

# **AFTER BIRTH OF A NATION**

by  
David Robson

## AFTER BIRTH OF A NATION

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AFTER BIRTH OF A NATION

*For  
Ingrid and Sonja*

## AFTER BIRTH OF A NATION

*After Birth of a Nation* received its world premiere on February 10, 2017, at City Theater Company, Wilmington, Delaware (Michael Gray, Artistic Director). It was directed by Michael Gray, with scenic and lighting design by Vicki Neal and Richard A. Kendrick; costumes by Pierre's; and press photography by Joe del Tufo. The production was stage managed by Joe Trainor.

The cast was as follows:

WOODROW WILSON—Paul McElwee

COLONEL EDWARD HOUSE—Dan Tucker

MARGARET WOODROW WILSON—Dylan Geringer

DAVID WARK (D.W.) GRIFFITH—Jim Burns

CLARENCE FIELDS—Christopher Banker

REVEREND RICHARD GAMBLE—George Tietze

CORA GAMBLE—Kerry Kristine McElrone

EUGENY DEMIDOV—Jeff Hunsicker

## AFTER BIRTH OF A NATION

### **CHARACTERS**

WOODROW WILSON—*Caucasian, 50s, 28<sup>th</sup> President of the United States*

COLONEL EDWARD HOUSE—*Caucasian, 50s, Advisor to the President*

MARGARET WOODROW WILSON—*Caucasian, 20s, First Daughter and Acting First Lady*

DAVID WARK (D.W.) GRIFFITH—*Caucasian, 40s, Motion picture director*

CLARENCE FIELDS—*African American, 30s, White House servant*

REVEREND RICHARD GAMBLE—*Caucasian, 30s, Presbyterian minister*

CORA GAMBLE—*Caucasian, 30s, Wife of minister*

EUGENY DEMIDOV—*Caucasian, 50s or 60s, Russian Ambassador*

### **PLACE AND TIME**

The action takes place in the Green Room of the White House, Washington, D.C., February 18. 1915.

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### **NOTE**

The script calls for Woodrow WILSON and MARGARET Woodrow Wilson to bear a strong physical resemblance to one another. This requirement is grounded in the vivid photographic evidence of the time and can best be achieved on stage through makeup, the casting of similar-looking actors, or both. Equally important are the mannerisms and subtle inflections of tone and voice that the actors playing the roles can develop during rehearsals to accentuate the likeness between father and daughter.

### **ANOTHER NOTE**

At the top of the show, the character of FIELDS appears to be an offensive cinematic/theatrical stereotype, a throwback to a time in which African American performers were relegated to playing butlers and maids, and appearing as lazy, shuffling, and stupid. FIELDS cleverly uses these stereotypes—and the racism of the play's other characters—to mask his true intent. The actor playing FIELDS should make the distinction between the servile stereotype and the real man precisely and clearly.

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*Lights rise on the Green Room of the White House. The room contains two heavily draped French doors, left, through which falling snow can be seen. Center is a set of large double doors. Right, is a servants' door.*

*The room is decorated as if for a gala. Red, white, and blue streamers and banners help create the festive mood. The room also contains food and refreshment tables, cushioned benches and chairs, a small bar, a telephone stand and telephone, and a set of decorative handguns on the wall. Prominent is a promotional poster for the film *The Birth of a Nation*, portraying a masked clansman on a bucking steed.*

*Left, MARGARET stands looking out the French doors, her back to the audience. HOUSE stands center. WILSON is entering as lights rise.*

**WILSON.** Is she coming or not?

**HOUSE.** She won't budge.

**WILSON.** We can't just keep the guests waiting.

**HOUSE.** You should talk to her.

**WILSON.** You think she'll listen to me?

**HOUSE.** Doesn't she usually?

**WILSON.** These days, she has a mind of her own.

**HOUSE.** Perish the thought! Perhaps she needs to marry.

**WILSON.** She'll have no one—claims marriage is for fools. Anyway, who would want her at her advanced age?

**HOUSE.** Her options *are* quite limited at 29...

**WILSON.** I just don't know what to say to her anymore.

**HOUSE.** Maybe, don't *say* anything. Take a moment and listen to *her* for a change.

**WILSON.** Desperate times call for desperate measures.

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**HOUSE.** I'll stall Mr. Griffith for as long as I can. (*House exits. Wilson approaches Margaret, whose face remains either turned away or not fully seen during their conversation.*)

**WILSON.** The guests are waiting, my dear.

**MARGARET.** I'm not coming.

**WILSON.** But you love moving pictures.

**MARGARET.** My throat is sore. (*She coughs for effect.*)

**WILSON.** This is becoming serious: always taken to bed, then wandering the halls in the middle of the night.

**MARGARET.** It *is* serious; I don't know what I might do to myself.

**WILSON.** What you might do is eat from time to time—you're too thin, and that can't be good for your constitution. Now, I'll fetch the doctor in the morning, but until then—

**MARGARET.** I received three more marriage proposals today.

**WILSON.** Oh?

**MARGARET.** (*Margaret holds up the letters.*) What if I run off and elope, like Nellie and Jessie?

**WILSON.** Is that what you want?

**MARGARET.** You know what I want.

**WILSON.** This again? Your singing is but a hobby, my dear.

**MARGARET.** No, it's my future career.

**WILSON.** Women don't have careers, Margaret, they have husbands. Now, let's have a look at those proposals of yours.

**MARGARET.** I'm not interested in marriage! (*Margaret rips her proposal letters in half.*)

**WILSON.** I see. Well, a singing career is out of the question. Show business simply isn't a proper vocation for a woman.

**MARGARET.** And you get the final say?

**WILSON.** A child's duty is to obey.

**MARGARET.** A daughter's duty, you mean—and a wife's!

**WILSON.** What I mean is that at this moment your singing is neither here nor there. Tonight, the White House needs a hostess. Years ago, you see, a friend's kindness set the course of my career, and now I must return the favor. But I can't do it alone. I need you; the nation needs you; and duty to country sometimes requires great sacrifice.



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**MARGARET.** They elected you, not me.

**WILSON.** Be that as it may, without you, my child, all is lost.

**GRIFFITH.** *(Entering holding a glass of champagne.)* Where's that little Margaret Wilson I've heard so much about? *(Griffith stands between Wilson and Margaret.)* Let me take a look at you, dear girl! *(Margaret moves out of shadow; she and Wilson bear a striking resemblance to one another. In fact, they look almost identical. Griffith is taken aback.)* Ah, the spitting image of your...your... *(He looks back and forth at father and daughter.)* late mother—beautiful!

**WILSON.** Margaret, I'd like to introduce you to Mr. David Wark Griffith, America's most famous motion picture director.

**MARGARET.** Pleased to meet you, Mr. Griffith.

**GRIFFITH.** Mr. Griffith was my pappy's name. Call me D.W.! Your father tells me you love the pictures.

**MARGARET.** Oh, yes.

**GRIFFITH.** Well, let me tell you: This here picture we're showing tonight has everything: romance, battle scenes like you've never witnessed.

**WILSON.** And to think it all came from my old friend Tom Dixon's novel.

**GRIFFITH.** Genius begets genius, I like to say. *(To Margaret.)* My picture is the epic tale of two families—one from the North and one from the South. This is a tribute to the Lost Cause and the War of Northern Aggression: the bloody battles; the virginal, white heroine; the vile Black menace.

**MARGARET.** Oh.

**GRIFFITH.** But that's only the first part. Then we get to Reconstruction: economic depravity, dang-blasted carpetbaggers, traitorous scalawags, and lazy, shiftless Negro legislators. Oh, and let's not forget the ever-present threat of miscegenation.

**WILSON.** The dreaded mixing of the races!

**GRIFFITH.** It climaxes with those hooded heroes, the Klan, galloping into town on their mighty steeds, vanquishing their darkie foes, and preserving the purity and supremacy of the white race. What do you say about that?

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**MARGARET.** I do enjoy Miss Gish's acting...

**GRIFFITH.** Oh, then wait until you see Lillian in this. She's fantastic! I, uh, hear tell that you're a performer yourself. Is that right?

**MARGARET.** Why, yes.

**GRIFFITH.** You like to sing.

**MARGARET.** I love to sing!

**GRIFFITH.** Then what do you say that we go out there and warm this place up with a song?

**MARGARET.** You want me to sing? Tonight?

**GRIFFITH.** We got the band out there to play along with the picture, so why not give them a little practice with a genuine star.

**MARGARET.** I'm no star.

**GRIFFITH.** Trust me, Maggie—may I call you Maggie? I know charisma when I see it.

**MARGARET.** But I haven't prepared.

**GRIFFITH.** The sign of a true professional is being able to think—and sing—on your feet.

**MARGARET.** That's how I usually sing: On my feet.

**GRIFFITH.** Then you've got nothing to worry about. Come on!

*(Margaret turns to her father for his approval; he tacitly gives it. Griffith offers his arm; Margaret takes it; and they begin to exit.)* You need a little glass of liquid courage first?

**MARGARET.** Oh, I don't drink alcohol.

**GRIFFITH.** Your mother raised you well then. Only hags, whores, and suffragists put their lips to a glass of alcohol.

**MARGARET.** What have you against suffragists, Mr. Griffith?

**GRIFFITH.** Just about everything you can think of, little lady! Now, right this way. Wait! We have to make our grand entrance. Try this! *(Griffith half-raises his arm in a "pope-wave" pose. He nods to Margaret to follow suit. She does. They exit slowly and grandly through the double doors, as House and FIELDS enter.)*

**HOUSE.** Mr. President, this is Clarence Fields; he's filling in for Malcolm this evening. Apparently, Fields has long been in the service of the vice president.

**WILSON.** *(To Fields.)* You work for Tom Marshall?

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**FIELDS.** Yas, suh.

**WILSON.** Haven't talked to that shifty son of a bitch in three months.

**HOUSE.** Fields tells me that nearly all the guests have arrived.

**FIELDS.** Yas, suh, only waiting for de Chief Justice and his wife. (*Sounds of applause, offstage.*) Maybe dat's dem now.

**WILSON.** The applause coming from the East Room is for my daughter, Margaret. She's agreed to sing a ditty before the picture begins. We should probably get out there.

**HOUSE.** I need a moment; something's come up. (*To Fields.*) That will be all, Fields. (*Fields exits through the servants' door; House closes the double doors.*)

**WILSON.** What is it, House?

**HOUSE.** The festivities will have to wait. (*The band begins playing "Beautiful Dreamer" by Stephen Foster, off.*)

**WILSON.** Whatever for?

**HOUSE.** There is war in Europe, Mr. President!

**MARGARET.** (*Off.*) (*Singing.*) "Beautiful dreamer, wake unto me,/Starlight and dewdrops are waiting for thee...."

**WILSON.** And what am I supposed to do about it?

**HOUSE.** You're supposed to take an interest. Our allies are depending on us for help.

**MARGARET.** (*Off.*) (*Singing.*) "Sounds of the rude world, heard in the day,/Lull'd by the moonlight have all pass'd away...."

**WILSON.** You know my policy, colonel: When it comes to the war, the United States shall remain "impartial in thought as well as in action—"

**HOUSE.** (*Overlapping with Wilson.*) "Impartial in thought as well as in action," yes, yes. But you must see that our neutrality makes us look weak.

**WILSON.** Don't use that word.

**HOUSE.** I only meant that—

**WILSON.** I don't like that word.

**HOUSE.** You should know that as we speak, the Russians are pinned down in East Prussia. If arms and reinforcements don't arrive soon, they'll be slaughtered.

**WILSON.** Not my problem.

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**HOUSE.** Meanwhile, German U-boats are threatening the entire European continent.

**WILSON.** You know as well as I do the Germans are harmless.

**MARGARET.** (*Off.*) (*Singing.*) “Beautiful dreamer, queen of my song,/List while I woo thee with soft melody....”

**HOUSE.** But, sir, what if they attempt to sink a commercial liner like the *Eastland* or *Lusitania*?

**WILSON.** Take it from me, the *Lusitania* will sail the seas for a hundred years!

**MARGARET.** (*Off.*) (*Singing.*) “Gone are the cares of life's busy throng,/Beautiful dreamer, awake unto me!/Beautiful dreamer, awake unto me!”

**HOUSE.** What you don't seem to grasp, sir, is that Germany has one of the world's most formidable fighting forces—

**WILSON.** Listen to yourself, colonel: You speak as if the Germans are a nation of Jew-hating goose-steppers with a taste for blood.

**HOUSE.** Well, if the shoe fits... (*“Beautiful Dreamer” concludes, followed by loud applause.*)

**WILSON.** Anyway, if God truly wanted us to go to war in Europe, He'd have told me by now.

**HOUSE.** God speaks to you directly, does He?

**WILSON.** Naturally! I'm the President of the United States after all. I'm the chosen one.

**HOUSE.** But how do you know when He's calling you?

**WILSON.** Sometimes it's a little whisper in my ear; other times I see His image in a piece of toast or coffee cake. Mostly, though, His signs come like a bolt from the blue. (*The double doors suddenly open, and GAMBLE escorts Margaret through them.*) Just like that!

**GAMBLE.** (*To Margaret.*) My dear lady, what a glorious introduction to your work!

**MARGARET.** (*To Gamble.*) Thank you ever so much.

**GAMBLE.** Our congregation's choir has long sung your praises, but they greatly underestimated your gifts.

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**WILSON.** Reverend Gamble, so good of you to join us. Margaret, this man is pastor of the same church in Augusta, Georgia, that my father—your grandfather—led when I was a boy.

**MARGARET.** How nice to meet you!

**GAMBLE.** The pleasure is all mine. I am simply ravished—spiritually speaking, of course. In fact, I do believe that Miss Wilson's sterling success calls for a toast. I raise my glass to the angelic Margaret Wilson! (*House and Wilson raise their glasses.*) The most eligible woman in Washington!

**HOUSE.** Oh, well now...

**GAMBLE.** Indeed, in the country!

**WILSON.** Here, here!

**GAMBLE.** Whose velvet trilling fills the meadowlark with envy!  
(*Gamble bends to kiss Margaret's hand as CORA enters.*)

**CORA.** Here you are, dear.

**GAMBLE.** Here I am! May I introduce my wife: Cora. (*Cora extends her hand; Wilson lightly kisses it.*)

**WILSON.** Delighted to make your acquaintance, Mrs. Gamble.

**CORA.** Thank you, Mr. President.

**WILSON.** This is my aid, Colonel House.

**CORA.** How do you do?

**HOUSE.** Charmed, madam!

**CORA.** And who is this elegant young lady.

**WILSON.** This, dear woman, is my eldest daughter, Margaret.

**MARGARET.** Pleased to meet you, Mrs. Gamble. (*Margaret curtsies to Cora.*)

**CORA.** Well, aren't you just the sweetest thing.

**GRIFFITH.** (*Entering.*) Who started the party without me?

**GAMBLE.** (*Shaking Griffith's hand.*) It is a great honor to meet you, Mr. Griffith. I've seen all your films.

**GRIFFITH.** You don't say.

**CORA.** Richard loves the pictures.

**GAMBLE.** *The Perfidy of Mary* and *The Painted Lady* remain two of my favorites. And *Judith of Bethulia* is simply a masterpiece. I couldn't be more thrilled to be here for the premiere of your latest tour de force.

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**HOUSE.** Perhaps we should get things started then.

**GRIFFITH.** I couldn't agree more. Mr. President... (*Griffith motions for Wilson to lead them out.*)

**WILSON.** (*To Cora.*) May I escort you to your seat, Mrs. Gamble?

**CORA.** Thank you, Mr. President. (*Cora takes Wilson's arm, and they exit.*)

**GAMBLE.** Miss Wilson...?

**MARGARET.** Oh, certainly. (*Margaret takes Gamble's arm, and they exit; FIELDS enters through the servants' door.*)

**GRIFFITH.** (*To Fields.*) Do me a favor, boy: lock the door this time. The Green Room is off limits until after the picture.

**FIELDS.** Yas, suh.

**HOUSE.** Clarence: If we receive any more telegrams this evening, make sure they come to me immediately.

**FIELDS.** Yas, suh. (*Griffith and House exit. After they're gone, Fields moves to the telephone, right. He picks it up and waits for the White House operator.*) Yas, ma'am: I needs an outside line: Impotent presidential bidness. The number I'm calling is Linville 4787. (*He listens and waits.*)

**GRIFFITH.** (*Off.*) Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. Please make yourselves comfortable.

**FIELDS.** (*Into phone.*) Hey. It's me. What? Where do you think I am? I said I was going to do it; I did it, no thanks to you.

**GRIFFITH.** (*Off.*) Tonight, I reveal to you the fruits of my great labor...

**FIELDS.** (*Into phone.*) They bought the phony letter from the vice president.

**GRIFFITH.** (*Off.*) The greatest motion picture ever made!

**FIELDS.** (*Into phone.*) Yes, technically, that was your idea, but...

**GRIFFITH.** (*Off.*) It's a tribute and testament to a simpler time...

**FIELDS.** (*Into phone.*) Then why did you chicken out...?

**GRIFFITH.** (*Off.*) ...a time in which homespun values mattered, in which brotherhood stood above the baser instincts of avarice and cynicism.

**FIELDS.** (*Into phone.*) Listen, there are times in a person's life when you've either got to put up or shut up.

**GRIFFITH.** (*Off.*) Tonight, friends, you are witness to the glory and spirit that is the Lost Cause!

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**FIELDS.** (*Into phone.*) No, Griffith's a racist, and his picture's nothing more than a recruiting campaign for the Klan.

**GRIFFITH.** (*Off.*) The return of grace, goodness, and honor that was lost in the South's defeat in the Civil War!

**FIELDS.** (*Into phone.*) That's why—

**GRIFFITH.** (*Off.*) Tonight, ladies and gentlemen, you are witness to the birth of a nation! (*Sounds of applause, off; band music begins to play, off, as movie commences.*)

**FIELDS.** (*Into phone.*) Tonight, D.W. Griffith must die! (*Margaret quietly enters and stands watching Fields.*) The rest is silence!

**MARGARET.** Who are you? (*Fields, startled, turns to Margaret, hangs up telephone.*) Where's Malcolm?

**FIELDS.** Malcolm, uh, he, he off tonight. I'm de, de substitute butler.

**MARGARET.** What's your name?

**FIELDS.** Fields, ma'am, Clarence Fields.

**MARGARET.** How do you do, Mr. Fields? (*Margaret extends her hand; FIELDS, not used to this, doesn't move.*) It's customary, Mr. Fields, to take a woman's hand when offered.

**FIELDS.** Yas, ma'am.

**MARGARET.** It's alright; I won't bite. (*Fields looks around, makes sure no one else is watching, and awkwardly shakes her hand.*)

**FIELDS.** How de do?

**MARGARET.** I'm well, thank you. Who were you talking to...?

**FIELDS.** Me? Oh, well, I was jus speaking wit my ole granny down in Arkansas who took sick. You know how it go.

**MARGARET.** I do. My mother was sick for a time before she died.

**FIELDS.** I was mighty sorry tuh hear about dat, Miss Margaret.

**MARGARET.** If you need to use the telephone, there's one in the kitchen for staff.

**FIELDS.** I'll remember that foe next time.

**MARGARET.** It was nice meeting you, Mr. Fields.

**FIELDS.** Call me Clarence.

**MARGARET.** Thank you, Clarence. (*Fields shuffles out the servants' door.*) The rest is silence...the rest is silence...Where do I know that from...? (*Margaret pulls a piece of paper from her dress, looks at it, and*

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*dials. Fields opens the servants' door a crack and watches Margaret.)*  
*(Into phone.)* Operator, I need an outside line. The number I'm calling is Northwood 2521. Yes, thank you. *(She waits to be connected.)* Hello, yes, I'm trying to reach Mr. Frederick Stock of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. My name is Margaret Wilson. I'm a singer. Hello...? Hello...?  
*(Margaret hangs up the phone. Gamble enters holding two empty champagne glasses. Fields enters unseen. Gamble sneaks up behind Margaret and speaks into her ear.)*

**GAMBLE.** How do you like the picture?

**MARGARET.** *(Startled.)* Reverend Gamble, you scared me half to death.

**FIELDS.** Suh, eyes supposed tuh keep deese doors locked during de picture.

**GAMBLE.** Well, you've done a lousy job of it. Bring me more champagne. *(Fields finds a bottle and pours champagne into Gamble's glass.)* Now, go and see if any of the other guests need your assistance. Miss Wilson and I desire a few minutes alone.

**MARGARET.** We do? *(Fields exits through the servants' door.)*

**GAMBLE.** You better watch yourself, Miss Wilson: some might see your spending private time with the Negro help as rather unseemly.

**MARGARET.** I don't know what you mean, reverend?

**GAMBLE.** Do call me Richard.

**MARGARET.** You're missing the picture.

**GAMBLE.** I could say the same about you. You know, the moment we met tonight I could see that you were troubled, Margaret. I'm trained to sense these things. Won't you confide in me?

**MARGARET.** If you must know, I've been trying to contact Frederick Stock of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, hoping that he might be looking for a singer. But I've left him three—now, four—messages, and he hasn't returned any of them.

**GAMBLE.** Why do you need Frederick Stock when you have me?

**MARGARET.** You?

**GAMBLE.** I know all about the music business.

**MARGARET.** You do?

**GAMBLE.** Of course, I do. I've been leading a church choir for eight years.



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**MARGARET.** Oh, but that hardly counts as—

**GAMBLE.** And before that I had a rather noteworthy singing career—traveled throughout the South. Have you heard of the Texarkana Tenor?

**MARGARET.** I don't...think so... (*Gamble looks crestfallen.*) Then again, it may ring a bell!

**GAMBLE.** Well, that was me! I could have made quite a lot of money, but...

**MARGARET.** But...? (*Gamble points skyward. Margaret looks up, trying to see to what he might be referring.*)

**GAMBLE.** The Lord.

**MARGARET.** Oh, yes, the Lord.

**GAMBLE.** When He calls, you can't refuse. As for you, dear lady, I only pray that even more Americans may soon hear your dulcet tones.

**MARGARET.** I did plan a tour last year, but...a dream deferred, I'm afraid.

**GAMBLE.** If you were, say, to try again, do you think your father would accompany you on the road?

**MARGARET.** Oh no. He's much too busy.

**GAMBLE.** All by yourself then?

**MARGARET.** You have objections.

**GAMBLE.** If I may be frank...

**MARGARET.** Please.

**GAMBLE.** A comely and eligible maiden traveling the dark and dusty roads of our nation all by herself might appear to some as improper.

**MARGARET.** Do you see it that way?

**GAMBLE.** The Lord tells us, "Let he who is without sin cast the first stone," but you will meet many who do not understand the word of God as I do. Then again, I'm, uh, certain you could procure a trustworthy— even ecumenical—chaperone if you truly wanted one.

**MARGARET.** You have someone in mind?

**GAMBLE.** Ahem!

**MARGARET.** Are you volunteering yourself, reverend—?

**GAMBLE.** Ah! Ah! Ah!

**MARGARET.** Richard.

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**GAMBLE.** My schedule is a rather full one. Still, I believe arrangements could be made.

**MARGARET.** But my father wants me to stay here.

**GAMBLE.** You mean he'd deny the world your gift? I don't believe it, and, you know, he couldn't ask for a more honorable person to accompany his little flower. And with my contacts, well, I'll have you singing in every Presbyterian church from Boston to Bangkok.

**MARGARET.** But what about your congregation?

**GAMBLE.** I've long looked for a mission that would use my talents more fully. I am but a vessel for God's will. And you, dear woman, could be a vessel for my...my.... But don't wait too long in making your decision, or else thinking might cloud your judgment.

**MARGARET.** Isn't it supposed to?

**GAMBLE.** Perhaps, but thinking can become a dangerous habit, especially among the weaker sex.

**MARGARET.** The—

**GAMBLE.** Oh, yes, the Lord tells us...uh...uh...

**MARGARET.** What does He tell us?

**GAMBLE.** He tells us, um, uh, "Let not thought, uh, impede thy fortunes."

**MARGARET.** I don't know that verse.

**GAMBLE.** It's in...in...Leviticus—chapter 4, verse 9. (*Gamble moves close to her.*) Would it be impolite of me to tell you how fetching you are?

**MARGARET.** You find me—

**GAMBLE.** Oh, yes.

**MARGARET.** But your wife is in the next room, and I don't know that we should be alone like this.

**GAMBLE.** We're not hurting anyone.

**MARGARET.** I know how I'd feel if a husband of mine was this close to another woman.

**GAMBLE.** But how do you feel right now, right at this second?

**MARGARET.** Warm, uh—

**GAMBLE.** Yes.

**MARGARET.** Hot, in fact—

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**GAMBLE.** Yes! (*Margaret tries to move away, but Gamble grabs her hand.*) Don't you see, Margaret? The heart wants what the heart wants. (*Margaret breaks away from Gamble and tries to make it to the door, but he pulls her back.*)

**MARGARET.** But Mr. Griffith's film!

**GAMBLE.** (*Cornering Margaret on a bench.*) We'll make our own moving picture. It will be dramatic, intense, and full of unbridled passion. (*He tries to kiss her; she fights him off. They get tangled.*)

**MARGARET.** Please...No...

**GAMBLE.** In my experience, when a woman says no, she legitimately means yes.

**MARGARET.** No! I mean no! (*Margaret and Gamble tumble off the bench. At that moment, the double doors open. Wilson enters.*)

**WILSON.** Where's my champagne, reverend? I'm in there waiting for—reverend? Huh! Not in here. (*House, holding a newspaper, comes up behind Wilson, touches his shoulder. Wilson jumps.*)

**WILSON.** Stop following me around the house...House!

**HOUSE.** The picture must be stopped, Mr. President!

**WILSON.** What? Why?

**HOUSE.** (*Showing the newspaper.*) At its premiere in Los Angeles ten days ago, the picture was called *The Clansman*.

**WILSON.** Yes, yes, after Dixon's book.

**HOUSE.** Despite the name change, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People is calling the film racist and threatening to lead protests across the country against it.

**WILSON.** All the NAACP does is complain—about slavery, about voting rights, about segregation, about cross burning, about lynching. What a bunch of babies!

**HOUSE.** But once they find out that we've shown the picture at the White House, well, it could be bad. The last thing this administration needs is a scandal.

**WILSON.** Scandal! I don't like the sound of that. Hit me, House! (*Wilson holds out a glass. House fills it with champagne. Wilson drinks it down in a gulp.*) More!

**HOUSE.** You may want to slow down, Mr. President.

## AFTER BIRTH OF A NATION

**WILSON.** In the glass, colonel! (*House pours Wilson more champagne.*)  
Much better! Now, what do you propose we do?

**HOUSE.** I'm not sure, but rest your mind, Mr. President. I'll think of something.

**WILSON.** I'm counting on you, colonel. (*House and Wilson exit. Wilson grabs the champagne bottle on his way out. Once the men are gone, Gamble and Margaret rise from their hiding place.*)

**MARGARET.** Do you really think they'll stop the picture?

**GAMBLE.** I don't know, but I understand the colonel's predicament. Still, you have to show people that you've got nothing to hide.

**GRIFFITH.** (*Entering, prompting Gamble to drop to the floor.*) Here you are, darling girl!

**MARGARET.** Here I am!

**GRIFFITH.** You're missing the picture. Is anything wrong, Maggie? You look flushed.

**MARGARET.** It's just a bit stuffy in there, but I think I'm catching my breath now. Thank you.

**FIELDS.** (*Entering through the servants' door, and then to Griffith.*) Can I have a word with you alone, Mistah Griffith? It'll just take a minute.

**GRIFFITH.** No, you cannot; I'm in the middle of a picture. Now, I thought I told you to keep this door locked!

**FIELDS.** Sorry, suh. (*Griffith storms off. Fields locks the double doors and exits through the servants' door.*)

**GAMBLE.** Are they gone?

**MARGARET.** Yes, and me with them. (*Margaret moves to exit.*)

**GAMBLE.** Wait! (*Gamble grabs her arm.*)

**MARGARET.** But what of your wife?

**GAMBLE.** Since I met you, she's dead to me. (*There's a loud knock on the door.*)

**CORA.** (*Off.*) Richard?

**GAMBLE.** It's alive!

**CORA.** (*Off.*) Richard, are you in there?

**GAMBLE.** You have to help me, Margaret. She's a very jealous woman.

**CORA.** (*Off, jiggling the door handle.*) I can hear someone in there...

**GAMBLE.** Is there another way out of this room?

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**MARGARET.** I don't think so.

**GAMBLE.** Oh, God!

**MARGARET.** Wait! I know! (*Margaret goes to one of the French doors and opens it. A blizzard of snow blows in.*)

**GAMBLE.** You can't be serious. It's 20-below out there.

**CORA.** (*Off.*) Open this door!

**MARGARET.** What about the servants' entrance?

**GAMBLE.** What?! That door is for the *Negro* help.

**CORA.** (*Off.*) I'm coming in there! (*Gamble is torn between the servants' door and the French doors.*)

**MARGARET.** I have to let her in.

**CORA.** (*Off.*) Just wait until I get ahold of you!

**GAMBLE.** Farewell, my flower! (*Gamble rushes out the French doors but turns back to Margaret.*) This is but a momentary diversion, my sweet. Soon we will climb the highest peaks of romantic love together, hand in hand— (*Margaret quickly closes the door and the curtains, cutting Gamble off.*)

**CORA.** (*Off.*) What is going on in there?

**MARGARET.** Coming! (*Margaret unlocks and opens the double doors.*)

**CORA.** Oh, Miss Wilson. I'm looking for my husband. Colonel House told me he might be in here.

**MARGARET.** He's not.

**CORA.** Are you certain?

**MARGARET.** (*Opening wide the doors.*) The room is empty but for me.

**CORA.** I could have sworn...I mean, I hear that loud, insipid, nauseating voice every Sunday, and—

**MARGARET.** If I see your husband, I'll let him know that you're looking for him.

**CORA.** Don't bother.

**MARGARET.** What?

**CORA.** Richard is rather impressive when you first meet him, but once you get to know him...How can I put this delicately? Behind closed doors my husband is a cold, cold man. (*Gamble presses his freezing face against the one of the French doors. He mouths the words, "Help me." Neither Margaret nor Cora can see him.*)

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**MARGARET.** Have you considered that perhaps your husband also feels the growing distance between the two of you?

**CORA.** I don't think my husband feels much of anything anymore.

*(Again, Gamble's frozen face and figure is seen at the French door without the women noticing.)* Tell me: Do you know what's it's like to seek the warmth of another's touch, yet be doomed to wander in the endless frost of a frigid Siberian winter?

**MARGARET.** Not personally, no, but— *(Margaret spots Gamble at the French door and shouts/screams.)*

**CORA.** Heavens! What's wrong? *(Margaret moves to the French door, quickly closes the drapes, and turns to face Cora.)* You look like you've just seen a ghost.

**MARGARET.** The draft in this room is simply terrible! Perhaps we should return to the picture. It may lift your spirits.

**CORA.** Pictures bore me. *(A tapping is heard at the window.)* Do you hear something?

**MARGARET.** Like what?

**CORA.** Like a tapping sound.

**MARGARET.** No.

**CORA.** *(Listening.)* I could have sworn...

**MARGARET.** Could be the wind. *(Tapping again.)*

**CORA.** There it is again! Hear it?

**MARGARET.** Can't say that I do. *(They listen for a moment as the tapping grows fainter.)*

**CORA.** Now it's gone.

**MARGARET.** Strange.

**CORA.** Isn't it? Do you believe in a higher power?

**MARGARET.** I do believe in God.

**CORA.** I've long been a student of religion.

**MARGARET.** I think the wife of a minister should take her husband's lead in all things ecclesiastical.

**CORA.** Oh, but I'm not a Presbyterian. You look surprised.

**MARGARET.** I'm just not sure why you're telling me all this.

**CORA.** What if Christianity is but one of many belief systems that each contain at least a kernel of truth? You see, there are many theologies out

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there, Margaret, waiting to be studied, embraced, lived. I began by dabbling in the teachings of the Kabbaylah.

**MARGARET.** The what?

**CORA.** I then progressed to standard Judism—the Too-rah, the Tall-mud, etcetera. For a long while it was a private joke on my husband. As he spoke from the pulpit every Sunday, I amused myself with the secret knowledge that I had already celebrated Yahwee’s glory the day before, on Shabbus.

**MARGARET.** Guess you showed him...

**CORA.** Before long, I drifted to Islab and its prophet Mohaymid—

**MARGARET.** Did you?

**CORA.** From there I explored Surfism, the Zorry-astrism of Persia—

**MARGARET.** The Zorry who?

**CORA.** The sect has few followers these days, and there is strength in numbers. That’s why Buddy-hism continues to fascinate me. It’s not nearly as obscure, and its “life is pain” philosophy virtually sums up the current state of my marriage. But these days I tend to follow the tenets of Hindyism. I mean, why should we be limited to believing in only one God?

**MARGARET.** I hadn’t really thought about it.

**CORA.** (*Pulling a small book from the folds of her dress.*) Have you ever read this?

**MARGARET.** What is it?

**CORA.** It is the Bhakivid Gita, and it has changed my life. Listen to this (*Cora reads a passage.*): “The soul is never born nor dies at any time.”

**MARGARET.** Lovely! Still, it’s not quite like the Good Book, is it? What did you say it’s called?

**CORA.** The Gita.

**MARGARET.** Thank you for sharing it with me.

**CORA.** (*Placing her hand on Margaret’s.*) There is so much I’d like to share. Please, take it. (*She offers Margaret the book.*)

**MARGARET.** Oh, I couldn’t.

**CORA.** Consider it a gift.

**MARGARET.** No, no.

**CORA.** It would mean the world to me.

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**MARGARET.** (*Taking the book.*) Very well then. Thank you.

**CORA.** Look at me, Margaret. What I'm about to say may come as a shock.

**MARGARET.** Then maybe you shouldn't say it.

**CORA.** You see, what men don't understand—can never understand—is the well of longing that resides in the hearts—and bodies—of women like you and me.

**MARGARET.** Longing?

**CORA.** Don't you have desires, Margaret?

**MARGARET.** Of course, I do.

**CORA.** Name one.

**MARGARET.** I want to be a professional singer.

**CORA.** You misunderstand. You see, *I'm* speaking of the bottomless yearning that begins as little more than a glowing ember in one's most private of grottoes, until it is slowly caressed and coaxed into a flickering blue flame.

**MARGARET.** Father used to take us camping all the time when I was a girl...

**CORA.** (*Putting a finger to Margaret's lips.*) Hush! I'm speaking of the *fire*.

**MARGARET.** Fire?

**CORA.** But this fire has a far greater purpose than mere heat. And to find it, more fuel must be added to the crackle, the sizzle, the smolder. The fiery confirmation builds and grows, dancing in time with the racing beat of a heart. You don't know how much more of this you can take, but you can't wait to find out. That's why you welcome the flames, live for the burn!

**MARGARET.** Do you need a glass of water?

**CORA.** I have felt that fire, Margaret, but for too long I've had to push it down, hide it from a world that does not understand. But here, tonight, it's *you* who has stoked the scalding fire inside of me.

**MARGARET.** Me...?

**CORA.** You! Feel my heart! (*Cora takes Margaret's hand and presses it to her chest.*) Can you feel that?

**MARGARET.** It's beating very fast.



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**CORA.** You've made me a starling that longs to break free of its cage. Kiss me. (*Cora pulls Margaret in and plants a kiss on her lips. Margaret pulls away.*)

**MARGARET.** No! (*They wrestle, as Margaret tries to escape.*)

**CORA.** We're wild animals whose fate it is to run free— (*Margaret breaks from Cora and runs from her; Cora gives chase.*) Gazelles destined to leap and bound across the arctic savannah and find a place of safety and sanctuary—

**MARGARET.** But we're women!

**CORA.** And I, like Sappoe, the great Greek poetess of Lesbios, do not fear the erotic promise of female passion.

**MARGARET.** Speak for yourself! (*Margaret again runs for it, with CORA at her heels.*)

**CORA.** "Come back to me, Gongyla, here tonight!" (*Margaret stops, looks behind her to see to whom Cora is speaking.*)

**MARGARET.** Who?

**CORA.** "You, my rose, with your Lyndian lair. There hovers forever around you delight: A beauty desired." (*Margaret makes a move to escape, but Cora heads her off. Margaret and Cora are now at a standstill.*) Look at you: "Even your garment plunders my eyes. I am enchanted."

**MARGARET.** I'm not listening to you. (*Margaret places her hands over her ears.*) La, la, la! (*She runs to the door and nearly collides with an entering Griffith.*)

**GRIFFITH.** What in God's name is all this shouting for?

**MARGARET.** Oh, Mr. Griffith, thank heavens you're here. My father needs me, doesn't he?

**CORA.** Come back to me, Gongyla! (*Margaret tries to shoo Cora away.*)

**GRIFFITH.** People are starting to wonder what's going on in here. They can't concentrate on the picture. (*Fields enters from the servants' door.*) (*To FIELDS.*) Look at this!

**FIELDS.** Don't blame me, Mistuh Griffith. I ain't let them in no-how. I locked the door, jus like yuh said.

**GRIFFITH.** So, who the hell unlocked it?

**MARGARET.** I'm afraid I did.

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**CORA.** She had no choice, Mr. Griffith. You see, I was waiting on the other side, and I passionately demanded admittance.

**GRIFFITH.** This is the strangest movie premiere I've ever attended. (*To FIELDS.*) Now, for the last time, keep this room closed until the picture is over. Do you hear me? No more interruptions!

**FIELDS.** Yas, suh!

**WILSON.** (*Entering, a bit tipsy.*) Where's Margaret? She's missing the picture (*Margaret runs to Wilson.*) Oh, here you are, my dear!

**GRIFFITH.** Good, now everyone's happy.

**CORA.** I'm not happy.

**GRIFFITH.** We must continue the picture without further interruption.

**HOUSE.** (*Entering and dragging a frozen Gamble with him.*) Gangway! Gangway!

**WILSON.** Reverend Gamble! (*House drops Gamble down center.*)

**GRIFFITH.** What happened to him?

**FIELDS.** Look like he done been froze stiff.

**CORA.** Richard stiff? Not likely.

**HOUSE.** One of the cooks found him outside leaning against the pantry door.

**WILSON.** Speak to us, Reverend.

**GAMBLE.** Muh-muh-muh...

**GRIFFITH.** What are you trying to say, man?

**HOUSE.** Who did this to you?

**GAMBLE.** Muh-muh-muh...

**WILSON.** What's he trying to say, Margaret?

**MARGARET.** I have no idea.

**WILSON.** What should we do?

**HOUSE.** I have it! Fields, place Reverend Gamble before a warm fire and do your best to reinvigorate him. That means as many glasses of warm brandy as he can take.

**FIELDS.** But I gots to watch that no one gets in here, like Mistuh Griffith say.

**GRIFFITH.** I think you already screwed the pooch on that one.

**HOUSE.** It's alright, Fields. This is far more important. (*Fields drags Gamble out.*)

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**GRIFFITH.** Says who?

**WILSON.** Griffith, you must understand—

**GRIFFITH.** All I understand, Mr. President, is that you invited me here to show a picture, and with all this hubbub the natives are getting restless out there.

**MARGARET.** Perhaps I can entertain them with a few more songs, sing along with the picture.

**GRIFFITH.** Would you? It will be perfect for the scene of the Little Colonel returning home from war.

**CORA.** I'd be happy to join you, Miss Wilson.

**MARGARET.** That's not necessary.

**CORA.** Although I left my bulbul tarang at home, I also play the Jew's harp, and I happen to have mine with me. (*Cora pulls a Jew's harp from the folds of her dress.*)

**GRIFFITH.** Splendid!

**MARGARET.** Oh, God, no! (*Margaret exits.*)

**CORA.** Wait for me, Gongyla! (*Cora exits.*)

**GRIFFITH.** Huh! And I've been calling her Maggie all this time.

**WILSON.** This calls for another drink!

**HOUSE.** You've had quite enough, Mr. President. We should get you to bed.

**WILSON.** (*To Griffith, sotto voce, about House.*) He's like my mother.

**GRIFFITH.** But what about the Lost Cause?

**HOUSE.** Your *cause* was lost some time ago.

**GRIFFITH.** Did you hear that, Mr. President? He's talking like he knows something about the life of a Southern man.

**HOUSE.** I'm from Texas!

**GRIFFITH.** Colonel, if you really want to understand, you have to watch the rest of the picture.

**HOUSE.** Can't I just write you a glowing review, have the president sign it, and send you on your way?

**GRIFFITH.** That'll work!

**WILSON.** Over my dead body!

**HOUSE.** What?

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**GRIFFITH.** I could not, in good conscience, agree to speak highly of a picture I've yet to see.

**HOUSE.** (*To Wilson.*) So, *now* you take a stand! You choose to ignore world crises, abandon our allies in their time of need, but when it comes to Griffith's silly picture you suddenly develop a conscience?

**WILSON.** I don't have to explain myself to you; I'm the president!

**GRIFFITH.** (*To House.*) Wait, did you just call *Birth of a Nation* silly?

**HOUSE.** It's a comedy, isn't it?

**GRIFFITH.** What gave you that idea?

**HOUSE.** Oh, I don't know, the egregious use of blackface, for one; the histrionic acting and overwrought characterizations—

**WILSON.** Can you believe the nerve of this man, Griffith?

**GRIFFITH.** I'm giving the people what they want.

**HOUSE.** The people want high melodrama, do they?

**GRIFFITH.** They sure as shit don't want reality.

**HOUSE.** They want the truth!

**GRIFFITH.** Truth? Where have you been living, colonel? When people go to the pictures they go to escape from reality. They want handsome heroes, dastardly villains, passionate romance, the thrill of the chase! (*Cora enters, looking for Margaret. As she does, Margaret suddenly enters from the opposite side of the stage, sees Cora, is startled, and quickly tiptoes away. Wilson, House, and Griffith watch them.*)

**HOUSE.** Yeah, not a fan.

**WILSON.** You're such a pill, House. I, for one, enjoy a good melodrama.

**HOUSE.** Meanwhile, Mr. President, the world is at war.

**WILSON.** It's not *our* war, colonel. Anyway, it's not as if the Russians are beating down our door. (*Fields enters, hands House a telegram. House reads it to himself.*) What's that now?

**HOUSE.** It's the Russians.

**WILSON.** All of them?

**HOUSE.** They seek a meeting—say it's urgent.

**WILSON.** Tell them I promised the American people that we'd stay out of this thing.

**GRIFFITH.** You're afraid of losing, aren't you?

**WILSON.** What?

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**GRIFFITH.** There's an election next year, and you're afraid that if you go back on your promise to stay out of the war, they'll vote you out of office.

**WILSON.** This isn't about the electorate; it's about me. I can't just go changing my mind willy-nilly. People will think I'm, I'm, you know...not a strong, decisive leader.

**HOUSE.** Well, it's true that no one is going to confuse you with 26.

**WILSON.** You had to go there, didn't you?

**HOUSE.** No disrespect intended, Mr. President.

**GRIFFITH.** (*To Wilson.*) You're not an admirer of Mr. Roosevelt, I take it.

**WILSON.** Theodore Roosevelt is an overgrown monkey—no sense of, of nuance, of subtlety—

**HOUSE.** But he does move a crowd, does he not?

**WILSON.** All smoke and mirrors—theatrics!

**HOUSE.** But theatrics backed by rugged, testosterone-fueled strength!

**WILSON.** Pish-posh!

**GRIFFITH.** Colonel House may be on to something, Mr. President. See, on the big screen, with makeup and close-ups and the right storyline, ordinary men—men with little to no charisma or even acting experience—can take on the stature of gods.

**WILSON.** Gods, eh?

**HOUSE.** I like the sound of this, Griffith. But what I want to know is how?

**GRIFFITH.** Oh, it takes years of training, of trying and failing, of working your fingers to the bone to—

**HOUSE.** We don't have that kind of time. But what if images and the power of storytelling were turned toward the non-fictional world?

**GRIFFITH.** That's exactly what I've done. *The Birth of a Nation* is a history.

**HOUSE.** Yes, of, of course it is, but I was thinking about more contemporary history.

**WILSON.** (*To Griffith.*) He means now.

**GRIFFITH.** What are you driving at, House?

**HOUSE.** The president, for example, is a man of strong ideals and honesty, but he could never be accused of carrying a big stick.

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**WILSON.** I'm standing right here.

**HOUSE.** What I'm saying is that with the power of this new medium, Mr. President, well...Look there: *(He points at the movie poster.)* Look at these stark-white robes rippling in the wind, the Klan's galloping horses carrying them to victory. That's the power of the moving picture. Do you see?

**WILSON.** I'm drunk; it's all a little fuzzy.

**GRIFFITH.** The colonel is onto something, Mr. President. What was most gratifying that day on the set was the presence of the man who led that charging brigade in real life.

**WILSON.** Who was it?

**GRIFFITH.** My father.

**WILSON.** There?

**GRIFFITH.** Oh, not exactly. *(Griffith pulls a Klan hood from his pocket.)* The old man is long dead, but this was my daddy's. In his memory, the actor wore it for the climactic scene. All of us were deeply moved.

**WILSON.** The son carrying the father's hood, passing on the illustrious and noble Klan tradition from one generation to the next. That, my friends, is the kind of America I long for once again!

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