

Alma / John  
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I heard you sing and I've never heard anyone sing with quite so much . . . feeling! No wonder they call you "the Nightingale of the Delta."

ALMA. It's sweet of you to fib so, I sang so badly.

MRS. BUCHANAN. You're just being modest! (She simpers, as she goes off. Alma had risen from the bench. She now sits down again and closes her eyes, unfolding a fan suspended about her throat. John glances down at her, then notices an unexploded firecracker. He picks it up, lights it, and tosses it under the bench. It goes off and Alma springs up with a sharp outcry. He laughs and descends the steps and comes over to the bench.)

JOHN. Hello, Miss Alma.

ALMA. Johnny Buchanan, did you throw that firecracker?

JOHN. Ha ha!

ALMA. It scared me out of my wits! Why, I'm still breathless.

JOHN. Ha ha!

ALMA. Ha ha ha! I think I needed a little shock like that to get me over the shock of my fiasco—on the bandstand!

JOHN. I heard you sing. I liked it.

ALMA. Ha ha ha ha ha! You liked both verses of it? I sang *one twice!* Ha ha ha . . .

JOHN. It was good enough to sing three or four times more.

ALMA. *Chivalry!* Chivalry still survives in the Southern states!

JOHN. Mind if I sit down with you?

ALMA. Oh, please, please *do!* There's room enough for us both. Neither of us is terribly large—in *diameter!* Ha ha ha! (He sits down. There is an awkward pause.)

JOHN. You sang with so much feeling, Miss Alma.

ALMA. The feeling was panic!

JOHN. It sounded O.K. to me.

ALMA. Oh, I can't hear myself sing, I just feel my throat and tongue working and my heart beating fast! —a *hammer* . . .

JOHN. Do you have palpitations when you sing?

ALMA. Sometimes I'm surprised that I don't just drop dead!

JOHN. Then maybe you shouldn't.

ALMA. Oh, afterward I feel I've done something, and that's a different feeling from what one feels—most times . . .

JOHN. You seem to be still shaking?

ALMA. That firecracker was a shock to my whole nervous system! Ha ha ha!



JOHN. I'm sorry. I had no idea that you were so nervous.

ALMA. Nobody has a right to be so nervous! You're—you're home for the holidays, are you? I mean home for the rest of the summer?

JOHN. I've finished medical school. But I'm connected with a hospital now, doing laboratory work.

ALMA. Oh, in *what*, how *thrilling*! How thrilling that sounds, in *what*? —Uh?

JOHN. Bacteriology.

ALMA. *That's—* (*She gasps.*) —that's something to do with, with, with a . . . *microscope*? —Uh?

JOHN. Sometimes you have to look through a microscope.

ALMA. I looked through a telescope once, at Oxford, Mississippi, at the state university when Father delivered the baccalaureate address there one spring. But I've never, never looked through a *microscope*! Tell me, what do you see, I mean, what is it like, through a microscope, if that question makes any sense? —Uh?

JOHN. (*Slowly.*) Well—you see pretty much the same thing that you see through a telescope.

ALMA. Ohhhh?

JOHN. A—a cosmos, a—microcosmos! —part anarchy and—part order . . . (*Music is heard again.*)

ALMA. Part anarchy and part order! Oh, the *poetry* of science, the *incredible* poetry of it! Ha ha ha!

JOHN. (*Vaguely.*) Yes . . .

ALMA. Part anarchy and part order—the footprints of God—Uh?

JOHN. His footprints, maybe, yes . . . but not—God!

ALMA. Isn't it strange? He never really, *really*—exposes Himself! Here and there is a footprint, but even the footprints are not very easy to follow! No, you can't follow. In fact you don't even know which way they're pointing . . . Ha ha ha!

JOHN. How did we get started on that subject?

ALMA. Heaven knows, but we did! —So you're home for a while! I bet your mother's delighted, she's so crazy about you, constantly singing your praises, tells me you graduated *magna cum laude* from Johns Hopkins last summer! What are your—future plans?

JOHN. I'm leaving tomorrow.

ALMA. Oh, tomorrow? So soon! As soon as all that?!

JOHN. Just got a wire from an old teacher of mine who's fighting bugs in Cuba.

ALMA. Fighting bugs! In Cuba?



JOHN. Yes. Bugs in Cuba. *Fever bugs.*

ALMA. Ohhhh, fever! —Ha ha ha . . .

JOHN. There's a little epidemic down there with some unusual—  
aspects, he says. And I've always wanted to visit a Latin country.  
(*He spreads his knees.*)

ALMA. Oh, those Latins. All they do is dream in the sun, dream,  
dream in the sun and indulge their senses!

JOHN. (*Smiling suddenly.*) Well, I've heard that cantinas are  
better than saloons, and they tell me that señoritas are—caviar  
among females!

ALMA. Be careful you don't get caught. They say that the tropics  
are a perfect quagmire. People go there and never are *heard of*  
again!

JOHN. Well, it couldn't be hotter than here, that's one sure thing.

ALMA. Oh, my, isn't it dreadful? Summer isn't the pleasantest  
time of year to renew your acquaintance with Glorious Hill, Mis-  
sissippi— The Gulf wind has failed us this year. It usually cools the  
nights off, but it has failed us this year.

JOHN. Driving along the river cools you off.

ALMA. How heavenly that sounds, driving along the river to cool  
off!

JOHN. Does it sound good to you?

ALMA. Almost too good to believe!

JOHN. Why don't we take a drive.

ALMA. What a *divine suggestion!* (*She springs up. But Mrs.  
Buchanan enters quickly.*)

MRS. BUCHANAN. *John! John, darling!*

JOHN. What is it, Mother?

MRS. BUCHANAN. Your father and I have been searching the  
whole Square for you! —Excuse us, Miss Alma!

ALMA. Certainly, Mrs. Buchanan. (*She closes her eyes for a  
moment with a look of infinite desolation.*)

MRS. BUCHANAN. (*Continuing as she grabs hold of John's arm.*)  
Your father's received a call from Mrs. Arbuckle, but I insist that  
he must go right to bed; he's about to collapse from exhaustion,  
and there's absolutely no reason why you can't go and give that  
woman—please excuse us, Miss Alma! (*She is dragging him away.*)  
—the morphine injection, that's all that can be done . . .

JOHN. (*Calling back.*) Goodbye, Miss Alma.

ALMA. Goodbye! Goodbye! (*She sinks back down on the bench.*)

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ACT THREE

A CAVALIER'S PLUME

SCENE 1

*John precedes Alma down the steps into the D. area of the square. He is cupping his hands to light a cigarette.*

ALMA. (*With quiet de-speration.*) God.

JOHN. What did you say, Miss Alma?

ALMA. I said God.

JOHN. (*Wryly.*) With reverence suitable—to a minister's daughter?

ALMA. I'm afraid not. I said it just to myself as a—as an expletive of disgust with my behavior tonight.

JOHN. I haven't noticed anything about your behavior tonight that should disgust you, Miss Alma, not a thing.

ALMA. You haven't noticed a thing unusual about it?

JOHN. Unusual, yes, you've been unusually quiet, but at a movie you're not expected to compete with the piano.

ALMA. We've walked three blocks from the movie to the square and I've scarcely spoken a word.

JOHN. Oh, that I noticed and I wondered about it. I thought maybe you'd remembered some other New Year's Eve engagement that you'd—forgotten.

ALMA. Do you really think I have so many engagements that they slip my mind?

JOHN. I've known some young ladies that couldn't keep their social calendars straight during the holiday season.

ALMA. I'm sure you have, among debutantes in the East, in Baltimore, but here, in Glorious Hill, in my case, no, no, I assure you, although I did cancel a New Year's Eve engagement with Roger Doremus. Remember Roger Doremus? One of the few that attended the little cultural meeting at the rectory?

JOHN. Oh, yes, Doremus, he's a noticeable, a rather—distinctive young man.



ALMA. He's made me an offer of what he regards as a marriage.

JOHN. "Regards as" but isn't?

ALMA. Not in my opinion. (*The duologue is charged as though it were a quarrel.*)

JOHN. In what way was it unacceptable to you?

ALMA. Strange you'd ask: can't you imagine?

JOHN. No, I can't, it's—too cold.

ALMA. You've seen him. —Can you imagine any intimacy with him?

JOHN. The idea of an intimacy with him never crossed my mind.

ALMA. Just imagine! —Doctors are supposed to imagine the feelings of others, even if not seriously interested.

JOHN. I've seen him at the Delta Planter's Bank.

ALMA. He's employed there, yes. How did he impress you?

JOHN. As a very nervous young man. I gave him a hundred dollar check to cash and he cashed it for two hundred, which isn't the sort of miscalculation that would be likely to insure his position there if it happens often.

ALMA. Please don't—joke. It could very well be, it probably was, my last offer of marriage.

JOHN. You're well out of it, Alma.

ALMA. And well into *what*?

JOHN. Almost anything else. (*He moves a pace or two.*)

ALMA. Are you taking me home before the bells ring the New Year in? (*Embarrassed by her intensity, he draws a pair of wool mittens from a pocket.*) —You're cold, about to put on mittens, a pair of wool mittens. —Knitted by your mother?

JOHN. Yes, of course. You don't think I'd buy them myself? —She gave them to me, stuffed them in my pocket.

ALMA. Along with much disapproval of your taking me out, even just to a movie, and strong admonitions to bring me straight back to the rectory? Which you're eager to do?

JOHN. Not eager but—you're not cold, Miss Alma?

ALMA. Why, no, my face is burning, the wind is stimulating. If you feel chilly, please endure it a while. Or is it you that's remembered another engagement tonight?

JOHN. (*Returning mittens to pocket.*) Mother said she would wait up for me to—see the New Year in. —Holidays don't mean much to me. I come home for them because mother expects it and—father not being well—

ALMA. Something obligatory. —Frosty branches snapping— lovely . . . (He tosses cigarette away; lights another.) You throw a cigarette away before it's half finished and light another.

JOHN. Tension is catching—especially if you don't understand the reason.

ALMA. Is it so completely mysterious to you?

JOHN. It is: I don't understand it.

ALMA. I've never smoked: Albertine did. Why not I? Would you let me share it with you? (He passes the cigarette to her: she chokes on it a little.) —I've only gone out with two or three young men in Glorious Hill. It was always a failure. Wide, wide stretches of—uninhabitable ground between us, you know.

JOHN. Deserts of misunderstanding? Was that it?

ALMA. That was it: exactly. He'd talk, I'd talk, but then the talk, the effort, would be exhausted. Silence would fall. I'd twist the ring on my finger, sometimes so hard that it would cut my finger. Oh, look, I've cut my finger!

JOHN. You seemed to be over-excited by the movie.

ALMA. Please stop making fun of me! —The caller would look at his watch as if he'd never seen a time-piece before. And, oh, would I know that the desperate undertaking had come to a close. At the door he'd say "I'll call you"—which meant goodbye for good. —Yes, well, about Roger . . .

JOHN. I think I know about Roger. I doubt he always cashes a hundred dollar check for two hundred but I suspect he suspects that he'd be advanced more rapidly at the bank if he were respectably married. Banks think that way.

ALMA. Oh, do they think?! —What Roger said to me was: "We're fond of each other, get along well together, companionship is something."

JOHN. (Not meaning to laugh but laughing.) What an impassioned proposal.

ALMA. Oh, yes, wasn't it, though, a bank employee's proposal, no, no, no!

JOHN. Rejected? Firmly?

ALMA. Very firmly rejected. Yes, something but not enough, I told him. I WANT MORE THAN THAT!

JOHN. You said it that loudly?

ALMA. Not vocally: in my heart. I also said, "We have no desire for each other."



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NOTE: The material which has been excised from this scene can be worked into the climactic scene in the "rented room"—perhaps more tellingly. To make the symbol of the "fireplace" clearer, he can throw off his coat, onto the bed, turn u. to face her, hands making an unseen gesture as he says: "Well, there's your fireplace! You'll observe it's not lighted." —Alma: "Not yet: but don't despair." —She throws her coat on the bed. She slowly approaches him, kisses him. —The metaphor of failed sex can be represented by their sitting rigidly back to back, on the platform (bed) till the building emotion lights the "fireplace" as the bells ring the New Year in.

## ACT THREE

### SCENE 2

*The rented room.*

*John enters the room first, holding the door open for—what shall I call her now—Dolores? Monica (a Spanish Saint), Santa, Estrella, Alma? —will use Alma for now.*

*Alma enters wide-eyed, a hand on the plume on her hat, as if entering a new world, crossing a new frontier.*

JOHN. Here it is, the room.

ALMA. I see.

JOHN. Does it please you, it is what you expected? (*He speaks roughly. She remains in the doorway.*)

ALMA. All that I expected was that you'd jump out of the taxi on the way here.

JOHN. That would have been like making an incision for surgery and then going no further with the operation. (*He throws his coat on the bed [platform] and turns u. to face her.*) —Well, here's your fireplace! You'll observe it's not lighted! (*Her eyes remain, pleadingly, on his face: she approaches him slowly.*)

ALMA. —Not yet, but later, perhaps . . . (*She throws her own coat on the bed and removes her hat. There is the sound of a mechanical piano and drunken voices, under.*)

JOHN. —I'm sorry, Alma, that was—savage of me . . .

Start



ALMA. No more savage than I have been with you.

JOHN. The porter's provide us with a tray, a couple of wine-glasses and one of those straw-covered bottles from Italy, they call it Chianti. Will you have some, Alma?

ALMA. —Yes . . . (*He hands her a glass of wine: then drinks from the bottle, Alma, sitting on the bed.*) Will the fire light? Under the influence of Italian wine?

JOHN. That remains to be seen.

ALMA. Let's try to light it. (*He remains standing, looking moodily about.*) —What are you waiting for, John?

JOHN. For you to decide if you really want to go on with this—adventure . . .

ALMA. My answer is yes. What's yours?

JOHN. (*With difficulty.*) I have to be sure that you know that regardless of how this—adventure—went, whether well or—badly—it couldn't, I—couldn't—

ALMA. —Go beyond this room with it.

JOHN. There are certain—practical reasons.

ALMA. And many impractical reasons, I know all of that.

JOHN. The most important one is— (*Drinks from bottle again.*) —one that I'd rather not speak of but I think you know what it is.

ALMA. I know that you don't love me.

JOHN. No. No, I'm not in love with you.

ALMA. I wasn't counting on that, tonight or ever.

JOHN. God, you sit there and tell me that you're expecting nothing?

ALMA. I'm not telling you that. I expect a great deal, but for tonight only. Afterward, nothing, nothing at all.

JOHN. Afterward comes quickly in a room rented for an hour.

ALMA. An hour is the life-time of some creatures.

JOHN. Generations of some creatures can be fitted into an hour, the sort of creatures I see through my microscope, but you're not one of those creatures, you're a complex being, an hour isn't a life-time for you, Alma.

ALMA. Give me the hour and I'll make a life-time of it. | —My glass is empty, you're being very selfish with that wine. (*He turns to re-fill her wine-glass.*) No, no, let's share the bottle. (*He sits down rather gingerly beside her. She takes the bottle from his hand and drinks from it.*) Alma isn't really my name. I was christened Albertine, in honor of mother's sister, but after her elope-