere. Where?

GIRL—On the stairs, most likely. I live on the top floor.

MAN—You do? What's your name?

GIRL (sinks into a chair beside the table. Faintly)—It's Jessie—Jessie Dean.

MAN—Jessie Dean? (With a shrug of his shoulders and a smile.) Well, I suppose that'll do as well as any other name. But how did you get in here, Jessie Dean? Tell me that!

GIRL—The door was unlocked.

MAN (starts and searches his pockets hastily. Finding his door key therein he holds it up smilingly)—You're right! But look here, Jessie! What did you come here for? It's two o'clock in the morning. Rather late for a neighborly call, don't you think?

GIRL (shoots a swift, stealthy glance at the man over her shoulder. Moistening her dry lips she mutters)—I made a mistake—going up to my room in the dark. I was tired—dazed.

MAN (seated lazily on the table edge he picks up one after another such small objects as lie upon it and passes them through his hands, seeming unconsciously to weigh, measure and test them. He speaks with a sham seriousness)—Dazed? Dazed? I guess that's what was the matter with me when I got home last night—forgetting to lock my own door. But don't tell me you'd been boozing, Jessie! A nice girl like you! I wouldn't believe it! (He switches on the table lamp and tilts the shade so as to throw its light full upon the girl. He looks her over cynically.) You come from the country, don't you, Jessie?

GIRL (nods her head wearily)—Yes.

MAN—I thought so. Dazed! Just a little country June bug, bumbling and buzzing around and butting into the wrong places in the dark! You look like a June bug, Jessie—plain brown all over: brown dress, brown hat, brown—

GIRL (swings about in her chair and faces him with quivering lips and trembling hands)—Don't make fun of me! Don't!

MAN (quickly and harshly)—Then tell me the truth! You don't expect me to swallow that dope you're feeding me, do you? Come!

GIRL (distractedly)—Oh, stop tormenting me! Let me go, won't you? Please!

MAN—Not much. (He points to some odds and ends of papers which the girl in her hasty search of the table drawer had scattered on the floor.) You've been frisking my things. What were you after?

GIRL (flames out defiantly)—I wanted money! I had to have it—had to!

MAN—But why did you pick me out? Why did you come in here? That's what I want to know.

GIRL—Yours was the first door I found unlocked going upstairs. I was dazed, I tell you—desperate! I'd been down at the river. I stood on the dock, I don't know how long! I don't know how long I stood there—the black water—the stars shining in it! (She shudders and covers her face with her hands.) But I lost my nerve. I couldn't do it—couldn't!

MAN (in mock sympathy)—You? Sure not! What would be the use? Take it from me, Jessie, so long as a girl is young and pretty there's nothing in this drowning business—not a thing!

GIRL (passionately)—There's not a thing in living—not for me! I can't get work. I'm hungry! Do you know what it is to be hungry—to have something burning inside of you night and day—gnawing, gnawing, gnawing at you like a dog? Do you know what it is to have no place to go—do you—no place to go?

MAN—You said you lived upstairs.

GIRL—I lied. I couldn't pay my rent. I was put out last night. (Her arms fall hopelessly upon the table and she buries her face in them.) Oh, if I could only go back—go home! But I'm ashamed! I couldn't face them! A failure—a good-for-nothing—that's what I am! And now—a thief! Oh, what a fool I was! Oh, if I'd never come away!

MAN (a slight pause ensues. Then the man leans over the table and looks the girl straight in the eyes)—Just about at the end of your string, Jessie? Is that it?

GIRL—At the end of my string! (Then suddenly she breaks out with passionate fervor.) How lonesome I've been! How lonesome and miserable I've been—in the dark—with the lights—

MAN—The lights?

GIRL (rises from her chair and stares into vacancy, as though fascinated by the vision that confronts her)—I could see them from my window. I couldn't stay in bed with them sparkling over there—over the tops of the houses—like diamonds! Many and many a night I've sat there in the dark, looking at them—the whole sky bright—bright!

MAN (cuts in swiftly, tensely)—I get you! It's the white lights, you mean. And I know what you are thinking about, sitting there in your room—what was fretting your heart out! Why were you up under the roof, in the dark, in the cold, nalled down to some old rickety chair? That's what you were thinking about! That's what was fretting you! While other girls were right down in the lights, all dolled up, cabaret sup-

pers, fox-trotting, maybe—

GIRL—No, no! Not that! It wasn't that!

MAN—Then it was something mighty like it. (He walks deliberately around her, scrutinizing her from head to heel, appraising her, like a slave-dealer.) And you, as good a looker as any of them! Hard luck! Hard luck! (His manner changes completely. His gaze softens. His tones become hushed, soothing. His touch is gentle, reassuring, as he lays a hand on each of her shoulders and holds her off at arm's length, looking directly into her eyes.) Poor little June bug! You never had much fun, did you? Just blew in from the country and bumped your head against the city and then—nearly fell into the river! It's a mean trick the city plays on girls like you! (He draws her closer to him. She flutters, trying to pull away. But his compelling eyes never for an instant lose touch with hers, and his voice flows on, soft, cajoling.) Poor little kid! Wanted pretty clothes like other girls; wanted good times like other girls—and couldn't get 'em. But never mind, giddle! The end of the world isn't due to-night! The white lights will burn just as bright to-morrow night as they do now—brighter, maybe. Don't worry! Your chance will come.

GIRL—My chance? What do you mean?

MAN—There are plenty of dresses in the shops, lots prettier than this one ever was. There are slippers, just your size, with high heels and with silver buckles on them, and the cutest little hats, one for every day in the week.

GIRL (swiftly, with trembling hands and sparkling eyes)—You mean? What do you mean? How—when will my chance come?

MAN (earnestly, gravely)—Tell me, sister! What would you do to live easy and sleep soft? What would you do to get all you wanted to eat and drink; all the clothes you wanted to wear—the real stuff; all you wanted, mind you, and then some?

GIRL—Oh! Don't ask me!

MAN—What would you do—what wouldn't you do—to be quit of the river—to be quit of it for keeps?

GIRL (shudders and covers her face with her hands)—Tell me how! Tell me what to do!

MAN—But would you do it? Think!

GIRL—Yes! Tell me! Anything!

MAN (stretches out his right hand and holds it flat, back upward. His speech grows quicker, crisper. He closes his eyes and turns his head aside, as though to concentrate his whole attention to the sense of feeling)—Touch my hand with your fingers! (The girl, surprised, curious, hesitates a moment, then does as she has been told.) No, no! That won't do! Lighter! Just the tips! S—o! That's more like it! (He takes a piece of string from the table, ties a knot in it and holds it out to her.) Untie that knot!

GIRL (as she undoes the knot quickly and dexterously the man critically studies every movement of her hands. She is eager, anxious for praise)—There! It's untied! See! But—what's all this about? I don't understand.

MAN—Wait! (He takes from his pocket a necklace of showy pearls, fondles it daintily, and holds it up before the girl's eyes.) See that! Fasten it around my neck!

GIRL—Oh! Isn't it beautiful—beautiful! (She steps behind him and clasps it about his neck.)

MAN—Now, listen! I want you to unclasp it. If you can do it without my feeling it, without my knowing it—I'll give it to you!

GIRL (starts back, amazed)—To me? You'll give that necklace to me? Why? Why will you?

No one ever gave me anything like that. No one ever spoke to me—no one ever treated me as you do.

MAN (pats her hand lightly, closes his eyes and turns his head to one side)—Now! (The girl quickly and eagerly steps behind him and unfastens the necklace.)

MAN (good-humoredly)—Rotten, sister! Rotten! You almost jarred me off my feet! (The girl clasps and unclasps the necklace once more.)

MAN—Worse!

GIRL—I'll never be able to do it! Never!

MAN—Forget it! I caught onto your hands the minute you held them up. And I know! If anybody does, I do! Once more!

GIRL (when she has again unclasped the necklace she peeps anxiously about to ascertain if he has noticed. He has not, but stands motionless, his eyes shut, his head turned to one side, waiting. The girl thereupon tiptoes around in front of him and holds the string of pearls up before his eyes, proudly, with a gay little laugh)—There! I've done it! I always was quick with my fingers. They used to say at home—

MAN (in good-natured banter)—Don't be too cocky, girlie! You're in the kindergarten yet. You've got to learn how to unhook the goods so you can do it in the dark. You've got to learn to do it so fine that it won't even rustle a cobweb. You've got to learn to pass 'em to me with a hundred guys looking on, maybe. Oh, it's a great game, sister! Beats jumping in the river all to death. But I'll have to work on you a month before I dare put you on the job.

GIRL (she speaks thoughtfully, in a low tone)—The job? Where?

MAN—Why, the opera, Peacock Alley, cabarets—everywhere—everywhere they've got "Welcome" on the doormat and the dames doll up and go. He yawns and stretches himself lazily.) Of all the nuts in this crazy world they're the worst—the dames! They'd tie a string of millstones

around their necks if they cost as much as diamonds—and die happy trying to lug 'em about! (His manner changes abruptly. He takes the girl's hands in his.) Do you get me?

GIRL (hesitatingly)—Yes! I—got you!

MAN—And you're wise to what the job is? (The girl nods her bowed head.)

MAN (gently raises her chin so as to compel her to look at him)—And are you game?

GIRL (mutteringly)—I used to think—I used to believe—that—stealing! (A slight pause. Then she grips the man by the arms and breaks out passionately.) But I can't go back upstairs, and wait, and wait—and starve! I want my chance! Give it to me! Yes, I'm game! (The man gently takes the necklace from her hand, quietly steps behind her and clasps it about her neck. Softly, insidiously his arms steal around her. With a momentary tremor she closes her eyes and lays her head on his breast, awaiting the desired, the expected kiss. The man bends his head to give it, when, suddenly, the girl starts violently, pushes him away, and stands, her body tense, listening.)

GIRL—What's that?

MAN—What? (Jerks his revolver from his pocket. But the terror, the awe in her voice freeze him. He stands rooted to the spot. His hand, clutching the pistol, hangs poised in midair. Finally he breaks out in fretful irritation.) What do you hear? Tell me! (A slight pause ensues.) Can't you talk? What is it?

GIRL (in a tense whisper)—A drum! (Now, at last, it is audible—the beating of a bass drum—distant, dull, monotonous.)

MAN (relieved)—A drum? What of it?

GIRL (her eyes veer to the window. She is puzzled, a little frightened)—I don't know! (She starts to run toward the window. The man tries to detain her. She pulls away from his clutch.) I must know! (She reaches the window, and as she pulls the curtains aside dawn—hot and breathless—enters the room, stealing the color from it, dimming the lights and aging the face of the man.)

MAN (brutally)—Come back here! Don't you hear me?

GIRL—Oh, I see! It's the Salvation Army. They're marching—



"But I can't go back upstairs and wait and starve! I want my chance! Give it to me! Yes, I'm game!"

MAN (sulkily, bitterly)—The guys! Can you beat it? Aren't they a scream, banging on that fool drum?

GIRL (leaves the window and approaches him)—But—it isn't the drum alone! Listen!

MAN—I can't hear anything else—nothing but that infernal drum! (He stops abruptly. He breathes with painful effort. Into his eyes comes a look of terrified astonishment.) I don't know what's the matter with me! It deafens me! It's beating here—like a great heart!

GIRL (stands gazing affrightedly about her)—But there's something else—something besides the drum! I can't make out what—where! I'm frightened! It's in this room! It's in the air!

MAN (his face is contorted, his tones are harsh)—It's the drum, I tell you! It'll drive me crazy! (He strides to the window and shouts through it.) Shut up, out there!

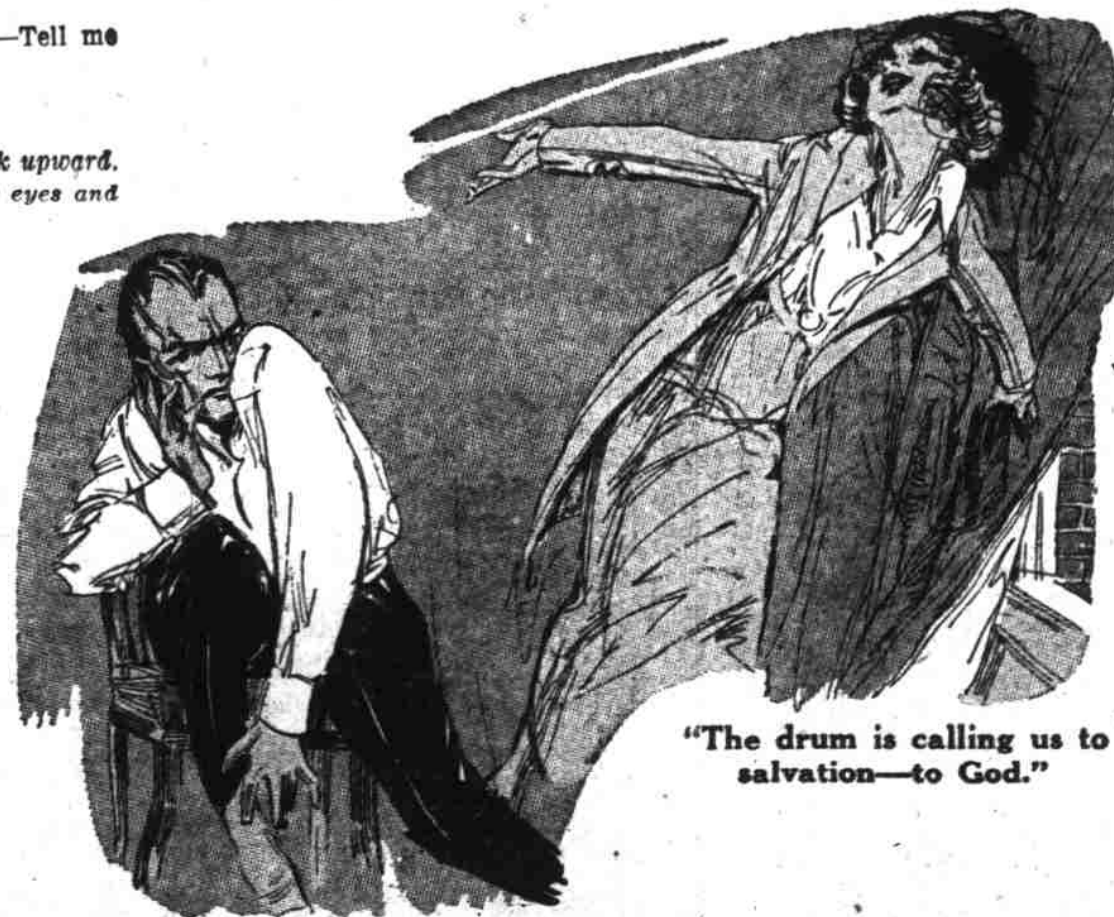
GIRL (trying to drag him back from the window)—Don't. Don't! You don't know what you're saying! Listen! Can't you hear it now? The whole air quivers with it! (She pauses. She crosses her hands on her breast and lifts her eyes reverently.) It's like the flutter of many wings. It's like the rushing of great waters. It's like the thunder in the hills.

MAN (seheels suddenly and covers as though a thunderbolt had crashed down beside him. Aghast, he creeps across the room, his head sunk between his shoulders, his hands upraised, as if to fend off some stupendous force)—I hear it! I hear it now! It's a mighty VOICE speaking in the drum! (Shuddering, he clutches at his breast.) It's got me—got me here—my heart, my soul—that nothing else could touch! The VOICE is calling! It's speaking to me! (As though palsied, he sinks into a chair. Staring unseeingly before him his next words seem to flow unconsciously from his lips in tones that are low pitched, almost chanting.) "The wages of sin is death. But if thou repent and turn from thy wicked ways, lo, thou shalt, though they be scarlet, shall be purged, and thou shalt surely live." (As these words are spoken the girl stands mute, her head bent, her face hidden in her hands.)

MAN (springs from his chair and stretches out his hands toward the window, through which is heard, faintly but continuously, the dull, monotonous beating of the drum. His whole frame is shaking, his voice is impassioned)—What! You can't mean me—not me—a dirty, low-down thief, stealing from women to squander what I steal on other women? No! I'm rotten to the marrow of my bones! (He turns and seizes the girl roughly by the shoulder.) See this girl—as weak as water—and I dragging her down, as I have done a dozen others like her! No! You can't mean me!

GIRL—You said my chance would come. It has! And yours! Listen! The drum! (She lifts the hand, hanging inert at his side, and lays it in it the money she has stolen from him and the jewels he has clasped about her neck. Then, like a shadow, she crosses the room to the doorway, draws the curtains covering it a little way apart, and, wheeling around to face him, cries excitedly.) The drum is calling us—to salvation—to God!

MAN (remains motionless, staring at the window, through which the first rays of the sun are now beaming. Through his heedless fingers the necklace and the roll of money slip unregarded to the floor. The squares his shoulders and throws back his head. His eyes flash as his voice rings out)—I come! (He turns and strides to the door, where the girl stands waiting. She draws the portieres farther apart. Together they step across the threshold, and in silence the heavy folds close behind them. As they do so the curtain falls, and for a moment or two after it has come to rest the drum continues to beat—distant, muffled, mysterious.)



"The drum is calling us to salvation—to God."