

# THE LAST SOUTHERN GENTLEMAN

a play in one act

by

RALEIGH MARCELL

based in part on  
"The Shadows" in  
THE AIR-CONDITIONED NIGHTMARE  
by  
HENRY MILLER

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2M 1F\*  
(\*plays 4 characters)

white columns, an easy chair  
some bushes, a projected image  
Running time: about 40 minutes

WEEKS HALL, eccentric Southerner  
HENRY MILLER, novelist  
\*INEZ, Weeks's secretary  
\*YOUNG LADY, loony visitor  
\*SPOT, Weeks's dog  
\*TOUR GUIDE

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THE LAST SOUTHERN GENTLEMAN

(amid shadows and light we discover  
HENRY MILLER, in a white linen suit)

HENRY MILLER

It was in Paris that I first began to dream of visiting Louisiana. It was Abe Rattner, the painter, who put the bug in my head. We had been discussing camouflage when by some strange transition, he began talking about his friend and fellow artist, Weeks Hall who he said lived in a strange part of the world, in this town called New Iberia. His description of Weeks Hall and the house he lived in was so vivid, so out of this world, that I resolved to go to Louisiana one day and see with my own eyes the wonders he described.

(Henry fades into shadows as WEEKS  
HALL is discovered. he wears jeans,  
blue denim shirt, thick glasses,  
loosely knotted white tie, a leather  
brace on his right hand & wrist.  
ever-present cigarette. he is seated  
on a comfy chair with side table)

WEEKS HALL

Inez! ... INEZ!

(INEZ enters, properly secretarial)

INEZ

Yes, Mr. Hall. More dictation?

WEEKS HALL

Am I dead? ...

(she hesitates)

Ah-ha!

(this is not the first time this has  
happened)

INEZ

You're not dead, Mr. Hall.

WEEKS HALL

(unconvinced)  
Better go out into the garden, the far corner, into the family  
cemetery, and see if I'm there.

INEZ

But you're here.

WEEKS HALL

I want to know if I'm buried there.

INEZ

(maybe she can "get" him this time)  
And what if you are?

WEEKS HALL

....You can have the rest of the week off. Now go!

(she starts to scamper off but returns)

INEZ

Oh, this just arrived.

(hands him an envelope and leaves)

(Weeks is a man whose life has been  
spent waiting: for people to visit,  
for certain words to arrive, and  
when words arrive they are treated  
with awed & restrained anticipation.  
at first his words are seemingly  
addressed to the still unread  
contents of the envelope)

WEEKS HALL

My great-great grandparents built this house in 1834. It is  
called "The Shadows". I inherited it in 1919. I am alone and  
the last of my family. I have spent the entirety of my adult  
life seeking a means of preserving this house for posterity...  
and have failed utterly.... This letter is from the American  
Institute of Architects.

(he opens the letter, with difficulty)  
I've been waiting for their answer...You see, some years ago  
I offered to give this place to them.

(MORE)

WEEKS HALL (Continued)

(he quickly scans the letter)  
Well! Looks like the place is still mine.

(pours himself a glass of wine)  
This was intended to be a celebratory bottle. Curious thing about wine. It works just as well on disappointment... I am destined, it seems, to die by the glassfull.

(he turns to view the unseen "house")  
My great great grandparents built this place. But I *created* it...And since 1922 this house, and myself, have constituted the local ruins.

(Inez returns)

WEEKS HALL (Continued)

Well---?

INEZ

....You're here.

WEEKS HALL

That calls for a toast: To Inez Hebert -- whose fear of this arthritic, partially blind, crippled, and still pathetically sober body is far greater than her desire for "the rest of the week off"!

INEZ

Oh, Mr. Hall --- there are several...ladies...outside.

WEEKS HALL

Gawking?

INEZ

You could call it that.

WEEKS HALL

Well then! They must be attended to.

INEZ

Mr. Hall...

WEEKS HALL

No-no. This is precisely why I keep him around. He must earn his keep. And, besides, it's not proper to keep one's idiot twin-brother locked away in the attic all the time.

(Inez sees the futility of intervention and exits. Weeks disappears into shadows and suddenly pops up from behind some bushes, only the top half of his body visible. He wears a grotesque mardi-gras mask)

WEEKS HALL (Continued)

Ah! Ladies---!

(rips off the mask)  
Are you looking for Mr. We...we...Weeks Hall? Do you wi...wish to go through this house?

(slobbering and stammering)  
Mr. Ha...ha...Hall is a...a...away at the mo...moment but I would be ple...ple pleased to --- if I could only find my pa...pa...pants!

(He comes out from behind the bushes, the Ladies having scampered off)

WEEKS HALL (Continued)

Ladies? Ladies! Don't go away!... STAY AWAY!

(Weeks takes a moment to enjoy his triumph before lapsing into reflection as he turns to gaze at the "house" and light a cigarette)

WEEKS HALL (Continued)

Eighteen years ago. In 1923. The great moving picture director D.W. Griffith stood here, with me, looking at this place after a long delightful evening of wine and coffee and cigarettes. By then he had made his great pictures. Broken Blossoms. Way Down East. Intolerance. Birth of A Nation. Now he was making smaller films. He used this place as the setting for The White Rose which he confessed would not amount to very much. It was sadly true. He also confessed that he would be much happier at anything else than directing pictures. He was caught in a net of circumstances, you see. Some of his own making. Some not. But he felt always bayed by the hounds of those circumstances driving him on to be "up and doing" as he said.

(MORE)

WEEKS HALL (Continued)

To be possessed of the hallucination that he was enormously busy. But as quickly as his confessions were uttered his brain roiled with grand ideas. His next picture would undertake nothing less grand than our Revolution and would be called simply America. But he has never recaptured what had come before. And an entire art form which he helped to create ignores and spurns him.... And here I stand now, 18 years later, and I find myself now where he was then....

(a car horn sounds OFF. Weeks shakes off his reverie, sweeps up a bottle of wine, pouring 2 glasses, which he takes away with him)

(Henry Miller appears, now wearing a suitably tropical hat and carrying a suitcase. he sets the suitcase down and mops his brow, taking in the scene as Weeks sweeps on, handing him a glass of wine)

WEEKS HALL (Continued)

Weeks Hall --- local ruin.

HENRY MILLER

Henry Miller --- writer of dirty books.

(they touch glasses & drink deeply.  
Miller breathes easy.)

HENRY MILLER (Continued)

New York seems a million miles away.

WEEKS HALL

Or a hundred years---?

HENRY MILLER

Yes. At least.

WEEKS HALL

And your trip? Thus far---?

HENRY MILLER

The only way to see America is by automobile. Unfortunately when I left, I'd never driven before. Oh, I'd had half a dozen lessons.

(MORE)

HENRY MILLER (Continued)

I knew how to shift gears, steer, and apply the brake -- what more is necessary? I left New York on a Saturday at noon in high spirits approaching the Holland Tunnel. I'd never been in the damned hole before except in a taxi. It was a nightmare. To get into Newark is easy. To get out --- I circled endlessly for hours. Well, and here I am! In New Iberia, Louisiana.

WEEKS HALL

Another---?

HENRY MILLER

Definitely.

(Weeks fills both glasses. Miller explores)

HENRY MILLER (Continued)

Well? Where is it? That child of yours. That inheritance. That burden of the past you so stoically bear upon your back. Where is it? That house of yours. All I see is an impenetrable bamboo hedge.

WEEKS HALL

(laughs)

I can't allow anyone to just walk in. Unescorted. Unenlightened. "The Shadows" must be discovered in a certain way. My way. This way....

(as they disappear into shadows an IMAGE of "The Shadows" as large as can be achieved, appears. they emerge from shadows. Miller separates himself)

HENRY MILLER

(to himself)

It's alive. Organically alive. Sensuous. As mellow as a great tree. So sturdy and yet so graceful. So full of dignity and simplicity. It evokes the magnificence of a recent past.

(now to Weeks)

I literally shuddered when I walked through the gate.

WEEKS HALL

There are 18 one-hundred year-old live oaks on this acre and a half.

HENRY MILLER

There is something dismal and forbidding in them.

WEEKS HALL

I find them unchanging and protecting.

HENRY MILLER

(reaching up)

Ah--Spanish moss, that peculiar spawn of the south. But what is this?

WEEKS HALL

Aspidistra. Locally known as cast-iron plant. It perseveres and persists. You can't kill it.

(he emphasizes the point by downing his wine)

HENRY MILLER

You've created a fortress here, Weeks.

WEEKS HALL

If only it was! It's impossible to have any privacy. Despite the bamboo. Despite the fence. This place attracts the tourists, those beastly souls who have a mania for seeing the world...

HENRY MILLER

---like me?

WEEKS HALL

No. Because you will understand....

YOUNG LADY (off)

MR. HALL!! MR. HALL---

(a YOUNG LADY practically drops from the sky directly in front of Weeks and Henry)

YOUNG LADY (Continued)

Don't you remember me? Oh how silly! How could you remember me? You've never met me.

(MORE)

YOUNG LADY (Continued)

(to Henry)  
He's never met me.

(to Weeks)  
I wrote to you and you wrote to me...

WEEKS HALL  
---Miss! How did you get in here?

YOUNG LADY  
Ever since I saw the picture of this place in Miss Emily Post's book I have been *desiring* to come here. I said *desiring* on purpose, Mr. Hall.

WEEKS HALL  
Who let you in here?

YOUNG LADY  
Oh, that nice colored man he said it costs two-bits to see the garden and I said "two-bits?" and he said "twenty-five cents, Miss" how quaint! he said "two bits" and called me "Miss"...

WEEKS HALL  
CLEMMY! YOU COME HERE ---!

YOUNG LADY  
Oh is that his name? I've read all about you.

(to Henry)  
I've read all about him.

(to Weeks)  
Does your house really obsess you--?

(to Henry)  
Are you famous? Are you a writer? Because he invites them here and they write about his house...

WEEKS HALL  
---the twenty-five cents was to look at the garden and not to molest me!

YOUNG LADY  
Oh Mr. Weeks Hall did you say *molest* because I said *desiring*???

WEEKS HALL  
CLEMMY---!

YOUNG LADY

(to Henry)

Do you know he puts cardboard dummies in the windows just to confuse the unfortunates like me who pilgrimage here just to stand and gaze at his pretty plantation...

(Weeks stats herding the Young Lady off)

WEEKS HALL

---my dear young lady---!

YOUNG LADY

Oh my dear! I'm "a dear"! I shall expire---

(to Henry)

LOOK! There's one of his "ladies" up there now! I have the picture of this house from Miss Emily Post's Etiquette pinned up on the ceiling above my bed! It's the last thing I see every night before I succumb to sweet slumber and the first thing...

(now she is out and off)

WEEKS HALL

Clemmy! Escort her to the street. And collect an additional two-bits!

(to Henry)

That, sir, is the ugly side of publicity. Lunatics like her. There's also the Midwestern matron. I dealt with a gaggle of them earlier today except I usually climb up to the second floor balcony and urinate over the rail. I have had them walk in on me while I was shaving and in the tub. People have seen more of me that they have of Gypsy Rose Lee!

(Miller now stares at an unseen "Lady" in an upper window)

HENRY MILLER

There is someone up there...

WEEKS HALL

Oh her! She's my some-time day-time Lady.

(Weeks retrieves a Cardboard Lady from behind a column. she can stand on her own and is beautifully seductive. she holds aloft a bottle of Coca Cola)

WEEKS HALL (Continued)

She is my night-time amour ... I was in the drug store one day and I backed into her. By instinct I turned and said, "Excuse me". The clerk snickered. Two ladies in line whispered to each other. And the color did rise in my face. Well, I had to have her. So I bought her. And here she is... I mean, it's pure surrealism, isn't it? Live people on guard before an inanimate object. Acting surreptitiously before a paper Lady... SO ...some evenings she's up in my bedroom peeking out from behind gauzy curtains.

(he carefully arranges her)

There! Lives alone does he? Drinks too much? Lectures his man Clemmy on philosophy? Pisses over the balcony? Well, here's something else to chew upon ye people of New Iberia!

HENRY MILLER

And look at what she's holding.

WEEKS HALL

Ah yes! Demand! That's what it's all about these days. Publicity. Oh, the demand created by publicity is nothing short of miraculous, you see. Look here!

(meaning the Coke)

Taste, for the first time, some...brownish...caffeene-laced...sweetened liquid from some roadside stand AND IT TASTES LIKE WHAT IT IS! ... But ...have it brought to you in the pomp and circumstances of the American Soda Fountain and it becomes the national drink!

HENRY MILLER

Then you eschew publicity?

WEEKS HALL

Oh no. Certainly not. Because it has another side. One which will be our salvation.