

Rev. Winemiller
2 Pages

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.

Rev. Winemiller
3 Pages

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. (*Gasps.*) 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!

STOP