

The Emp

Scene One

The studio at the School of Design on Pine Street in San Francisco, April 23, 1877. There are various pieces of furniture and other objects scattered about, as would be the case in an active studio. The easel is on wheels. The furniture can be positioned and repositioned to create other locales needed later in the play. The collection in the room is also the source for all properties.

But for now, Addie Ballou is preparing her canvas. She talks to us as she does.

BALLOU

What do you call an emperor? Majesty? Sire? Highness? Majesty. Sounds right. What I was thinking when I agreed to this, I'll never know. I've painted men with money, men with standing, all sorts. But no emperors. Or madmen. Alright, then. You do all the usual things. Stretch the canvas, apply gesso, arrange a setting... I don't think I want a setting. Just him dropped onto the canvas as if from the sky. Or from some other reality. Isolated but intimately present. At any rate, I'll have to pose him. Or *suggest* a pose. Then sketch him in ochre, fill in the undercoats, detail and finish, varnish and frame... Uoh! I'm shaking.

Norton appears out of the shadows. Addie joins him in a neutral light in an area downstage. They are about to board a horse-drawn streetcar.

Scene Two

NORTON

Excuse me, madam.

BALLOU

Yes.

NORTON

May I?

Offers his hand to help her board.

BALLOU

Thank you.

They stand apart holding on to (imaginary) hand grips.

BALLOU

(responding to a conductor) My fare? Yes.

She searches her purse for a nickel and holds it in the direction of the (imaginary) conductor. Before he can take it...

NORTON

What do mean, sir, asking me for money!?! Have you no idea to whom you speak? Discharge your duties with greater courtesy or I shall have you sacked!

Addie watches the conductor recoil and leave without taking her nickel. She returns it to her purse.

NORTON

Forgive me, but you are recently arrived, madam?

BALLOU

Hm? Yes. Just this afternoon, in fact, from Indiana. I was at the post office to send a letter to my son informing him of my safe arrival, sir.

NORTON

You are a fine mother, madam.

BALLOU

Thank you, sir.

NORTON

I wish you every happiness during your stay in our hilly hamlet.

BALLOU

That is very kind.

NORTON

You are here on holiday, madam?

BALLOU

No, sir, as a matter of fact, I have located here.

NORTON

You will find the city very appreciative of intelligent, cultured ladies such as yourself.

BALLOU

Most kind.

NORTON

I am honored to have been chosen by fortune to have been among the first to welcome you, madam.

BALLOU

As am I by your welcome, sir.

NORTON
You travel alone, madam?

BALLOU
I am some years a widow.

NORTON
My condolences. Should you ever find yourself in need of assistance, call upon the Emperor, he will be forever at your service.

BALLOU
Where should I find this emperor, sir?

NORTON
Ask anywhere. I descend here. A most enjoyable evening to you, madam.

BALLOU
And to you, sir.

She turns back to us, Norton fades into the shadows.

BALLOU
I had been to San Francisco before, I had lectured several times in this city, and I had heard of the famous Norton I, Emperor of the United States and Protector of Mexico, as anyone who visits here is sure to do. But I had never seen the man. I thought perhaps the man on the streetcar was an official of the transportation company, I had no idea he was the Emperor himself. It was only months later as I was passing by the Metropolitan Theatre on Montgomery that I understood who he was.

Scene Three

Montgomery Street, 1875.

BALLOU
There, next to a playbill announcing a revival of *The Gold Demon* with an image of our own David Belasco portraying Norton I, right there next to the poster stood Norton himself – the original article. But I did not, at first, recognize him.

Norton appears again. He tips his hat.

NORTON
Delighted to be meeting you again.

BALLOU
Mr. Norton?

NORTON
I am.

BALLOU
You are famous throughout the City. How do you know me?

NORTON

We met on a streetcar. You had just come from the post office to post a letter to your son.

BALLOU

You have a sharp memory, sir.

NORTON

I pride myself in knowing my subjects, Mrs. Ballou.

BALLOU

I am greatly surprised that you know my name, however.

NORTON

You were speaking once with a woman wearing spectacles. On Kearny Street. She used your name.

BALLOU

I'm afraid I cannot identify who that might have been.

NORTON

A lady involved in advocating for female rights, I believe.

BALLOU

With glasses? Well... I will have to give that some thought.

NORTON

Has our City treated you well?

BALLOU

I am speaking regularly. It is a beautiful and very vibrant place.

NORTON

How do you find it regards your former home in Indiana?

BALLOU

Actually, I am from Ohio, but you are correct. At that moment I was coming from... How did you know...?

NORTON

(suddenly shy) Well, perhaps it is coincidence that I say that place, and not a recollection at all. *(nervously)* Have you invested in a bond?

BALLOU

A bond?

NORTON

Imperial bonds, fifty cents, five and ten dollars. Printed by none other than the famous Charles Albert Murdock, by imperial appointment. I accept coin of the realm, but not the greenback. It is doubtful that the Bank of England can be made to accept the greenback, and as such the people have no guarantee as to its continued solidity.

A bond? BALLOU

Yes, well... It was, as I said, a delight to have... NORTON

he begins to move away.

I *will* take a bond, sir. BALLOU

Deeply sorry to have disturbed you. NORTON

Here is a dollar, I shall take two. BALLOU

Oh, no, shop's closed for the day. Maybe another time. NORTON

He rushes back into the shadows.

BALLOU
 What an odd man. I pass him from time to time, he tips his hat and says nothing. Suits me. I've had my fill of odd men. But then, one afternoon last fall... Well. I'd received news that my daughter, Eva, was finally to join me in November. Oh, that was news so welcome... and so terrifying. She is now just turned eleven. She had been lodging with a fine family in Michigan, a situation I had been supporting for years. And I would visit whenever I could bend my travels to take me to her. And to be living again together was a dream! But we were not accustomed to one another. How would she look and behave? Girls change rapidly at her age. How would *I* look to *her*?

Scene Four

*Near Portsmouth Square, November 1876.
 Addie passes him, head down. He speaks
 rather forcefully as she does.*

Mrs. Ballou! What worries you? NORTON

I'm sorry? BALLOU

You are deep in thought. NORTON

Yes. BALLOU

She tries to continue on

Brooding promotes ill health. NORTON

I'm not brooding. BALLOU

Fretting, spinning mental tales of anguish and dread. NORTON

It really is of no concern of yours, and it is fine news, really, just... BALLOU

You don't know how things will play out? NORTON

You might say. BALLOU

Permit me? NORTON

He takes a slightly battered carnation from his lapel and hands it to Addie.

Oh. Oh, yes, well isn't that sweet. (pause) A carnation, is it? Well. I must be going, I'm late for... BALLOU

And introduce me, please. NORTON

I'm sorry? BALLOU

To whomever it is arrives. NORTON

Surely. Thank you. BALLOU

Addie walks further into the light, leaving Norton watching, concerned, as she goes.

BALLOU
I know he is universally considered to be kindly, but I find him a bit annoying, frankly. That he should pretend to know more about me... about my life... than he had any right to... than he *should* have known. And flaunting it! It was simply rude, in my book. I was so angry that I forgot completely about Eva for a good quarter of an hour. And when my anger cooled... well. My darling daughter was coming to live with me again, and we would find our way, in time.

Scene Five

*Norton appears behind her; on Pine Street,
January 1877.*

Paint me, Mrs. Ballou.	NORTON
Oh! Why did you do that?	BALLOU
Do what?	NORTON
Sneak up on me!	BALLOU
I walk like a cat. I'm sorry. I don't mean to startle.	NORTON
Well, you do.	BALLOU
Mrs. Ballou, the Emperor needs a portrait.	NORTON
Does he?	BALLOU
What is an emperor who has never been portrayed on canvas? Isn't that one of the perquisites?	NORTON
Have we been introduced?	BALLOU
I introduced myself in front of the Metropolitan, some time ago.	NORTON
By a mutual acquaintance?	BALLOU
Oh, come now, do you really stand on ceremony, or only when you wish to prevaricate?	NORTON
That was... you were very...	BALLOU
Candid?	NORTON
Rude.	BALLOU

Same thing. NORTON

Excuse me, I really must... BALLOU

Paint me. NORTON

How do you know I am an artist? BALLOU

Aren't you? NORTON

How do you know that? BALLOU

I am a member of the Bohemians. And San Franciscans jabber and talk. Paint me. NORTON

I have not painted anyone in months. BALLOU

I know. Why not? NORTON

That's no business of yours. BALLOU

Eva's arrival? Are you getting along? NORTON

(suspicious) Beginning to. BALLOU

Do you like her? NORTON

I don't see where... BALLOU

I am interested. NORTON

We enjoy many of the same things. She is bright. And charming. And headstrong, which I admire. BALLOU

Give this to her, from her Emperor. NORTON

He removes one of the peacock feathers

from his hat.

BALLOU

Oh, she will love this. Still, having her close and always in need on entertainment does take some getting used to.

NORTON

(pause) Will you paint me?

BALLOU

I've so little time.

NORTON

My time is short as well, but my schedule is completely empty.

BALLOU

I doubt I can find anything until April.

NORTON

I look my best in springtime.

BALLOU

And even then, I have lectures, engagements... they take me away.

NORTON

I have the legislature, ceremonials, affairs of state.

BALLOU

Do you? *(pause)* When in April?

NORTON

The first week is... have you a calendar?

BALLOU

I have one of those little cards that...

NORTON

Murdock prints. Let us take a look.

BALLOU

If memory serves, the week of the 16th...

NORTON

I travel to Petaluma. The week of the 11th?

BALLOU

I speak in Portland.

NORTON

The 23rd?

BALLOU

I can't think of anything.

NORTON
Ten in the morning on April 23rd. At?

BALLOU
I shall attempt to reserve the studio at the School of Design.

NORTON
Right here on Pine Street?

BALLOU
Yes, yes, on Pine.

NORTON
(*with a bow*) I am honored.

BALLOU
Be on time.

Scene Six

(*to us*) How did that happen? But here we are. Four months later. Eva and I went to Redding to visit son Ed, and from there I branched out to give lectures and speak with local suffrage chapters. But I saw him occasionally and...

Norton passes by.

NORTON
April 23rd, Mrs. Balou, don't forget!

BALLOU
(*to us*) Each time, the same.

NORTON
See you in April!

BALLOU
(*to us*) That day in January I suddenly understood the fascination San Francisco has with that man, and it has been growing in me ever since. I now *want* to paint him. And to understand him. The more I learn, the more I wonder.

Norton fades again.

Scene Seven

We return to the studio in April. Addie paces silently, organizes her brushes, tests the gesso to see that it is dry, sharpens her pencil with sandpaper. A bell rings. She pulls on a cord and waits. A moment later Norton steps into the room.

NORTON
Good, I'm in the right place.

And five minutes late. BALLOU

Lovely. Spacious and light. NORTON

Going forward I will need you on time. BALLOU

Quite comfortable. NORTON

I'm just fitting this in, you know, between many other obligations. BALLOU
There is a long pause. Addie fiddles with a brush. Norton spends more time than is necessary taking in the room.

Shall we? BALLOU

Yes! Yes, where do you wish me? NORTON

Just here. I was thinking that you would stand holding your hat, one hand on the chair... BALLOU

I've been photographed. NORTON

(?) Yes, I've seen... BALLOU

In that pose, I mean. NORTON

I see. *In* a photograph. BALLOU

Bit old-fashioned don't you think? NORTON

I thought it fitting for an emperor. BALLOU

Just so. I feel that if you could be more... *less* conventional? NORTON

Now that you mention it, I had something else in mind but I was afraid you'd find it... lacking. In dignity. BALLOU

Perfect. NORTON

I see you seated... BALLOU

Very good. (*he immediately sits*) NORTON

...here, holding your walking stick lightly in your right hand. BALLOU

Thus? NORTON

Yes. And with your hat upon a table behind you. BALLOU

Oh. NORTON

I knew you wouldn't like it. BALLOU

I'd rather keep the hat on. NORTON
doffing his hat to show a bald pate

Warmth or vanity? BALLOU

After a certain age a man's hair grows everywhere except where it is wanted. NORTON

May I see you with your hat on? BALLOU
he obliges

I prefer it on the table. NORTON

Can you tolerate the glare? BALLOU

It hides your face, and you have a noble visage. NORTON

(*slightly irritated*) Hmph. As you say. BALLOU

Please, be at ease. NORTON