

The Eccentricities Of A Nightingale

BY TENNESSEE WILLAMS



★
DRAMATISTS
PLAY SERVICE
INC.

The Eccentricities Of A Nightingale

ACT ONE

THE FEELING OF A SINGER

SCENE 1

It is the evening of July 4th of a year shortly before the First World War.

The exterior set is part of a public square in the small southern town of Glorious Hill, Mississippi. Two stone steps ascend, at the rear, to a public fountain which is in the form of a stone angel (Eternity), in a gracefully crouching position with wings lifted and hands held together in front to form a cup from which water flows. Near the fountain is a small bench. Framing the set above are mossy branches. Behind is a sky with stars beginning to appear.

Before and for a few minutes after the curtain rises, a somewhat-better-than-typical church soprano is heard singing a semisecular song such as "O That We Two Were Maying."

The Reverend and Mrs. Winemiller, an Episcopal clergyman and his wife, in their early sixties, are on the bench. Sitting on the steps to the fountain is John Buchanan.

The song ends, there is a burst of applause, and while it continues, Miss Alma Winemiller enters from R. At the same moment a rocket explodes in the sky, casting a momentary white radiance beneath it.

ALMA. (*Excitedly calling to her parents.*) The first skyrocket! Oh, look at it burst into a million stars! (*There is a long-drawn "Abhh" from unseen spectators. After the brief glare the stage seems very dark. Barely visible figures, laughing, chattering, sweep about the fountain like a sudden passage of birds. Alma cries out as if frightened.*) Oh, I'm blinded, I can't see a thing! Father, Father, where are you? (*A child imitates her mockingly.*)

REV. WINEMILLER. Here we are, Alma, we're down here on the bench.

ALMA. Oh . . . (*She rushes breathlessly down to them. The stage lightens again. Alma is dressed in pale yellow and carries a parasol to match.*) The words flew out of my mind. I sang the same verse twice. Was it noticeable? Please open my bag for me, Father. My fingers are frozen stiff. I want my handkerchief. My face and my throat are drenched with perspiration. Was that— Oh, I'm talking too loudly! (*She lowers her voice to a shrill whisper.*) *Is that John Buchanan up there by the fountain? I rushed right by him but I think he spoke! Don't look now, he'll know we're talking about him. But I think it is!*

REV. WINEMILLER. Suppose it is! What of it? Sit down, Alma.

ALMA. Oh, the Gulf wind is blowing, what a relief! . . . Yes . . . yes, that is John Buchanan . . . (*Her voice quivers over the name. Her father hands her the handkerchief.*) Oh, thank you, Father. Yesssss—that's John Buchanan, he's been home for a week but hasn't called or dropped over . . . I wonder *why!* Don't you think it's *peculiar?*

REV. WINEMILLER. Why "peculiar"? (*A stout dowager in black lace and pearls approaches John Buchanan and takes his arm.*)

ALMA. His mother stands guard over him like an old dragon! Look at her, keeping time to the music with her lorgnette, one arm hooked through John's, terrified that someone will snatch him from her!

REV. WINEMILLER. Alma, sit still for a minute. Just sit here quietly and listen to the music until you get back a little composure.

ALMA. (*In a shrill, rapid whisper, staring straight out.*) She'll pretend not to see me. I remember the last time John came home from college, while he was still at Johns Hopkins, I was sitting on the front porch one evening. I nodded to him as he went by the house and he lifted his hat and started to come up to me to say hello. Do you know what she did? She immediately stuck her head out of

their window and shouted to him, literally shouted to him as if the house had caught fire. "John! John! Come here right this minute! Your father wants you *immediately* in his office!"

REV. WINEMILLER. Do you want them to overhear you?

ALMA. Oh, they're not *there* any more, she's dragged him out of danger!

REV. WINEMILLER. Mrs. Buchanan is always friendly and I don't think it's reasonable of you to blame her for his failure to pay you as much attention as you would like. Now where is your mother gone?

MRS. WINEMILLER. (*Wistfully, at a distance.*) *Where is the ice cream man?*

ALMA. Mother, there *isn't* any ice cream man!

REV. WINEMILLER. I'll have to take her right home. She's on her bad behavior.

ALMA. Has she been talking about the Musée Mécanique?

REV. WINEMILLER. Babbling about it to everybody we meet!

ALMA. Let her go home. She can get home by herself. It's good for her. Oh, I see where she's headed, she's going across the Square to the White Star Pharmacy to treat herself to an ice cream sundae.

REV. WINEMILLER. What a terrible cross to have to bear!

ALMA. The only thing to do with a cross is *bear* it, Father.

REV. WINEMILLER. The failure of a vocation is a terrible thing, and it's all the more terrible when you're not responsible for the failure yourself, when it's the result of a vicious impulse to destroy in some other person.

ALMA. Mother isn't responsible for her condition. You know that.

REV. WINEMILLER. Your mother has *chosen* to be the way she is. She isn't out of her mind. It's all deliberate. One week after our marriage a look came into her eyes, a certain look, a look I can't describe to you, a sort of a cold and secretly spiteful look as if I, who loved her, who was *devoted* to her, had done her some, some —*injury!* —that couldn't be—*mentioned* . . .

ALMA. I think there are women who feel that way about marriage.

REV. WINEMILLER. They ought not to marry.

ALMA. I know, but they do, they *do!* They are the *ones* that marry! The ones that could bring to marriage the sort of almost—*transcendental!* tenderness that it calls for—what do they do?

Teach school! Teach singing! Make a life out of little accomplishments. Father . . . Look! Mrs. Buchanan is making another entrance! *(The Dowager approaches her son again.)* She looks so sweet and soft, but under the black lace and pearls is something harder and colder than the stuff that stone angel is made of! And something runs in her veins that's warm and sympathetic as—mineral water! She's come to take her son home. He's too exposed in this place. He might meet a girl without money! A girl who was able to give him nothing but love!

REV. WINEMILLER. Alma, you're talking wildly. I don't like this kind of talk!

ALMA. Oh, yes, oh, yes. She told Miss Preston, who works at the public library, that she was determined that John should make the right kind of marriage for a young doctor to make, a girl with beauty and wealth and social position somewhere in the East!—the Orient where the sun rises! *Ha ha ha!* *(Mrs. Buchanan calls "John? John? John?" with idiotic persistence, like a bird.)*

REV. WINEMILLER. Alma, I think you had better come home with me, you're not yourself. You're talking almost as wildly as your mother . . .

ALMA. I'm sorry, Father. Singing in public always leaves me feeling overexcited. You go, you go on home, I'll be all right in a moment or two. I have to wait for Roger . . .

REV. WINEMILLER. I'm not sure I like you being seen so much and associated in people's minds with that, that—well—that rather peculiar young man . . .

ALMA. You make me think of that story about the Quakers. One Quaker met another Quaker and he said, "Everybody is mad in this world but thee and me, and thou art a little peculiar!" *Ha ha ha!*

REV. WINEMILLER. Why do you laugh like that?

ALMA. Like what, Father?

REV. WINEMILLER. You throw your head back so far it's a wonder you don't break your neck! —Ah, me . . . Hmmm . . . *(He strolls away with a slight parting nod. A skyrocket goes off. There is a long "Abhh!" from the crowd. In dumb play, John's mother tries to lead him from the square, but he protests. Somebody calls her. She reluctantly goes, passing in front of Miss Alma.)*

ALMA. *(Overbrightly.)* Good evening, Mrs. Buchanan.

MRS. BUCHANAN. Why, Miss Alma! I want to congratulate you.

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.*)

A skyrocket goes up. The crowd cries "Abhhi!" Roger Doremus, a young man with the little excitements of a sparrow, rushes on with his French horn in a case.)

ROGER. How did it go, my solo on the French horn?

ALMA. I'm! —please get me some water, water, from the fountain, I—I—

ROGER. You're not feeling well?

ALMA. I have to take one of my tablets but my mouth is so dry I can't swallow the tablet. *(She leans back, touching her throat as Roger crosses anxiously to the fountain. The scene dims out.)*

ACT ONE

SCENE 2

The Rectory interior on Christmas Eve of the following winter. During the interval the soprano sings a traditional Christmas carol, one not too familiar.

Like all the sets, the Rectory interior is barely suggested, by window and doorframes and a few essential properties.

The Reverend and Mrs. Winemiller are seated on either side of a small round clawfoot table that supports a cut-glass bowl of eggnog with cups. Rev. Winemiller faces the fireplace, which is in the fourth wall and is indicated by a flickering red glow. (Every interior in the play has a fireplace indicated in this way in the same position.) Evidently the fire gives little warmth, for the minister has a lady's lavender woolen shawl wrapped about his hunched shoulders.

Mrs. Winemiller is never quite silent, although her interior monologue is never loud enough to be intelligible. She sounds like a small running brook or a swarm of bees and her face changes expression as her interior world falls under light and shadow.

Miss Alma is a little outside the lighted area as the scene begins and her responses to Rev. Winemiller's singsong elegiac ruminations come out of the shadow where the window frame is located. In this frame is a small candle.

REV. WINEMILLER. (*As if continuing.*) Actually we have about the same number of communicants we've had for the past ten years, but church attendance has dropped off about, hmmm, twenty per cent.

ALMA. Just remember what old Doctor Hoctor announced to his congregation one year, he said to his congregation, "We haven't had any additions to the congregation this year but we've had a number of valuable subtractions."

REV. WINEMILLER. In the old days before they had the church pension fund ministers stayed in the pulpit as long as they were able to crawl up the chancel.

ALMA. Yes, poor old Doctor Hoctor, he hung on forever! Much longer than his congregation. They say it finally dwindled down to just a pair of old ladies, one widow and one spinster who hated each other so fiercely that one would sit in the front pew and the other so far in the rear that old Doctor Hoctor, who had lost his sight but still had a little hearing, was never quite certain whether she was there or not except when she had the hiccoughs. Ha ha!

REV. WINEMILLER. A man must know when he's outlived his term of usefulness and let go. I'm going to retire next year . . .

ALMA. But, Father, you won't come into the pension for five more years! What will we live on, what I make teaching singing?

REV. WINEMILLER. The Bishop had hinted to me that if I don't feel able to continue, it might be arranged for me to come into my pension a little bit sooner than I'm due to get it.

ALMA. Ah? (*She suddenly turns out a lamp and rushes back to the window.*) I have never seen anything so ridiculous! Mrs. Buchanan has put on a Santie Claus outfit and is going out their front walk with a sack of presents. I wonder if—John's with her. Yes! —Perhaps they'll . . . Oh, we must get Mother upstairs! They'll come here first, I should think, since we're next door. Yes, they are, they're going to come here first! Mother! Mother! Go upstairs and I'll bring you a piece of fruitcake! Mother? A piece of—! Oh . . . No . . . They're *not* going to come here first. They're crossing the street. (*In a tone of desolation.*) They've

crossed the street, yes, they've—crossed—the street. . . . You don't suppose they'll—*overlook* us this year?

REV. WINEMILLER. You're constantly at that window spying on the Buchanans.

ALMA. *Spying* on the Buchanans? What a notion!

REV. WINEMILLER. You come in the parlor, turn out the lamp, gravitate to that window as if you had to stand by that window to breathe.

ALMA. Why, Father, I've been looking at the snow. I just happened to notice Mrs. Buchanan in her Santie Claus outfit coming out of the . . .

REV. WINEMILLER. The house is surrounded by snow on all four sides and all four sides of the house have windows in them through which you could look at the snow if it is only the snow that holds such a fascination over you.

ALMA. It does, it *does* fascinate me, why, it is the first snow that's fallen on Glorious Hill in more than a hundred years, and when it started falling, they closed all the stores on Front Street and every office in town, even the bank. And all came out, just like overgrown boys, and had snow fights on the street! —Roger Doremus told me . . . No. I don't believe they're going to come here at all. They've gone in the other direction down the block . . . (*She pours a cup of eggnog, sips it with one hand extended toward the glow of the fireplace.*) The snow reminds me of an old proverb. "Before you love, you must learn how to walk over snow—and leave no footprint . . ." (*A carol is heard at some distance.*) The Methodist carolers have already gone out. I must get . . .

REV. WINEMILLER. Alma. Sit down for a moment. There's something I want to talk to you about.

ALMA. (*Apprehensively.*) I have to get ready to go out with the carolers, Father.

REV. WINEMILLER. They're not going out until half past eight.

ALMA. That's almost now.

REV. WINEMILLER. Then let them start without you. This is more important.

ALMA. That means it's something unpleasant?

REV. WINEMILLER. Yes, extremely unpleasant and that's why it's important. Alma, I've had one heavy cross to bear. (*He nods toward Mrs. Winemiller.*) One almost insufferable cross. A minister isn't complete without a family, he needs his wife and his family to make a—a social bond—with the parish!

ALMA. Father, I do all I can. More than I have the strength for. I have my vocal pupils. I sing at weddings, I sing at funerals, I swear there's nothing I don't sing at except the conception of infants!

REV. WINEMILLER. Alma, I won't endure that kind—!

ALMA. Excuse me, Father, but you know it's true. And I serve on the Altar Guild and I teach the primary class at Sunday school. I made all their little costumes for the Christmas pageant, their angel wings and dresses, and you know what thanks I got for that! Mrs. Peacock cried out that the costumes were inflammable! Inflammable, she screamed! Exactly as if she thought it was my secret hope, my intention, to burn the children up at the Christmas pageant! No, she said, those costumes are inflammable, if they wear those costumes they can't march in with candles! (*She gasps.*)—And so the candles weren't lighted. They marched in holding little stumps of wax!—holding little dirty stumps of wax! The absurdity of it, as if a wind had blown all the candles out—the whole effect I'd worked so hard to create was destroyed by that woman and I had to bite my tongue because I couldn't answer. I know that you wouldn't want me to answer back. Oh, I've had to bite my tongue so much it's a wonder I have one left!

REV. WINEMILLER. Please, more calmly, Alma. You're going to swallow your tongue from overexcitement some day, not bite it off from holding back indignation! I asked you to please sit down. Alma— Because of the circumstances, I mean your mother's condition, pitiable, and the never, never outlived notoriety of your Aunt Albertine and the Musée Mécanique . . .

ALMA. Why can't we forget something that happened fifteen years ago?

REV. WINEMILLER. Because other people remember!

ALMA. *I'm* not going to elope with a Mr. Otto Schwarzkopf!

REV. WINEMILLER. We must discuss this quietly.

ALMA. Discuss what quietly? *What!*

REV. WINEMILLER. Alma, someone, Alma—someone, Alma, who is—deeply devoted to you—who has your interests—very much at heart—almost as fond of you as her own daughter!

ALMA. Oh, this is Mrs. Peacock—my *bête noire*!

REV. WINEMILLER. She was deeply, deeply distressed over something that happened lately. It seems that she overheard someone giving an imitation of you at a young people's party . . .

ALMA. An imitation? An imitation, Father? Of what? Of what? Of *me!*

REV. WINEMILLER. Yes, of you.

ALMA. (*Gasp.*) What was it they imitated? What did they imitate about me, Father?

REV. WINEMILLER. The point is, Alma—

ALMA. No, please tell me, I want to, I *have* to be told, I must—know . . .

REV. WINEMILLER. What they imitated was your singing, I think at a wedding.

ALMA. My voice? They imitated my voice?

REV. WINEMILLER. Not your voice but your gestures and facial expressions . . .

ALMA. Ohhh . . . This leaves me quite speechless!

REV. WINEMILLER. You're inclined to—dramatize your songs a—bit too much! You, you get carried away by the, the emotion of it! That's why you choke sometimes and get hoarse when you're singing and Mrs. Peacock says that sometimes you weep!

ALMA. That's not true. It's true that I feel the emotion of a song. Even an ordinary little song like "The Voice That Breathed O'er Eden" or "O Promise Me" or "Because"—why, even commonplace little songs like "I Love You Truly," they have a sincere emotion and a singer must feel it, and when you feel it, you *show* it! Why, even a singer's heart is part of her equipment! That's what they taught me at the Conservatory!

REV. WINEMILLER. I'm sometimes sorry you went to the Conservatory.

ALMA. (*In a stricken voice.*) All right! I'll give up singing . . . *everything!*

REV. WINEMILLER. The thing for you to give up is your affectations, Alma, your little put-on mannerisms that make you seem—well—slightly *peculiar* to people! It isn't just your singing I'm talking about. In ordinary conversations you get carried away by your emotions or something, I don't know what, and neither does anyone else. You, you, you—*gild the lily!*—You—express yourself in—fantastic highflown—phrases! Your hands fly about you like a pair of wild birds! You, you get out of breath, you—stammer, you—laugh hysterically and clutch at your throat! Now please remember. I wouldn't mention these things if I didn't know that they were just mannerisms, things that you could control, that you can correct! Otherwise I wouldn't mention them to you. Because I can see that you are upset, but you can correct them. All you have

to do is *concentrate*. When you're talking, just watch yourself, keep an eye on your hands, and when you're singing, put them in *one* position and *keep* them there. Like *this!*

ALMA. Make a steeple? —No, I'd rather not sing . . .

REV. WINEMILLER. You're taking altogether the wrong attitude about this.

ALMA. I'll, I'll just give up my—social efforts, Father—all of them!

REV. WINEMILLER. The thing for you to give up is this little band of eccentrics, this collection of misfits that you've gathered about you which you call your club, the ones you say will be meeting here next Monday!

ALMA. What a cruel thing to say about a group of sweet and serious people that get together because of—interests in common—cultural interests—who want to create something—vital—in this town!

REV. WINEMILLER. These young people are not the sort of young people that it's an advantage to be identified with! And one thing more—

ALMA. What else, Father?

REV. WINEMILLER. Is it true that you go to the Square with a sack of crumbs?

ALMA. What, what, what?

REV. WINEMILLER. Is it true that you go every day to the Square with a sack of crumbs which you throw to the birds?

ALMA. I scatter bread crumbs in the Square for the starving birds. *That's true!*

REV. WINEMILLER. Have you thought how it might look to people?

ALMA. I thought it only concerned myself and the birds.

REV. WINEMILLER. Little things like that, an accumulation of them, Alma, little habits, little, little mannerisms, little—peculiarities of behavior—they are what get people known, eventually, as—*eccentrics!* And eccentric people are not happy, they are not happy people, Alma. Eccentrics are—what are you doing?

ALMA. (*Breathlessly.*) I can't open the box, I can't open the box, I can't open the box!

REV. WINEMILLER. Your Amytal tablets?

ALMA. I can't open the box!

REV. WINEMILLER. Give it to me. —Hysteria was the beginning of your mother's condition.

ALMA. *I can't breathe! (She rushes out.)*

REV. WINEMILLER. Alma! Don't leave the house till you get your mother upstairs! *(She has run out. He turns to his wife and shouts in her ear.)* Grace! This is Christmas Eve and we are going to have callers! You must go up to your bedroom and I will bring you up a piece of fruitcake!

MRS. WINEMILLER. *(Rousing slightly.)* No, oh, no, not till you give me the letter, you've hidden it from me, Albertine's last letter! It's got the new address of the Musée Mécanique! *(The "Valse Musette" fades in.)*

REV. WINEMILLER. *(After a pause.)* Grace, listen to me. Albertine has been dead for fifteen years. She and her paramour both died in a fire fifteen years ago, when Mr. Schwarzkopf set fire to the Musée Mécanique.

MRS. WINEMILLER. Oh, I remember the address, Seven Pearl Street! —I must keep that in my mind, that's the new address of the Musée Mécanique, it's Seven Pearl Street—or was it—Seventeen Pearl Street? *(The doorbell rings.)*

REV. WINEMILLER. *There, there now, visitors! And look at yourself, how you look! Go upstairs quickly, quickly! (He claps his hands violently together.)*

MRS. WINEMILLER. Yes . . . *(She makes a confused turn. He leads her out of the lighted area. The scene dims out.)*

ACT ONE

SCENE 3

A few minutes later. John and his mother and the Reverend Winemiller are seated in the Rectory parlor. Mrs. Buchanan is ludicrously attired as a female Santa Claus with the incongruous addition of a lorgnon on a silver chain.

She is spotted first before the light comes up on the others.

MRS. BUCHANAN. The children say to me, you're not Santie Clause, Santie Claus has whiskers, and I say, no, I'm Santie Claus's *wife!* They're so surprised!

REV. WINEMILLER. I know they must be delighted.

MRS. BUCHANAN. Tickled to death! Having a wife gives him such a respectability! And how has Grace been lately?

REV. WINEMILLER. A—uh—little disturbed.

MRS. BUCHANAN. All the excitement in the air, don't you think? Mrs. Santie Claus has something for her, but if she's a little disturbed, we'll just put it under the tree. Is that Miss Alma? Oh, it is. How lovely! (*Alma's high-pitched laughter is heard. John rises from a hassock before the fireplace.*)

ALMA. *Joyeux Noel!* Ha ha!

MRS. BUCHANAN. How pretty you look, Miss Alma! I was afraid we'd miss you.

ALMA. I sang one carol and my throat felt scratchy. The combined church choirs and doing Handel's *Messiah*. (*She gasps.*) Such dreadful demands on the voice! That's Thursday. No, no, Friday, Friday evening, in the high school—goodness, I am getting hoarse! —auditorium!

MRS. BUCHANAN. Let John give you a gargle.

ALMA. Nasty gargles . . . I hate them! The voice is such a delicate instrument. When was the last time I saw you? Last—last . . . ?

JOHN. Fourth of July. The band concert in the Square.

ALMA. Oh! —oh, dear, the recollection of that . . . !

JOHN. I heard you sing.

ALMA. Goodness, yes, I still shudder. The same verse twice!

JOHN. Ha ha! And I threw a firecracker at you!

ALMA. Goodness, yes, you *did!* Ha ha! That was so naughty of you! You always did as a boy, I mean as a little boy, you always threw—firecrackers! Ha ha! —into the Rectory lawn! No Fourth of July was complete without— (*She gasps.*)

JOHN. Ha ha! That's right. I had to keep up the tradition.

ALMA. (*Gasping.*) That's right, that's right, you had to keep up the tradition! Let me give you some—oh, where is it? —eggnog!

JOHN. We've already been served.

ALMA. Have you? Why, yes, I'm *blind!* I have snow in my eyelashes. It makes rainbows in the light! What an adventure, just imagine, the first snow that's fallen on Glorious Hill in—how

many years? Almost a century. Before it began to snow it rained for two days. Suddenly the temperature fell. The rain froze on the trees, on the lawns, on the bushes and hedges, on the roofs, the steeples, the telephone wires . . . (*She pauses to gasp for breath.*)

REV. WINEMILLER. Alma, sit down, so John can sit down.

ALMA. Yes, forgive me! —Till the whole town was literally sheathed in ice! —And when the sun rose that morning . . . you can't imagine how *dazzling!* It made you suddenly *see* how dull things usually are—the trees, oh, the trees, like huge crystal chandeliers! —turned upside down!

MRS. BUCHANAN. It's just like fairyland.

ALMA. Exactly like fairyland.

JOHN. I wish I had five cents for every time someone has said that.

MRS. BUCHANAN. Little John has been up North so long it's made him a cynic.

ALMA. Have you lost patience with our romantic clichés?

MRS. BUCHANAN. Little John, Little John, I can see that your shoes are still damp! —We call him Little John and his father we call *Big John* although little John is almost twice as tall as Big John is!

ALMA. How tall is Little John?

MRS. BUCHANAN. As tall as Jack's beanstalk!

ALMA. I don't think it's fair for a boy to have such curls!

MRS. BUCHANAN. As a boy he was so indifferent to the ladies. But those days are all gone now. Every morning cards and letters this high, to the junior Doctor Buchanan in green, pink and lavender ink with all the odors of springtime!

ALMA. What a success he's going to have as a doctor.

MRS. BUCHANAN. His waiting room will be large as a railroad station.

ALMA. At least that large and probably with an annex.

MRS. BUCHANAN. But his love is bugs! He's specializing in something I can't even pronounce.

ALMA. *Bacteriology!* He told me last Fourth of July.

MRS. BUCHANAN. (*Turning to Rev. Winemiller.*) Graduated *magna cum laude* from Johns Hopkins with the highest marks in the history of the college. Already—think of it—seven fine offers from staffs of various hospitals in the East, and one in California!

ALMA. (*Gasping.*) All the gifts of the gods were showered on him!

MRS. BUCHANAN. (*To Rev. Winemiller.*) I wanted to have five sons but only had one. But if I had had fifteen I don't think it would have been reasonable to expect that one of the lot would have turned out *quite so fine!*

ALMA. Your mother is proud as a peacock.

MRS. BUCHANAN. Don't you think it's excusable in a mother?

ALMA. Not only excusable but . . . your cup is empty, John, do let me—fill it!

MRS. BUCHANAN. Don't make him tipsy! John, your shoes are damp, I can tell by just looking at them! (*Declining eggnog.*) Oh, no, no more for me, I have to climb some more chimneys! —That sounds like Grace! (*Mrs. Winemiller is heard descending the stairs, imitating Alma's shrill laugh.*)

REV. WINEMILLER. (*Anxiously.*) Alma, I think your mother is—

ALMA. (*Gasping.*) Oh, excuse me! —I'll see what Mother wants. (*She rushes out. Mrs. Buchanan touches the minister's arm.*)

MRS. BUCHANAN. Oh, such a tragedy, such a terrible cross for you to bear! Little John, I think we had better go, now, the reindeers must be getting restless. (*John sneezes. She throws her hands up in terror.*) I knew it, I knew it, I knew it! You have caught cold!

JOHN. *Oh, for God's sake!*

MRS. BUCHANAN. John! (*John sneezes again.*) That settles it, you're going straight home to bed! (*Mrs. Winemiller rushes into the parlor. Alma follows her.*)

ALMA. Father, Mother insists on remaining downstairs. She says that she wasn't ready to go to bed.

MRS. WINEMILLER. (*Excitedly.*) I have found my letter with the address on it. It's Seven Pearl Street in New Orleans. That's where Albertine is with Mr. Schwarzkopf and the Musée Mécanique. Oh, such a lot of news in it!

REV. WINEMILLER. Yes, I am sure. But let's not discuss the news now.

MRS. WINEMILLER. (*To Mrs. Buchanan.*) Have you ever been to the Musée Mécanique?

MRS. BUCHANAN. Long ago, Grace, long ago I—had that pleasure . . . (*She touches her lips nervously with her lorgnon.*)

MRS. WINEMILLER. Then you know what it is? It's a collection of mechanical marvels, invented and operated by **my** sister's—husband! —Mr. Otto Schwarzkopf! Mechanical marvels, all of

them, but, then, you know, when everything's run by mechanics it takes a mechanical genius to keep them in good condition all of the time and sometimes poor Mr. Schwarzkopf is not in condition to keep them all—in—condition . . .

MRS. BUCHANAN. Well, this is a mechanical age we live in . . .

ALMA. Mother, Mrs. Buchanan has brought her son with her and we are so eager to hear about his work and his—studies at—Johns Hopkins.

JOHN. Oh, let's hear about the museum, Miss Alma.

MRS. WINEMILLER. Yes! That's what I'm telling you about, the Museum! —of mechanical marvels. Do you know what they are? Well, let me tell you. There's the mechanical man that plays the flute. There's the mechanical drummer—oh, such a sweet little boy all made out of tin that shines like a brand new dollar! Boom, boom, boom, beats the drum. Toot, toot, toot, goes the flute. And the mechanical soldier waves his flag, waves it, waves it, and waves it! Ha ha ha! —And oh! *Oh!* —the loveliest thing of all—the mechanical bird-girl! Yes, the mechanical bird-girl is almost the biggest mechanical triumph since the Eiffel Tower, according to people who know. She's made of sterling silver! Every three minutes, right on the dot, a little mechanical bird pops out of her mouth and sings three beautiful notes, as clear as—a bell!

REV. WINEMILLER. Grace, Mrs. Buchanan remembers all of that.

MRS. WINEMILLER. The young man *doesn't!* I don't believe he's seen the Musée Mécanique.

JOHN. No, I've never. It sounds very exciting!

MRS. WINEMILLER. Well, lately, I personally think they have made a mistake. I think it was a mistake to buy the *big snake*.

JOHN. A mechanical snake?

MRS. WINEMILLER. Oh no, a real one, a live one, a boa constrictor. Some meddling maddie told them "Big snakes pay good." —So Mr. Schwarzkopf, who is not a practical man, a genius without any business sense whatsoever—mortgaged the whole Museum to pay for this great big snake! —So far, so good! —But! The snake was used to living in a warm climate. It was winter. New Orleans *can* be cold! —The snake seemed chilly, it became *very stupid*, and so they gave it a *blanket!* —Well! —Now in this letter I've just received today—Albertine tells me a *terrible* thing has happened!

JOHN. What did the big snake do?

MRS. WINEMILLER. Nothing—just *swallowed* his blanket!

JOHN. I thought you were going to say it swallowed Mr. Schwarzkopf.

MRS. BUCHANAN. Oh, now, Little John, *hush*, you bad boy, you! (*She touches her lips with the lorgnon.*)

MRS. WINEMILLER. Swallowed its blanket!

JOHN. Did the blanket disagree with it?

MRS. WINEMILLER. Disagree with it? I should say it did! What can a stomach, even the stomach of a boa constrictor, do with a heavy blanket?

JOHN. What did they do about the—situation?

MRS. WINEMILLER. Everything they could think of—which wasn't *much*. . . . Veterinarians, experts from the—zoo! —Nobody could suggest anything to. . . . Finally they sent a telegram to the man who had sold them the snake. "The big snake has swallowed his blanket! What shall we do?" —He'd told them big snakes pay good, but *dead* snakes—what do they pay? —They pay what the little boy shot at! —Well! —Do you know what the man that sold the snake to them wired back? —"All you can do is get on your knees and pray!" That's what he replied.

MRS. BUCHANAN. Oh, now, really! How cruel!

JOHN. Ha ha ha!

ALMA. (*Desperately.*) Mother, I think you—

JOHN. And did they pray for the snake?

MRS. WINEMILLER. They prayed for the big investment! —They should have stuck to mechanics in the—Museum—but somebody told them that big snakes pay good . . .

ALMA. Mother, it's past your bedtime. You go up to bed and I will bring you a slice of delicious fruitcake. Won't that be nice?

MRS. WINEMILLER. Yes! —if you really bring it. (*She starts hurriedly off, then turns and waves to the company.*) Merry Christmas!

REV. WINEMILLER. She is—well, as you see . . . she's . . .

MRS. BUCHANAN. Yes! A little disturbed right now. All the excitement of the holiday season. Little John, we must be running along, don't you think? Big John's waiting for us.

JOHN. I've just persuaded Miss Alma to sing us something.

MRS. BUCHANAN. Oh! (*Insincerely.*) How nice! (*Alma is at the piano.*)

ALMA. Would you care for something profane or sacred?

JOHN. Oh, something profane, by all means!

REV. WINEMILLER. (*Weakly.*) I think I will try a little of this eggnog . . . (*Miss Alma sings. It is not necessary for the actress to have a very good voice. If she has no singing voice at all, the song can be dubbed, the piano placed so her back or her profile will be to the audience.*)

ALMA. (*Singing.*)

From the land of the sky-blue water,
They brought a captive maid,
Her eyes are lit with lightning,
Her heart is not afraid!

I stole to her tent at dawning.
I wooed her with my flute!
She is sick for the sky-blue water.
The captive maid is mute . . .

MRS. BUCHANAN. (*Interrupting the song.*) Oh, how lovely, how lovely, one of my favorite pieces, and such a beautiful voice! —before I forget it, Mrs. Santie Claus has some gifts to put under your tree . . . —Where is your Christmas tree?

ALMA. Oh, this year we put it up in Father's study! (*Rev. Wine-miller leads Mrs. Buchanan offstage. Alma and John remain by the piano.*) My hands are so stiff from the cold I could hardly touch the right keys . . .

JOHN. Shall we sit by the fire?

ALMA. Oh, yes, that's a good suggestion . . . an excellent suggestion!

JOHN. You sing very well, Miss Alma.

ALMA. Thank you—thank you . . . (*Pause. She clears her throat.*)

JOHN. Don't they call you "the Nightingale of the Delta?"

ALMA. Sarcastically, perhaps! (*She has drawn up a hassock to the imagined fireplace. He sits on the floor with his palms extended toward the flickering red glow.*) I have a lyric soprano. Not strong enough to make a career of singing but just about right for the church and for social occasions and I—teach singing! —But let's—let's talk about you—your—your—life and your—plans! Such a wonderful profession, being a doctor! Most of us lead such empty, useless lives! But a doctor! —Oh —With his wonderful ability to relieve—human suffering, of which there is always—so—much!

(*Her tongue runs away with her.*) I don't think it's just a profession, it's a *vocation!* I think it's something to which some people are just—appointed by God! (*She claps her hands together and rolls her eyes.*) Yes, just divinely appointed! —Some of us have no choice but to lead a useless existence—endure for the sake of endurance—but a young doctor, you! —with *surgeon's fingers!* (*She has sprung up to fill his cup with eggnog. The silver ladle slips from her fingers. She utters a startled cry.*) Ouuu! —Oh, look what I've done! I've dropped the spoon in the bowl and it is completely submerged. What can I fish it out with, oh, what can I fish it out with?

JOHN. Do you mind if I use my surgeon's fingers?

ALMA. Ohhhh—pleeeeeease! —do—ha ha ha! (*She gasps.*)

JOHN. Well! —that was not such a delicate operation . . .

ALMA. Now you must have a napkin to wipe those fingers!

JOHN. My handkerchief will do!

ALMA. No, no, no, no, no, not that beautiful handkerchief with your monogram on it! —probably given you by someone who loves you for—Christmas . . . (*She picks up a napkin, grabs his hand, and wipes his fingers with tremulous care.*) I guess you're totally "booked up" as they say, for the short time you'll be home from your laboratory?

JOHN. (*Gently.*) Just about all.

ALMA. There's a group of young people with interests in common meeting here at the Rectory Monday. Monday evening. I know you'd like them so much! —Wouldn't you be able to—drop over? For just a *while?*

JOHN. What sort of interests do they have in common?

ALMA. Oh! —vaguely—*cultural*, I guess. . . . We write things, we read things aloud, we—criticize and—discuss!

JOHN. At what time does it start, this—meeting?

ALMA. Oh, *early*—at eight!

JOHN. I'll—try to make it.

ALMA. Don't say try as if it required some Herculean effort. All you have to do is cross the yard. —We serve refreshments, both liquid and solid!

JOHN. Reserve me a seat by the punch bowl.

ALMA. (*Her voice nearly failing with emotion.*) That gives me a splendid idea. I *will* serve punch. Fruit punch with claret in it. —Do you like claret?

JOHN. Oh yes. I'm crazy about it.

ALMA. We start so early. We finish early, too! You'll have time for something exciting later. Your evenings are long ones, I know that! —I'll tell you *how* I know! —Your room is—opposite mine . . .

JOHN. How do you know?

ALMA. Your light—shines in my *window!* ha ha ha!

JOHN. At two or three in the morning?

ALMA. Or *three* or *four!* —in the morning! ha ha!

JOHN. It—wakes you up? (*He smiles warmly. She glances away.*)

ALMA. Ha ha—yes . . .

JOHN. You should have let me know, you should have—**com-**plained about it.

ALMA. Complained? —Goodness, no—why *should* I?

JOHN. Well, if it . . .

ALMA. Oh, it . . .

JOHN. It doesn't?

ALMA. (*Very flustered.*) *What?*

JOHN. Wake you up? Disturb your sleep?

ALMA. Oh, no, I'm—awake, already . . .

JOHN. You must not sleep very well, or maybe you're getting home from late parties, too!

ALMA. The first supposition, I'm afraid, is the right one.

JOHN. I'll give you a prescription for sleeping tablets.

ALMA. Oh, no. You misunderstood me. I *finally* sleep, I, I, I—wasn't complaining. (*He suddenly takes her hand.*)

JOHN. What is the matter?

ALMA. What is the matter? I don't understand that question.

JOHN. Yes, you do. What is the matter, Miss Alma? (*Mrs. Winemiller has appeared at the edge of the lighted area in her nightgown. She suddenly announces—*)

MRS. WINEMILLER. *Alma has fallen in love with that tall boy!*

ALMA. (*Springing up.*) Mother! What do you want downstairs?

MRS. WINEMILLER. That piece of fruitcake you said you would bring up to me.

ALMA. Go back to your bedroom. I will bring it up.

MRS. WINEMILLER. Now?

ALMA. Yes. Yes, now. Right now! (*She steals a frightened glance at John, touches her throat as the stage dims out and the returning voices of Mrs. Buchanan and Rev. Winemiller fade in. Fade out.*)

ACT TWO
THE TENDERNESS OF A MOTHER

SCENE 1

The Buchanans'. We see John in pajamas seated on the floor, smoking before the fireplace; nothing else.

His mother, Mrs. Buchanan, enters the lighted area in her lace negligee.

MRS. BUCHANAN. Son?

JOHN. Yes, Mother?

MRS. BUCHANAN. You mustn't misunderstand me about Miss Alma. Naturally I feel sorry for her, too. But, precious, precious! In every Southern town there's a girl or two like that. People feel sorry for them, they're kind to them, but, darling, they keep at a distance, they don't get involved with them. Especially not in a sentimental way.

JOHN. I don't know what you mean about Miss Alma. She's a little bit—quaint, she's very excitable, but—there's nothing *wrong* with her.

MRS. BUCHANAN. Precious, can't you see? Miss Alma is an *eccentric!*

JOHN. You mean she isn't like all the other girls in Glorious Hill?

MRS. BUCHANAN. There's always at least one like her in every Southern town, sometimes, like Miss Alma, rather sweet, sometimes even gifted, and I think that Miss Alma *does* have a rather appealing voice when she doesn't become too carried away by her singing. Sometimes, but not often, pretty. I have seen Miss Alma when she was almost pretty. But never, never *quite*.

JOHN. There are moments when she has beauty.

MRS. BUCHANAN. Those moments haven't occurred when I looked at her! Such a wide mouth she has, like the mouth of a clown! And she distorts her face with all those false expressions. However, Miss Alma's looks are beside the point.

JOHN. Her, her eyes are fascinating!

MRS. BUCHANAN. Goodness, yes, disturbing!

JOHN. No, quite lovely, I think. They're never the same for two seconds. The light keeps changing in them; like, like—a running stream of clear water . . .

MRS. BUCHANAN. They have a demented look!

JOHN. She's not demented, Mother.

MRS. BUCHANAN. *Ha!* You should see her in the Square when she feeds the birds. (*John laughs a little.*) Talks to them, calls them! "Here, birds, here, birds, here, birdies." Holding out her hand with some scraps of bread! —huh! —Son, your hair is still damp. It's lucky that Mother peeped in. Now let me rub those curls dry. —My boy's such a handsome boy, and I'm so proud of him! I can see his future so clearly, such a wonderful future! I can see the girl that he will marry! A girl with every advantage, nothing less will do!

JOHN. A girl with money?

MRS. BUCHANAN. Everything, everything! Intelligence, beauty, charm, background—yes! Wealth, wealth, too! It's not to be sneezed at, money, especially in the wife of a young doctor. It takes a while for a doctor to get established, and I want you to take your time and not make any mistakes and go a long, long, long, long way—further, much further than your dear father, although he hasn't done badly. . . . Yes, Mother can see her future daughter-in-law! —Healthy! Normal! Pretty!

JOHN. A girl like all the others?

MRS. BUCHANAN. Superior to the others!

JOHN. And sort of smug about it?

MRS. BUCHANAN. Oh, people have to be slightly smug sometimes. A little bit snobbish, even. People who have a position have to hold it, and my future daughter-in-law, my coming daughter—she'll have the sort of poise that only comes with the very best of breeding and all the advantages that the best background can give her.

JOHN. She won't be tiresome, will she?

MRS. BUCHANAN. Heavens, no! How could she?

JOHN. I've met some debutantes in Baltimore that found, somehow, a way of being tiresome . . .

MRS. BUCHANAN. Just wait till you meet the right one! I have

already met her, in my dreams! Oh, son, how she will adore you!
JOHN. More than she does herself?

MRS. BUCHANAN. She'll worship the ground you walk on.

JOHN. And her babies, how will they be?

MRS. BUCHANAN. Healthy! Normal!

JOHN. Not little pink and white pigs! With ribbons around their tails?

MRS. BUCHANAN. Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! Your babies, my son's babies, pigs?! Oh, precious! I see them, I know them, I feel their dear little bodies in my arms! My adorable little grandchildren. Little pink things for the girl. Little blue things for the boy. A nursery full of their funny little toys. Mother Goose illustrations on the wallpaper, and their own wee little table where they sit with their bibs and their silver spoons, just so high, yes, and their own little chairs, their tiny straightback chairs and their wee little rockers, ho, ho, ho! —And on the lawn, on the enormous, grassy, shady lawn of the—Georgian, yes, *Georgian* mansion, not Greek revival, I'm tired of Greek revival! —will be their swing, their shallow pool for goldfish, their miniature train, their pony—oh, no, not a pony, no, no, not a pony! —I knew a little girl, once, that fell off a pony and landed on her head! *Goodness, she grew up to be almost as odd as Miss Alma!* (At this point a dim spot of light appears on Miss Alma standing raptly before a window frame at the other side of the stage. A strain of music is heard.)

JOHN. Miss Alma has asked me over next Monday night!

MRS. BUCHANAN. Oh, I knew it, trying to rope you in!

JOHN. She says there's to be a club meeting at the Rectory. A little group of young people with interests in common.

MRS. BUCHANAN. Oh, yes, I know, I know what they have in common, the freaks of the town! Every Southern town has them and probably every Northern town has them, too. A certain little group that don't fit in with the others, sort of outcast people that have, or imagine they have, little talents for this thing or that thing or the other—over which they make a big fuss among themselves in order to bolster up their poor little, hurt little egos! They band together, they meet at each other's houses once a week, and make believe they're disliked and not wanted at other places because they're special, superior—gifted! . . . Now your curls are all dry! But let me feel your footsies, I want to make sure the footsies are dry, too, I bet anything they're not, I bet they're damp!

Let Mother feel them! (*He extends his bare feet.*) Ho, ho, ho, ho!
What enormous little footsies!

JOHN. (*As she rubs them with towel.*) You know, Mama, I never dreamed that you could be such an old tiger. Tigress, I mean.

MRS. BUCHANAN. Every mother's a tiger when her son's future happiness is threatened.

JOHN. I'm not in love with Miss Alma, if that's what you're scared of. I just respect her . . .

MRS. BUCHANAN. For what?

JOHN. I'm not quite sure what it is, but it's something she has, a sort of—*gallantry*, maybe . . .

MRS. BUCHANAN. Admire her for her good qualities and I am sure she must have some, but *do not get involved!* Don't go to the little club meeting. Make an excuse and don't go. Write a sweet little note explaining that you had forgotten another engagement. Or let Mother do it. Mother can do it sweetly. There won't be any hurt feelings. . . . Now give me that cigarette. I won't leave you to smoke it in bed. That's how fires start. I don't want us all burned up like the Musée Mécanique!

JOHN. Oh, did the Museum burn?

MRS. BUCHANAN. Heavens, yes, that's a story, but it's too long for bedtime. (*She bends to kiss him fondly, with a lingering caress.*) Good night, my precious! Sleep tight! (*She turns out the light as she leaves. The dim spot remains on Miss Alma a moment longer . . .*)

ALMA. Oh, my love, my love, your light is out, now—I can sleep!

ACT TWO

SCENE 2

The following Monday evening. The little group is meeting in the Rectory parlor. An animated discussion is in progress.

MRS. BASSETT. What are we waiting for, why don't we get started?

ROSEMARY. I agree. *Brrrr*, this room is too chilly to just sit still in.

ALMA. If you prefer to run around in a circle—

ROGER. Rosemary means what are we waiting for?

ALMA. For the rest to arrive, we're not fully assembled.

MRS. BASSETT. It's almost half an hour after eight when we usually start.

ALMA. We've never had such a small attendance as this. I—I wonder why? (*She knows, of course, that the Rectory is considered a disaster area.*)

MRS. BASSETT. (*Winking at Vernon.*) It's just the weather, Miss Alma, that's all it is, but since it's unlikely to get warmer, I suggest we discuss the manifesto which is hot off the press.

ALMA. I hope I'm not alone in opposing the manifesto.

MRS. BASSETT. I'd like to know why you oppose it.

VERNON. I think it's a question of whether or not we have a serious purpose. I was under the impression that we *had* a serious purpose, but of course, if we *don't* have a serious purpose—

ALMA. Of course we *do* have a serious purpose, but I don't see why that means we have to publish a—manifesto about it!

ROGER. What's wrong with a manifesto?

VERNON. Even if nobody reads the manifesto, it—*crystallizes*—our purpose, in our own minds.

ALMA. Oh, but to say that we—have such lofty ambitions.

ROGER. But, Miss Alma, *you* are the one who said we were going to make Glorious Hill the *Athens of the Delta!*

ALMA. Yes, but in the manifesto it says the Athens of the whole *South*, and besides an ambition, a hope of that kind, doesn't have to be—published! In a way to publish it—destroys it! —a little . . .

MRS. BASSETT. The manifesto is beautiful, *perfectly* beautiful, it made me cry!

VERNON. (*Who composed it.*) Thank you, Nancy.

ROGER. Boys and girls, the meeting is called to order. Miss Alma will read us the minutes of the last meeting.

MRS. BASSETT. Oh, let's skip the minutes! Who cares what happened last time? Let's concentrate on the present and the future! That's a widow's philosophy! (*The doorbell rings. Alma drops her papers.*) *Butter fingers!*

ALMA. (*Breathlessly.*) Did I—hear the bell—ring? (*The bell rings again.*) *Yes!* —it did! (*She starts to pick up the papers, they slip again.*)

MRS. BASSETT. Miss Alma, I don't think I've ever seen you quite so nervous!

ALMA. I forgot to mention it! —I . . . invited a . . . guest! —someone just home for the holidays—young Doctor Buchanan, the old doctor's son, you know! —he—lives next door! —and he . . .

VERNON. I thought we had all agreed not to have outsiders unless we took a vote on them beforehand!

ALMA. It was presumptuous of me, but I'm sure you'll forgive me when you meet him! (*She flies out. They all exchange excited looks and whispers as she is heard offstage admitting John to the hall.*)

ROSEMARY. I don't care who he is, if a group is a group there must be something a little exclusive about it! —otherwise it . . .

MRS. BASSETT. Listen! Why, she is hysterical about him! (*Miss Alma's excited voice is heard and her breathless laughter offstage racing.*)

ALMA. Well, well, well, our guest of honor has finally made his appearance!

JOHN. Sorry I'm late.

ALMA. Oh, you're not *very* late.

JOHN. Dad's laid up. I have to call on his patients.

ALMA. Oh, is your father *not well*?

JOHN. Just a slight touch of grippe.

ALMA. There's so much going around.

JOHN. These Delta houses aren't built for cold weather.

ALMA. Indeed they aren't! The Rectory's made out of paper, I believe. (*All of this is said offstage, in the hall.*)

ROSEMARY. Her voice has gone up *two octaves*!

MRS. BASSETT. Obviously *infatuated* with him!

ROSEMARY. Oh, my *stars*!

MRS. BASSETT. The last time I was here—the lunatic mother made a sudden entrance!

VERNON. *Shhhh!* —*girls!* (*Alma enters with John. He is embarrassed by the curious intensity of her manner and the greedily curious glances of the group.*)

ALMA. Everybody! —this is Doctor John Buchanan, *Junior*!

JOHN. Hello, everybody. I'm sorry if I interrupted the meeting.

MRS. BASSETT. Nothing was interrupted. We'd decided to skip the minutes.

ALMA. Mrs. Bassett says it's a widow's philosophy to skip the minutes. And so we are skipping the minutes—ha, ha, ha! I hope everybody is comfortable?

ROSEMARY. I'm just as cold as Greenland's icy mountains!

ALMA. Rosemary, you always are chilly, even in warm weather. I think you must be thin-blooded! —Here. Take this shawl.

ROSEMARY. No thank you, not a shawl! —at least not a gray woolen shawl, I'm not *that* old yet, that I have to be wrapped in a gray shawl.

ALMA. *Excuse me, do forgive me!* —John, I'll put you on this love seat, next to me. —Well, now we are completely assembled!

MRS. BASSETT. Vernon has his verse play with him tonight!

ALMA. (*Uneasily.*) Is that right, Vernon? (*He has a huge manuscript in his lap which he solemnly elevates.*) Oh, I see that you have.

ROSEMARY. I thought that I was supposed to read my paper on William Blake at the meeting.

ALMA. Well, obviously we can't have both at once. That would be an embarrassment of riches! —Now why don't we save the verse play, which appears to be rather long, till some more comfortable evening. I think it's too important to hear under any but ideal circumstances, in warmer weather, with—with *music!* —planned to go with it . . .

ROGER. Yes, let's hear Rosemary's paper on William Blake!

MRS. BASSETT. No, no, no, those dead poets can keep! —Vernon's alive and he's got his verse play with him; he's brought it three times! And each time been disappointed.

VERNON. I am not disappointed not to read my verse play, *that* isn't the point at all, *but—*

ALMA. Shall we take a standing vote on the question?

ROGER. Yes, let's do.

ALMA. Good, good, perfect, let's do! A standing vote. All in favor of postponing the verse play till the next meeting, stand up! (*Rosemary is late in rising.*)

ROSEMARY. Is this a vote? (*As she starts to rise Mrs. Bassett jerks her arm.*)

ROGER. Now, Mrs. Bassett, no rough tactics, please!

ALMA. So we'll save the verse play and begin the New Year with it! (*Rosemary puts on her glasses and rises portentously.*)

ROSEMARY. The poet—William Blake!

MRS. BASSETT. Insane, insane, that man was a mad fanatic!
(*She squints her eyes tight shut and thrusts her thumbs into her ears. The reactions range from indignant to conciliatory.*)

ROGER. Now, Mrs. Bassett!

MRS. BASSETT. This is a free country. I can speak my opinion. And I have *read up* on him. Go on, Rosemary. I wasn't criticizing your paper. (*But Rosemary sits down, hurt.*)

ALMA. Mrs. Bassett is only joking, Rosemary.

ROSEMARY. No, I don't want to read it if she feels that strongly about it.

MRS. BASSETT. Not a bit, don't be silly! I just don't see why we should encourage the writings of people like that who have already gone into a drunkard's grave!

VARIOUS VOICES. (*Exclaiming.*) Did he? I never heard that about him. Is that true?

ALMA. Mrs. Bassett is mistaken about that. Mrs. Bassett, you have confused Blake with someone else.

MRS. BASSETT. (*Positively.*) Oh, no, don't tell me. I've read up on him and know what I'm talking about. He traveled around with that Frenchman who took a shot at him and landed them both in jail. Brussels, Brussels!

ROGER. (*Gaily.*) Brussels sprouts!

MRS. BASSETT. That's where it happened, fired a gun at him in a drunken stupor, and later one of them died of t.b. in the gutter! All right, I'm finished. I won't say anything more. Go on with your paper, Rosemary. There's nothing like contact with culture! (*Alma gets up.*)

ALMA. Before Rosemary reads her paper on Blake, I think it would be a good idea, since some of us aren't acquainted with his work, to preface the critical and biographical comments with a reading of one of his loveliest lyric poems.

ROSEMARY. I'm not going to read anything at all! Not I!

ALMA. Then let me read it then. (*She takes a paper from Rosemary.*) . . . This is called "Love's Secret." (*She clears her throat and waits for a hush to settle. Rosemary looks stonily at the carpet. Mrs. Bassett looks at the ceiling. John coughs.*)

Never seek to tell thy love,
Love that never told can be;
For the gentle wind doth move
Silently, invisibly.

I told my love, I told my love,
I told him all my heart.
Trembling, cold, in ghastly fear
Did my love depart.

No sooner had he gone from me
Than a stranger passing by,
Silently, invisibly,
Took him with a sigh!

(There are various effusions and enthusiastic applause.)

MRS. BASSETT. Honey, you're right. That isn't the man I meant. I was thinking about the one who wrote about the "bought red lips." Who was it that wrote about the "bought red lips?"

ALMA. You're thinking about a poem by Ernest Dowson. *(The bell rings.)*

MRS. BASSETT. Ohhhhh, the doorbell *again!*

MRS. WINEMILLER. *(Above.)* Alma, Alma! *(Alma crosses the stage and goes out.)*

ROSEMARY. Aren't you all cold? I'm just freezing to death! I've never been in a house as cold as this!

ALMA. *(In the hall.)* Why, Mrs. Buchanan! How sweet of you to—drop over . . .

MRS. BUCHANAN. I can't stay, Alma. I just came to fetch my Little John home.

ALMA. Fetch—John!?

MRS. BUCHANAN. His father's just received an urgent call from o'd Mrs. Arbuckle's home. The poor woman is in a dreadful pain. John? John, darling? I hate to drag you away but your father can't budge from the house!

ALMA. Mrs. Buchanan, do you know everybody?

MRS. BUCHANAN. Why, yes, I think so. —John? Come, dear! I'm so sorry . . . *(It is obvious that she is delivering a cool snub to the gathering. There are various embarrassed murmurs as John makes his departure. Miss Alma appears quite stricken.)*

ALMA. *(After the departure.)* Shall we go on with the reading?

ROSEMARY. "The Poet, William Blake, was born in the year of our Lord, 1757 . . ." *(Mrs. Winemiller cries out and bursts into the room half in and out of her clothes.)*

MRS. WINEMILLER. Alma, Alma, I've got to go to New Orleans right away, immediately, Alma, by the midnight train. They've

closed the Museum, confiscated the marvels! Mr. Schwarzkopf is almost out of his mind. He's going to burn the place up, he's going to set it on fire—before the auction—Monday!

ALMA. *Oh, Mother! (She makes a helpless gesture, then bursts into tears and runs out of the room, followed by Mrs. Winemiller.)*

MRS. BASSETT. I think we'd all better go—poor Miss Alma!

ROGER. I move that the meeting adjourn.

VERNON. I second the motion!

MRS. BASSETT. *Poor Miss Alma! But I knew it was a mistake to have us meet here. (Sotto voce.) Nobody comes to the Rectory any more! —this always happens . . . the mother! —invariably makes a scene of some kind . . . (They trail off.)*

ROSEMARY. *(Slowly, wonderingly, as she follows them off.) I don't understand! —What happened? (Fade out.)*

ACT TWO

SCENE 3

Later that night.

The interior of the Doctor's office is suggested by a chart of anatomy, a black leather divan and an oak desk and chair behind it.

A buzzer sounds in the dark.

VOICES MURMUR ABOVE. —John? —Hannh? —The bell's ringing in the office. You'd better answer it or it will wake up your father. —All right, Mama. *(A panicky knocking begins. John enters in pajamas and robe, carrying a book. There are sounds of releasing a lock. Lights go up as Miss Alma enters. She has thrown on a coat over a nightgown, her hair is in disorder, and her appearance very distracted. She is having "an attack.")*

JOHN. Why, it's you, Miss Alma!

ALMA. *(Panting.)* Your father, please.

JOHN. Is something the matter?

ALMA. I have to see your father.

JOHN. Won't I do?

ALMA. No, I think not. Please call your father.

JOHN. Big John's asleep, he's not well.

ALMA. I'm having an attack, I've got to see him!

JOHN. It's after two, Miss Alma.

ALMA. I know the time, I know what time it is! Do you think I'd run over here at two in the morning if I weren't terribly ill?

JOHN. I don't think you would be able to run over here at two in the morning if you *were* terribly ill. Now sit down here. (*He leads her to the divan.*) And stop swallowing air.

ALMA. Swallowing what?

JOHN. Air. You swallow air when you get overexcited. It presses against your heart and starts it pounding. That frightens you more. You swallow more air and get more palpitations and before you know it you're in a state of panic like this. Now you lean back. No, no, lean all the way back and just breathe slowly and deeply. You're not going to suffocate and your heart's going to keep on beating. Look at your fingers, shame on you! You've got them clenched like you're getting ready to hit me. Are you going to hit me? Let those fingers loosen up, now.

ALMA. I can't, I can't, I'm too . . .

JOHN. You couldn't sleep?

ALMA. I couldn't sleep.

JOHN. You felt walled in, the room started getting smaller?

ALMA. I felt—walled in—suffocated!

JOHN. You started hearing your heart as if somebody had stuffed it in the pillow?

ALMA. Yes, like a drum in the pillow.

JOHN. A natural thing. But it scared you. (*He hands her a small glass of brandy.*) Toss this down. (*He places a hand behind her, raising her shoulders from the divan.*)

ALMA. What is it?

JOHN. Shot of brandy.

ALMA. Oh, that's a stimulant, I need something to calm me.

JOHN. This will calm you.

ALMA. Your father gives me—

JOHN. Let's try this to begin with.

ALMA. He gives me some little white tablets dissolved in—

JOHN. Get this down. (*She sips and chokes.*)

ALMA. Oh!

JOHN. Went down the wrong way?

ALMA. The muscles of my throat are paralyzed!

JOHN. Undo those fists, undo them, loosen those fingers. (*He presses her hands between his.*)

ALMA. I'm sorry I—woke you up . . .

JOHN. I was reading in bed. A physicist named Albert Einstein. I'm going to turn this light out.

ALMA. *Oh, no!*

JOHN. Why not? Are you afraid of the dark?

ALMA. Yes . . .

JOHN. It won't be very dark. I'm going to open these shutters and you can look at the stars while I tell you what I was reading. (*He turns off the lamp on the desk. Crossing to the window frame, he makes a motion of opening shutters. A dim blue radiance floods the stage.*) I was reading that time is one side of the four-dimensional continuum that we exist in. I was reading that space is curved. It turns back on itself instead of going on indefinitely like we used to believe, and it's hanging adrift in something that's even less than space; it's hanging like a soap bubble in something less than space . . .

ALMA. Where is the . . . ?

JOHN. Brandy? Right here. . . . Throat muscles still paralyzed?

ALMA. No, I—think I can—get it down, now . . .

JOHN. There's nothing wrong with your heart but a little functional disturbance, but I'll check it for you. Unbutton your gown.

ALMA. Unbutton? . . .

JOHN. Just the top of your gown.

ALMA. Hadn't I better come back in the morning when your father is . . . ?

JOHN. Sure. If you'd rather.

ALMA. I—my fingers are . . .

JOHN. Fingers won't work?

ALMA. They are just as if frozen!

JOHN. (*Kneeling beside her.*) Let me. (*He leans over her, unbuttoning her gown.*) Little pearl buttons . . . (*Stethoscope to her chest.*) Breathe. —Now out . . . Breathe . . . Now out . . . (*Finally he rises.*) Um-hmmmm.

ALMA. What do you hear in my heart?

JOHN. Just a little voice saying, "Miss Alma is lonesome." (*She springs up angrily.*)

ALMA. If your idea of helping a person is to ridicule and insult—

JOHN. My idea of helping you is to tell you the truth.

ALMA. (*Snatching up her cloak.*) Oh, how wise and superior you are! John Buchanan, Junior, graduate of Johns Hopkins, *magna cum laude!* —Brilliant, yes, as the branches after the ice storm, and just as cold and inhuman! Oh, you put us in our place tonight, my, my little collection of—eccentrics, my club of—fellow misfits! You sat among us like a lord of the earth, the only handsome one there, the one superior one! And oh, how we all devoured you with our eyes, you were like holy bread being broken among us. —But snatched away! Fetched home by your mother with that lame excuse, that invention about Mrs. Arbuckle's turn for the worse. I called the Arbuckles. —Better, much better, they told me, no doctor was called! Oh I suppose you're right to despise us, my little company of the faded and frightened and different and odd and lonely. You don't belong to that club but I hold an office in it! (*She laughs harshly.*)

JOHN. Hush, Miss Alma, you'll wake up the house!

ALMA. Wake up my wealthy neighbors? Oh, no, I mustn't. Everything in this house is *comme il faut*. (*A clock strikes offstage.*) Even the clock makes music when it strikes, a dainty little music. Hear it, hear it? It sounds like the voice of your mother, saying, "John? John, darling? We must go home now!" (*She laughs convulsively, then chokes, and seizes the brandy glass.*) And when you marry, you'll marry some Northern beauty. She will have no eccentricities but the eccentricities of beauty and perfect calm. Her hands will have such repose, such perfect repose when she speaks. They won't fly about her like wild birds, oh, no, she'll hold them together, press the little pink tips of her fingers together, making a—steeple—or fold them sweetly and gravely in her lap! She'll only move them when she lifts a teacup—they won't reach above her when she cries out in the night! Suddenly, desperately—fly up, fly up in the night! —reaching for something—nothing! —clutching at—space . . .

JOHN. Please! Miss Alma! You are—exhausting yourself . . .

ALMA. No, the bride will have beauty! (*Her voice is now a shrill whisper, she leans far toward him across the desk.*) The bride will have beauty, beauty! Admirable family background, no lunacy in it, no skeletons in the closet—no Aunt Albertine and Mr. Otto Schwarzkopf, no Musée Mécanique with a shady past! —No, no, nothing morbid, nothing peculiar, nothing eccentric! No—deviations! —But everything perfect and regular as the—tick of that—clock!

MRS. BUCHANAN'S VOICE. (*Above.*) John! John, darling! What on earth is the matter down there?

JOHN. (*At the door.*) Nothing. Go to sleep, Mother.

MRS. BUCHANAN'S VOICE. Is someone badly hurt?

JOHN. Yes, Mother. Hurt. But not badly. Go back to sleep. (*He closes the door.*) Now. You see? You are gasping for breath again. Lie down, lie down . . .

ALMA. I am not afraid any more and I don't care to lie down.

JOHN. Perhaps, after all, that outburst did you some good.

ALMA. Yes— Yes— (*Then suddenly.*) *I'm so ashamed of myself!*

JOHN. You should be proud of yourself. You know, you know, it's surprising how few people there are that dare in this world to say what is in their hearts.

ALMA. I had no right—to talk to you like that . . .

JOHN. I was—stupid, I—hurt you . . .

ALMA. No. I hurt myself! I exposed myself. Father is frightened of me and he's right. On the surface I'm still the Episcopal minister's daughter but there's something else that's—

JOHN. Yes, something else! What is it?

ALMA. (*Slowly shaking her head.*) Something—else that's—frantic!

JOHN. A *Doppelgänger*?

ALMA. (*Nodding slowly.*) A—*Doppelgänger!*

JOHN. Fighting for its life in the prison of a little conventional world full of walls and . . .

ALMA. What was it you said about space when you turned the light out?

JOHN. Space, I said, is curved.

ALMA. Then even space is a prison! —not—infinite . . .

JOHN. A very large prison, even large enough for you to feel free in, Miss Alma. (*He takes her hand and blows his breath on her fingers.*) Are your fingers still frozen? (*He leans against the desk, turning her face to the audience, closing her eyes.*)

ALMA. Your breath! —is . . . warm . . .

JOHN. Yours, too. Your breath is warm.

ALMA. All human breath is warm—so pitifully! So pitifully warm and soft as children's fingers . . . (*She turns her face to him and takes his face between the fingers of both her hands.*) The brandy worked very quickly. You know what I feel like now.

I feel like a water lily on a—Chinese lagoon. . . . I will sleep, perhaps. But—I won't see you—again . . .

JOHN. I'm leaving next Monday.

ALMA. Monday . . .

JOHN. Aren't there any more meetings we could—go to?

ALMA. You don't like meetings.

JOHN. The only meetings I like are between two people.

ALMA. We are two people, we've met—did you like our meeting? (*John nods, smiling.*) Then meet me again!

JOHN. I'll take you to see Mary Pickford at the Delta Brilliant tomorrow.

ALMA. (*Throws back her head with a gasping laugh, checks it quickly.*) Tomorrow? New Year's Eve? You'd take me to the movies?

JOHN. I like to forget holidays. (*Alma retreats with a slight gasp as Mrs. Buchanan enters in a lace negligee.*)

MRS. BUCHANAN. (*With acid sweetness.*) Oh, the patient's Miss Alma!

ALMA. Yes. Miss Alma's the patient. Forgive me for disturbing you. Good night. (*She turns quickly but with a fleeting glance at John, who grins by the door.*) Au revoir! (*She goes out.*)

MRS. BUCHANAN. And what was the matter with her?

JOHN. Palpitations, Mother. (*He turns out the office light.*) Haven't you ever had them?

MRS. BUCHANAN. Had them? Yes! —But controlled them! (*He laughs gaily on the stairs. She follows with an outraged "Huh!" Dim out.*)

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 desperation.*) 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."

JOHN. He did have a defensible point about companionship being something— Or are you waiting for a proposal from a, from a— male nightingale of the Delta?

ALMA. *Christ! (A cri-de-coeur: she snatches at his sleeve—a button comes off it.)* —Did I say Christ?

JOHN. Yes, you did, and you tore a button off me. (*This he says gently.*)

ALMA. —Well, as Aunt Albertine said, when she tore a button off Mr. Schwartzkopf's coat— "Some people don't even die empty-handed . . ."

JOHN. She tore a button off Mr. Schwartzkopf of the—

ALMA. Notorious Musée Mécanique when it caught fire. Can you endure the cold long enough to hear that story? Put this on you, it nearly matches your mittens! (*She removes her knitted shawl.*)

JOHN. Thanks, no, I'm not cold.

ALMA. *I told you I am burning! (A distant voice "Burrn-inng!"—drunk New Year's Eve laughter.)* —like the Musée Mécanique . . .

JOHN. Oh, that's right, it burned. An accident? Or arson?

ALMA. Definitely arson, fire set by the owner disowned. You see, you see—years ago, many, Aunt Albertine lived with us, and one Sunday a strange man came to the service and dropped a ten dollar bill in the plate and was naturally invited to dinner with us. (*She is close to him, wrapping the shawl about his throat and buttoning his coat to his chin.*) And at dinner, he sat next to Aunt Albertine. Next day she bought a plumed hat, and the following Wednesday he took her from the rectory forever.

JOHN. Straight to hell, on a plume.

ALMA. STOP IT! —grinning! —I—! —May I continue, or—?

JOHN. Please!

ALMA. Mr. Schwartzkopf had been married twice already without a divorce but bigamy was the least of his delinquencies, and obviously Aunt Albertine preferred living in sin to life in the rectory. But later on, things not prospering with them, creditors seized the museum and locked Mr. Schwartzkopf out. There was to be an auction of his mechanical marvels which included his Bird-Girl who was his only true love. Well, the night before this auction—you're still cold, let's sit closer together! —Mr. Schwartzkopf broke into the museum, set it on fire, and—wound the Bird-Girl up, crouched before her as she gave her musical whistles—Aunt Albertine rushed

into the burning building, caught her beloved by the sleeve of his coat: he shoved her fiercely away: when they dragged her out in flames, dying, she was still holding the button she'd torn from his coat as I tore this from yours! (*Holds it up.*) "Some people," she said, "don't even die empty-handed!" Don't you see a parallel, John, John?

JOHN. Parallel to what?

ALMA. —You don't want to hear what I say, and my ring's drawn blood, it's never cut half so deep. —Remember what mother said when she burst into the room Christmas Eve? "Alma has fallen in love with that tall boy!" —It's true, I had, but much longer ago. —Now you may take me home and pack away that disclosure where people put things said to them they want to forget—unless—

JOHN. Unless what, Alma?

ALMA. Unless, unless—by the most unlikely chance in the world, you wanted to take me somewhere else.

JOHN. Where is—"somewhere else"?

ALMA. Anywhere two people can be alone.

JOHN. We're alone here in the Square.

ALMA. To be honest—I told you I had to be honest—I was thinking of—a room. —A little room with a fireplace . . .

JOHN. One of those rooms that people engage for an hour? A bottle of wine in a bucket of ice—brrr! No! —No ice— No, one of those red wines in straw-covered bottles from Italy. I think they call it—Chianti . . .

ALMA. Just—four walls and a—fireplace . . .

JOHN. I'm glad you include a fireplace. That might be necessary to take the chill off, Miss Alma.

ALMA. Are there—are there such places?

JOHN. There have been such places since the beginning of time, I guess.

ALMA. *Take me to one!* —What is the answer, John?

JOHN. —I—

ALMA. You?

JOHN. I'll go get us a taxi. (*He starts u.*)

ALMA. (*A touch of madness.*) Give me something to guarantee your return! (*He pauses on elevation: snatches something from pocket, throws it down. She approaches it slowly and picks it up.*) —His—wallet! —Does he mean he regards me as a —? (*Laugh bit. Musée Mécanique theme as he calls "Taxi."*)

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 . . .

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-

ment with Mr. Schwartzkopf, father insisted that my name be changed to Alma. Your name can be changed more easily than your blood and the instincts in it. (*Discomfitted, he turns to sit rigidly sidewise on the bed, she turns to face the opposite way: they are back to back, in profile.*)

JOHN. This room reminds me of a hospital room. Even a folding white screen of the sort they put around patients about to expire.

ALMA. Turn out the light, let's see how it looks with the light out. (*He reaches above him as if to switch off a bulb.*)

JOHN. Know what it looks like now? A cave in Capri that's called the Blue Grotto.

ALMA. Put a match to the log.

JOHN. The log won't light.

ALMA. There's paper underneath it. Try, try, let's try! (*He rises without enthusiasm to strike a match. A flickering red glow strikes their figures.*) There, now, it's burning!

JOHN. Temporarily . . . (*Resumes his position on bed.*) —I did run away from here once and from one of those anonymous young ladies who get off the Cannonball Express after dark and stand aimlessly around the waiting room of the depot with an over-night bag beside them like a small dog. She knew this place and took me here. I made an excuse to slip away from the room and I ran like a rabbit—left a white linen jacket over a chair with a wallet containing eight dollars. —When I came back here next summer, that grinning old black porter handed me the white jacket. “A young lady left it for you, Mr. John,” he said. —The wallet was still in the pocket with a note from the lady. “Baby, I took five dollars to get me back to Memphis.” —Signed Alice . . .

ALMA. The fire's going out, quick, quick, it's expiring, ring for the porter to bring more paper, we must have a fire to take the chill off the room.

JOHN. Are you sure that a fire would take the chill off the room? (*She suddenly seizes her hat and tears off the plume, starts to cast the plume into the fireplace. He seizes her hand.*) Miss Alma!

ALMA. This plume will burn!

JOHN. Don't!

ALMA. This plume will burn. Something has to be sacrificed to a fire.

JOHN. (*Still gripping her hand that holds the plume.*) Miss Alma. Miss Alma. The fire has gone out and nothing will revive it. Take

my word for it, nothing! (*Music is heard very faintly.*) It never was much of a fire, it never really got started, and now it's out. . . . Sometimes things say things for people. Things that people find too painful or too embarrassing to say, a thing will say it, a thing will say it for them so they don't have to say it. . . . The fire is out, it's gone out, and you feel how the room is now, it's deathly chill. There's no use in staying in it. (*She turns on the light, walks a few steps from him, twisting her ring. There is a pause.*) You are twisting your ring. (*He catches hold of her hand again and holds it still.*)

ALMA. How gently a failure can happen! The way that some people die, lightly, unconsciously, losing themselves with their breath . . .

JOHN. Why—why call it a failure?

ALMA. Why call a spade a spade? I have to be honest. If I had had beauty and desirability and the grace of a woman, it would not have been necessary for me to be honest. My eccentricities—made it necessary . . .

JOHN. I think your honesty is the plume on your hat. And you ought to wear it proudly.

ALMA. Proudly or not proudly, I shall wear it. Now I must put it back on. Where is my hat? —Oh. —Here—the plume is restored to its place! (*Downstairs a hoarse whisky contralto starts singing "Hello, my honey, bello, my baby, bello, my ragtime doll."*) Who is—what is . . . Oh! a party—downstairs . . .

JOHN. This is—a honky-tonk.

ALMA. Yes! Perhaps I shall get to know it a great deal better!

JOHN. The plume on your hat is lovely, it almost sweeps the ceiling!

ALMA. You flatterer! (*She smiles at him with harshness, almost mockery.*)

JOHN. Don't! —we have to still like each other! —Don't be harsh.

ALMA.

If I wore a tall hat in a sunny room,
I would sweep the ceiling with a cavalier's plume—
If I wore a frock coat on a polished stair,
I would charm a grande dame with my gallant air.
If I wore a . . .

I don't remember the rest of it. Do you?

JOHN.

If I wore a gold sword on a white verandah,

I would shock a simple heart with my heartless candor!

ALMA. Yes, that's how it goes . . . (*The music dies out. All over town the church bells begin to ring in various tones, some urgent, some melancholy, some tender, and horns are blown and things exploded or rattled.*) There. There it is, the New Year! I hope it will be all that you want it to be! (*She says this with a sudden warm sincerity, smiling directly into his face.*) What a strange way we've spent New Year's Eve! Going to a Mary Pickford picture at the Delta Brilliant, having a long conversation in a cold square, and coming to a strange and bare little room like a hospital room where a fire wouldn't burn, in spite of our invocations! —But now—it's another year. . . . Another stretch of time to be discovered and entered and explored, and who knows what we'll find in it? Perhaps the coming true of our most improbable dreams! —I'm not ashamed of tonight! I think that you and I have been honest together, even though we failed! (*Something changes between them. He reaches above him, turns out the light bulb. Almost invisibly at first a flickering red glow comes from the fireplace. She has lowered the veil attached to her plumed hat. He turns it gently back from her face.*) What are you doing that for?

JOHN. So that I won't get your veil in my mouth when I kiss you. (*He does. Alma turns her face to the audience. The stage has darkened but a flickering red glow now falls across their figures. The fire has miraculously revived itself, a phoenix.*)

ALMA. I don't dare to believe it, but look, oh, look, look, John! (*She points at the fireplace from which the glow springs.*) Where did the fire come from?

JOHN. No one has ever been able to answer that question! (*The red glow brightens. The scene dims gradually out.*)

EPILOGUE

The Square, before the stone angel. A Fourth of July night an indefinite time later. Another soprano is singing.

A young traveling salesman approaches the bench on which Alma is seated.

ALMA. How did you like her voice?

SALESMAN. She sang all right.

ALMA. Her face was blank. She didn't seem to know what to do with her hands. And I didn't think she sang with any emotion. A singer's face and her hands and even her heart are part of her equipment and ought to be used expressively when she sings. That girl is one of my former vocal pupils—I used to teach singing here—and so I feel that I have a right to be critical. I used to sing at public occasions like this. I don't any more.

SALESMAN. Why don't you any more?

ALMA. I'm not asked any more.

SALESMAN. Why's that? *(Alma shrugs slightly and unfolds her fan. The salesman coughs a little.)*

ALMA. You're a stranger in town?

SALESMAN. I'm a traveling salesman.

ALMA. Ahhhh. A salesman who travels. You're younger than most of them are, and not so fat.

SALESMAN. I'm—uh—just starting out . . .

ALMA. Oh. —The pyrotechnical display is late in starting.

SALESMAN. What—what did you say?

ALMA. The fireworks, I said. I said they ought to be starting. —I don't suppose you're familiar with this town. This town is Glorious Hill, Mississippi, population five thousand souls and an equal number of bodies.

SALESMAN. Ha ha! An equal number of bodies, that's good, ha ha!

ALMA. Isn't it? My name is Alma. Alma is Spanish for soul. Usted habla Español, señor?

SALESMAN. Un poquito. Usted habla Español, señorita?

ALMA. Tambien! Un poquito.

SALESMAN. Sometimes un poquito is plenty!

ALMA. Yes, indeed, and we have to be grateful for it. Sit down and I'll point out a few of our historical landmarks to you. Directly across the Square is the county courthouse: slaves were sold on the steps before the abolition of slavery in the South; now gray old men with nothing better to do sit on them all day. Over there is the Roman Catholic Church, a small unimpressive building, this being a Protestant town. And there— *(She points in another direction.)* —There is the Episcopal church. My father was rector of it before his death. It has an unusual steeple. *(Her voice is rising in volume and tempo. One or two indistinct figures pause behind*

the stone bench, whispering, laughing at her. She turns about abruptly, imitating the laughter with a rather frightening boldness: the figures withdraw. She continues.) Yes, instead of a cross on top of the steeple, it has an enormous gilded hand with its index finger pointing straight up, accusingly, at—heaven . . . (She holds her hand up to demonstrate. The young salesman laughs uneasily and glances back of him as other figures appear in silhouette behind them.) Are you looking at the angel of the fountain? It's the loveliest thing in Glorious Hill. The angel's name is Eternity. The name is carved in the stone block at the base of the statue, but it's not visible in this light, you'd have to read it with your fingers as if you were blind. . . . Straight ahead but not visible, either, is another part of town: it's concealed by the respectable front of the Square: it's called Tiger Town, it's the part of town that a traveling salesman might be interested in. Are you interested in it?

SALESMAN. What's it got to offer?

ALMA. Saloons, penny arcades, and rooms that can be rented for one hour, which is a short space of time for human beings, but there are living—organisms—only visible through a microscope—that live and die and are succeeded by several generations in an hour, even. . . . Oh! —There goes the first skyrocket! Look at it burst into a million stars! (A long-drawn "Abhh" from the unseen crowd in the Square as a rocket explodes above it and casts a dim gold radiance on Alma's upturned face. She closes her eyes very tightly for a moment, then rises, smiling down at the young salesman.) Now would you like to go to Tiger Town? The part of town back of the courthouse?

SALESMAN. (Rising, nervously grinning.) Sure, why not, let's go!

ALMA. Good, go ahead, get a taxi, it's better if I follow a little behind you . . .

SALESMAN. Don't get lost, don't lose me! (The salesman starts off jauntily as the band strikes up "The Santiago Waltz.")

ALMA. Oh, no, I'm not going to lose you before I've lost you! (He is out of the lighted area. Another rocket explodes, much lower and brighter: The angel, Eternity, is clearly revealed for a moment or two. Alma gives it a little parting salute as she follows after the young salesman, touching the plume on her hat as if to see if it were still there. The radiance of the skyrocket fades out, the scene is dimmed out with it.)

THE END