

# **An Art Shop in Greenwich Village**

By Ray Cummings



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The little shop was dimly lighted—a lurid red glow at one side and a faint amber radiance from above. For a moment I stood looking around uncertainly—at the slovenly display-cases and tables, the unframed paintings on the walls, and the long shelves crowded with curios.

“Perhaps something in particular the *señor* would wish?” suggested the little old man ingratiatingly.

I glanced back into the black shadow that shrouded the farther end of the room, and then turned to meet the snakelike little eyes that were roving over my figure appraisingly.

I shook my head. “No,” I said; “nothing in particular.”

The little old man straightened his bent back with an effort, reaching a skinny hand toward the shelf above his head.

“The *señor* plays chess, perhaps?” His hand held a little white figure carved in ivory; he dusted it off against the faded black of his coat-sleeve. “A wonderful game, *señor*. This set is of the Moors—they carve superb in ivory, the Moors. Perhaps in the London Museum of Victoria and Albert the *señor* has seen the work before?”

“No,” I said, and moved away down the length of the table. “I lived in Spain a year. Your place interests me.”

He laid aside the ivory figure and followed me down the room with feeble steps; I noticed then that one of his feet dragged as he walked. It was peculiarly unpleasant—indeed the whole personality of this decrepit little old man seemed unpleasant and repulsive. I stopped in the red glow of an iron lantern that hung from a bracket upon the wall.

“I lived in Spain a year,” I repeated. “That is why, when I saw your sign, I stopped in to look around.”

He stood beside me, looking up into my face, his head shaking with the palsy of old age, his eyes gleaming into mine.

“In *España* you have lived, eh?” The thin, cracked treble of his voice came from lips that parted in a toothless smile. “That is good—very good, *señor*.”

“In Granada,” I added briefly.

He put a shaking hand upon my arm; involuntarily I drew back from his touch.

“The *señor* has lived in Granada! My birthplace, *señor*—yet for fifteen years have I been here in your New York. Fifteen years,

selling here the treasures of *España*. You have lived in Granada—ah, then, *señor*, the Alhambra you have seen?”

“Yes,” I said, “of course.”

He picked up a little vase from the table before us. The fire of patriotism that for an instant had lighted his face was gone; cupidity marked it instead.

“The *señor* perhaps is interested in ceramics?” His voice was almost a whine. “The great Alhambra vase—greatest example of the ceramic art of the Moors in all the world—here is its miniature, *señor*. See—gazelles in cream and golden luster upon a blue field.

“And there—over there you see a Moorish plate, painted with a luster of blue and copper. And there—the golden pottery of Malaga—you have heard of that, *señor*? *Madre miu*, what beautiful pottery they made—those Musselmen of Malaga!” He pointed at the lower shelf. “See it gleam, *señor* like purest gold. But to you, *señor*, you who have been to *España*—because we understand these things, you and I—will I sacrifice my treasure.”

“No,” I said. “The price does not matter.”

On the wall, above the red glow of the lantern, hung an unframed canvas. In the amber light that shone on it from above I could see its great splashes of color—the glittering, gaudy parade of a bull-ring.

“That painting there,” I asked—“what is that?”

Again he put his hand upon my arm, and I felt myself shiver in the close, warm air of the room.

“The *señor* perhaps is rich?” His voice came hardly above a whisper; he strained upward toward my face as though to exchange some darkly mysterious secret. *Un Americano rico,*” he said, “and the money perhaps does not matter?”

“Perhaps,” I said, and shook off his hold upon my arm.

“If that be so, *señor*, there are many among my treasures I could show.”

“I have no money with me to-night,” I said.

He raised his hand deprecatingly. “Naturally, *señor*. We understand each other. To have money in the pocket—it makes no importance if one understands.”

I glanced up again at the vivid, colorful bull-ring pictured upon the wall. His eyes followed mine.

“Francisco Goya,” he said. “Greatest in *España* to follow the great Velasquez.”

“You mean that is an original Goya?” I exclaimed.

His voice fell again to whining. “Ah, *señor*, no more can I tell you than they told to me. You, perhaps, who are of the art a judge—you can say if indeed it is of Goya.”

He waited, but I did not answer.

“A person very droll, *señor*—the great Goya. A fighter in the bull-ring once, before he took the brush. And with the

women—*Madre mia*, how they loved him—those women in the court of the fourth Charles! He painted well, *señor*. And his pictures of the bull-ring—like that, *señor*—his hands went up as though in benediction—“there are none better.”

I stood for a moment looking up at the painting.

“If the *señor* wishes,” he added softly, “it troubles me not to take it down.”

I shook my head, “A realist, this Goya,” I said.

“He had no heart, *señor*. What he saw he painted without pity. He was, as you would say, a satirist.”

I had no idea that the painting before me was genuine—nor indeed did I much care. But this little, withered old man, and his musty, cobweb-laden shop, had about them something vaguely sinister that fascinated me—a subtle sense of mystery I could not escape.

“I have studied art,” I said. “You interest me.”

Again I met his glittering eyes, and it struck me then, I think for the first time, that there was in them a light that was not the light of reason.

For an instant I could see him hesitate, and then as though he had reached a sudden decision, he motioned me to a chair and seated himself, facing me in the red glow of the lantern overhead.

“The *señor* is very young,” he began softly; again he hesitated, glancing swiftly over his shoulder as if to reassure himself that

there was no one else in the room. "Very young, *señor*, but also—shall we say —very rich?"

His eyes were fastened upon mine; the red beam from the lantern lighted his hollow cheeks with a weird, unearthly light. I took off my hat and laid it on the table at my side.

"That need not concern us," I said.

"*Muy bien, señor*. We understand each other *segurimente*. Of the character I am judge—for I am an old *señor*, and many people have I known."

He pulled a watch from his pocket. "The hour is late. No one comes to buy." He rose to his feet and locked the door that led to the street.

"That is better, *señor*." He came back toward me with his tottering, dragging step, and switched off the amber light in the ceiling. "The *señor* will remove his storm-coat?"

I laid my overcoat on the table and sat again in the little wicker chair. The shadows of the room were close around us now. In the heavy red of the light I could see only a corner of the table and the shaking figure of the little old man as he sat facing me. Behind him the solid blackness had crept up like a wall.

"*Bien, señor*. That is well. Now we talk."

I felt my pulse quicken a little; but I held my gaze firm to his.

"Only to you, *señor*, would I say what now you shall hear." His glance shifted upward into the darkness, then back again to mine.

“Francisco Goya, Velasquez, Sorolla y Bastida—all these great men of *España* are known to the *señor*. Is it not so?”

I nodded.

“But one there is—we shall call him Pedro Vasquez y Carbajál—of him the *señor* has never heard?”

“No,” I said; “I have never heard of him.”

He leaned forward in his chair again; his locked fingers in his lap writhed upon each other like little twisting snakes.

“A wonderful painter, *señor*, for he knew the secret to put life upon his canvas.” His voice fell to a sibilant whisper.

“Vasquez y Carbajál,” I replied. “No, I never heard of him.”

“Only one picture, *señor*, to make him famous. Very old he is, this Vasquez. One picture to make him famous. Five years it has taken him. Five years of working—working—” His voice trailed off into silence.

“Yes?” I prompted.

His head had sunk to his breast; he raised it with a start at my word. The fire came back to his eyes; he sat up rigid in his chair.

“A picture of the kind none other could paint, *señor*. The secret to put life upon canvas. Is that not droll?” His querulous, half maniacal laughter echoed across the shadowed room. “From the mortal living, *señor*, we take the life, and upon the canvas we make it immortal.”

I pushed my chair backward violently, half starting to my feet.

“Stay, *señor*.” He raised his hand, pointing a finger at me. “You who are of the art a judge—you would see this painting, no? This picture by the great Vasquez that soon will be seen by all the world?”

He laughed again—an eery laugh that chilled my blood.

“One moment, *señor*—one little moment, and your eyes shall see that which they have never seen before.” He rose to his feet unsteadily. “Life upon canvas, *señor*. And beauty—vivid and real to make your pulses beat strong.”

I stood beside him under the lantern.

“We shall look upon it together, you and I.” He raised a hand apologetically. “That is, of course—if the *señor* desires.” The mystery his words implied appealed to me—I was in my twenties then—and to the spirit of adventure that has always been strong in me. It was chicanery, I knew, but interesting, and I would see it through.

“Very well,” I said. “I will look at your painting.”

In silence I followed him into the shadows of the back of the room.

“Careful, *señor*—a chair is here.”

He suddenly drew aside a curtain in the darkness, and we stepped into a dim hallway, with a narrow flight of stairs leading to the floor above.

“I shall go in front, *señor*. You will follow. The way is not long, and there is light.”

The stairs were narrow and uncarpeted; they creaked a little under our tread. On the landing a window stood partly open, its shade flapping in the wind. The snow on the ledge outside had drifted in over the sill.

We stopped on the landing, and the old man closed the window softly.

“We speak not so loud now, *señor*, so—” He broke off abruptly. “It is better we speak not so loud now,” he finished.

At the top of the stairs we turned back and passed through a doorway into a room that evidently was immediately over the one we had just left.

It was a room perhaps thirty feet in length and half as broad. My first impression as I stepped over the threshold was that I had stepped across the world—in one brief instant transported from the bare, ramshackle, tumbledown Bohemianism of Greenwich Village, into the semibarbaric, Levantine splendor of some Musselman ruler. The room was carpeted with Oriental rugs; its walls were hung with tapestries; its windows shrouded with portieres. Moorish weapons—only symbols now of the Mohammedan reign over Spain—decorated the walls. Two couches were piled high with vividly colored pillows.

The rugs and all the hangings were somber in tone. The whole room bore an air of splendid, lavish luxury; and yet there was about it something oppressive—a brooding silence, perhaps, or the heavy scent of incense.

“My room of work, *señor*,” said the little old man softly, closing the door behind us.

I noticed then that there was one other door to the room, in the side wall near the front where there were two very large windows almost like a side skylight; and that this other door stood slightly ajar.

There was a huge fireplace with a blazing log-fire. I think that without its cheery crackle the oppressive feeling of mystery that hung over the room would have been almost unbearable.

“We shall have more light, *señor*.” The room was lighted only by a wavering yellow glow from the fire. He touched a switch, and from above came a flood of rose-colored light that bathed us in its sensuous warmth.

Over by the windows a large canvas, its face covered with a cloth, stood upon an easel; in front of the easel, nearer the side of the room, by the fireplace, I saw there was a model stand—a small board platform resting on the floor.

“You have a luxurious workshop,” I said casually.

The little old man looked over the room with an appraising, approving eye.

“One must have one’s ease, *señor*, when one creates.” He turned another switch, and a long row of hooded electric bulbs across the top of the windows cast their brilliant light directly downward upon the shrouded canvas.

“Come here,” he said. The whine had left his voice. He spoke the words as though now unconsciously he had slipped into the role of master, displaying to his pupil a great work of art.

He grasped me by the coat-sleeve, pulling me forward until I stood with my back against the portieres, and faced the shrouded canvas. Then abruptly he jerked down the cloth, and in the brilliant white glare from overhead the painting stood revealed.

I stared at the canvas. What I expected to see I do not know. What I saw left me gasping—first with amazement, then pity, then with an almost irrepressible desire to laugh. For upon the canvas was only a huge smear of many colored pigments—utterly formless, without meaning. I stared an instant, then turned and met the eyes of the little old man beside me. They gleamed into mine with triumph and pride, and in them I saw again—and this time plainly—the look of madness.

I held back the smile that struggled to my lips. “This—this painting—is it you who—”

“Is that not life, *señor*?” His thin, treble voice carried an exultant, masterful note. “Can you not see it there? Human life—painted in with pigments to make it immortal.”

“Was it you who painted that—that picture?” A great pity rose in my heart for this poor, deluded madman.

“I? Oh, *señor*, you do me great honor. It was painted, I have said, by Vasquez—Pedro Vasquez y Carbajál. A wonderful man, this Vasquez. They are children beside him, these others. Is it not so?”

I said nothing, but gazed again at the miserably grotesque daubs on the canvas.

“Look, *señor*! Is that not a soul you see in those eyes? A human soul?” He pointed a shaking finger at the smear of color before us, his eyes shining with pride. “You call them realists—these Goyas and these Zuloagas. You have seen the girls of Zuloaga, with their white faces and their lips of red. You have looked into their eyes—these girls he paints—have you ever seen there the soul?”

“‘Naturalism,’ they say; ‘a richness of tone!’ or ‘with a subtlety he paints.’ Or perhaps it is a ‘fuller impasto.’ Bah! They are but words—tricks of words for the critics to play with. They paint of life —these masters, as we call them—but their paintings are dead. They cannot capture the soul, *señor*—the soul that always struggles free—the human soul never can they hold imprisoned upon their canvas.

“And those lips, *señor*—see her beautiful red lips—are they not about to speak? The breath that trembles between them—is it not a little sigh she would breathe—a sigh to tell us she cannot understand this life that stirs within her?”

“She would have music, *señor*—music to whisper those little woman secrets no man shall hear. See the lute she holds—her fingers have but brushed its strings, and she has laid it down.

“And that hand—there upon her breast. Closer, *señor*—bend closer. Can you not see veins upon that hand? Blue veins they are, but in them there is red blood flowing—red blood to feed the flesh of her body—blood to give her life and hold

imprisoned there the soul. Can you not see it, *señor*? Human blood—the blood of life in a portrait.”

His voice rose sharp and shrill with triumph, and he ended again with his horrible senile laughter.

The jangling of a bell rang through the house. The little old man met my glance and hesitated. Then as the ring was repeated—I could hear it now; it was in the shop down-stairs—he muttered a Spanish oath softly to himself.

“Some one wants to see me,” he said. “A customer, perhaps—who knows. The *señor* will excuse me one little moment?”

“Yes,” I said; “I will wait for you here.”

“When the business calls, *señor*, it is not good for the pleasure to interfere.” He looked around the room uncertainly, and then started for the door through which we had entered.

“I leave the *señor* not alone”—he glanced significantly at the canvas—“and only for one little moment.”

When he had left the room I stood again before the canvas, partly enveloped in the great folds of the heavy window portieres. On the stairs outside I could hear the dragging footsteps of the old man as he tottered back to the shop below. I examined the canvas more closely now. There was upon it every color and combination of color, like the heaped-up pigments on a huge, untidy palette. But I noticed that brown seemed to predominate—a dirty, drab, faded brown, inexpressibly ugly, and somehow very sinister. It seemed a pigment color I had never seen before. I could see, too, that the

paints were laid on very thick—it was done in oils—as though it had been worked over and over again, for months or even years.

A light footfall sounded near at hand, a rustling of silk, the click of a latch. A girl stood in the partly opened side door—a young girl, hardly more than fifteen or sixteen, dressed in Moorish costume. She stood an instant hesitating, with her back partly turned to me, looking about the room. Then, leaving the door open behind her, she picked up a lute that was standing against the wall—I had not noticed before that it was there—and crossed the room toward the fireplace.

The girl crossed the room slowly; her back was still partly turned as she passed me. It took her but a moment to reach the fireplace, yet in that moment I had a vague but unmistakable feeling of being in the presence of an overpowering physical exhaustion. Her shoulders seemed to droop; she trailed the lute in her loose fingers over the heavy nap of the carpet; there was about her white figure as she walked a slackness of muscle, a limpness, a seeming absence of energy that was almost uncanny.

She reached the fireplace and sank on a hassock, holding the lute across her knees, her eyes staring away into the distance behind me. It was as though without conscious thought she had dropped into a model's pose.

I must have stepped forward into plainer view, or made some slight noise, for the girl's gaze abruptly shifted downward and met mine full.

“Oh, *señor*, I—” She showed no fear. She did not start to her feet, but sat quiet, as though in sudden bewilderment—yet with a mind too utterly exhausted to think clearly. “Oh, *señor*, I did not know. I thought only the *maestro* would be here, I came to pose for him. It is the hour.”

I tried to speak quietly. “He will be here in a moment,” I said. “I have been looking at your—your portrait.”

The girl did not smile, as I think I hoped she would, but stared at me apathetically. I held her glance a moment; then it wandered vaguely to the easel as though her thoughts were still groping with the import of my words.

In the shop down-stairs I could hear footsteps on the board flooring. After a moment I stepped forward out of the window recess, and, drawing up a chair, sat down beside the girl.

She dropped her gaze to mine without emotion. I could see her face had once been beautiful. From this close view-point I could see, too, that her lips were pale with an almost bluish paleness. Her cheeks were very white—a whiteness that was not a pallor, but seemingly more an absence of red. And then I got the vague, absurd impression that I could see into her skin—as though it contained nothing to render it opaque.

“Do you pose for the *maestro* every night?” I asked. My tone held that gentle solicitude with which one might address a child who was very ill.

“*Sí, señor*; every night at this hour.”

Her manner was utterly impersonal; her eyes still held that listless, apathetic stare. I gazed into them steadily: and then, far down in their depths, I seemed to see lurking a shadowy look of appeal.

“I have been examining your portrait,” I said. “It is a very—curious picture, is it not?”

A faint little glow of color came into the girl’s cheeks. She seemed somehow stronger now; but it was a gain of strength rather more mental than physical. I sensed dimly that, talking with me, her mind was clearing. She hesitated, regarding me appraisingly.

“A very, very curious portrait indeed it is, *señor*.” Again she paused; and then, as though she had come to a sudden decision, she added slowly: “A very curious portrait, *señor*. To me it has no meaning. Once I said that to the *maestro*, and he was very angry. He told me I was mad, because I could not see the art—the wonderful art in his work. He beat me then.” She shuddered at the memory. “But that was very long ago, *señor*, and never have I said it since. And every night I pose.”

“You are ill, *señorita*?” I said gently.

“The portrait needs so much of me,” she answered. And then some thought or memory that her words did not reveal made her shudder again. “I am ill, *señor*, as you say. Very ill. And that, too, makes the *maestro* very angry. I am not so beautiful now for the portrait. And soon I shall die—and then I can pose no longer.”

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