

Ah, Wilderness

ACT ONE

SCENE—*Sitting—room of the Miller home in a large small town in Connecticut—about 7:30 in the morning of July 4th, 1906. The room is fairly large, homely looking and cheerful in the morning sunlight, furnished with scrupulous medium—priced tastelessness of the period. Beneath the two windows at left, front, a sofa with silk and satin cushions stands against the wall. At rear of sofa, a bookcase with glass doors, filled with cheap sets, extends along the remaining length of wall. In the rear wall, left, is a double doorway with sliding doors and portieres, leading into a dark, windowless, back parlor, At right of this doorway, another bookcase, this time a small open one, crammed with boys' and girls' books and the best—selling novels of many past years—books the family really have read. To the right of this bookcase is the mate of the double doorway at its left, with sliding doors and portieres, this one leading to a well—lighted front parlor. In the right wall, rear, a screen door opens on a porch. Farther forward in this wall are two windows, with a writing desk and a chair between them. At center is a big, round table with a green shaded reading lamp, the cord of the lamp running up to one of five sockets in the chandelier above. Five chairs are grouped about the table—three rockers at left, right, and right rear of it, two armchairs at rear and left rear. A medium—priced, inoffensive rug covers most of the floor. The walls are papered white with a cheerful, ugly blue design.*

Voices are heard in a conversational tone from the dining room beyond the back parlor, where the family are just finishing breakfast. Then MRS. MILLER'S voice, raised commandingly, "Tommy! Come back here and finish your milk!" At the same moment TOMMY appears in the doorway from the back parlor—a chubby, sun—burnt boy of eleven with dark eyes, blond hair wetted and plastered down in a part, and a shiny, good—natured face, a rim of milk visible about his lips. Bursting with bottled—up energy and a longing to get started on the Fourth, he nevertheless has hesitated obediently at his mother's call.

TOMMY (*calls back pleadingly*): Aw, I'm full, Ma. And I said excuse me and you said all right. (*His FATHER'S voice is heard speaking to his mother. Then she calls: "All right, Tommy," and TOMMY asks eagerly*) Can I go out now?

MOTHER'S VOICE (*correctingly*): May I!

TOMMY (*fidgeting, but obediently*): May I, Ma?

MOTHER'S VOICE: Yes. (*TOMMY jumps for the screen door to the porch at right like a sprinter released by the starting shot.*)

FATHER'S VOICE (*shouts after him*): But you set off your 'crackers away from the house, remember! (*But TOMMY is already through the screen door, which he leaves open behind him.*)

(A moment later the family appear from the back parlor, coming from the dining room. First are MILDRED and ARTHUR. MILDRED is fifteen, tall and slender, with big, irregular features, resembling her father to the complete effacing of any pretense at prettiness. But her big, gray eyes are beautiful; she has vivacity and a fetching smile,

and everyone thinks of her as an attractive girl. She is dressed in shirtwaist and skirt in the fashion of the period.)

(ARTHUR, the eldest of the Miller children who are still living home, is nineteen. He is tall, heavy, barrel—chested and muscular, the type of football linesman of that period, with a square, stolid face, small blue eyes and thick sandy hair. His manner is solemnly collegiate. He is dressed in the latest college fashion of that day, which has receded a bit from the extreme of pre~ceding years, but still runs to padded shoulders and pants half—pegged at the top, and so small at their wide—cuffed bottoms that they cannot be taken off with shoes on.)

MILDRED (*as they appear—inquisitively*): Where are you going today, Art?

ARTHUR (*with superior dignity*): That's my business. (*He ostentatiously takes from his pocket a tobacco pouch with a big Y and class numerals stamped on it, and a heavy bulldog briar pipe with silver Y and numerals, and starts filling the pipe.*)

MILDRED (*teasingly*): Bet I know, just the same! Want me to tell you her initials? E.R.! (*She laughs. ARTHUR, pleased by this insinuation at his lady-killing activities, yet finds it beneath his dignity to reply. He goes to the table, lights his pipe and picks up the local morning paper, and slouches back into the armchair at left rear of table, beginning to whistle "Oh, Waltz Me Around Again, Willie" as he scans the headlines. MILDRED sits on the sofa at left, front.*)

(Meanwhile, their mother and their AUNT LILY, their father's sister, have appeared, following them from the

back parlor. MRS. MILLER is around fifty, a short, stout woman with fading light—brown hair sprinkled with gray, who must have been decidedly pretty as a girl in a round—faced, cute, small—featured, wide—eyed fashion. She has big brown eyes, soft and maternal—a bustling, mother—of—a—family manner. She is dressed in shirtwaist and skirt.)

(LILY MILLER, her sister—in—law, is forty—two, tall, dark and thin. She conforms outwardly to the conventional type of old—maid school teacher, even to wearing glasses. But 'behind the glasses her gray eyes are gentle and tired, and her whole atmosphere is one of shy kindness. Her voice presents the greatest contrast to her appearance—soft and full of sweetness. She, also, is dressed in a shirtwaist and shirt.)

MRS. MILLER (*as they appear*): Getting milk' down him is like— (*Suddenly she is aware of the screen' door standing half open*) Goodness, look at that door he's left open! The house will be alive with flies! (*Rushing out to shut it*) I've told him again and again—and that's all the good it does! It's just a waste of breath! (*She slams the door shut.*)

LILY (*smiling*): Well, you can't expect a boy to remember to shut doors—on the Fourth of July. (*She goes diffidently to the straight—backed chair before the desk at right, front, leaving the comfortable chairs to the others.*)

MRS. MILLER: That's you all over, Lily—always making excuses for him. You'll have him spoiled to death in spite of me. (*She sinks in rocker at right of table*) Phew, I'm hot, aren't you? This is going to be a scorcher. (*She picks up a magazine from the table and begins to rock, fanning herself.*)

(Meanwhile, her husband and her brother have appeared from the back parlor, both smoking cigars. NAT MILLER is in his late fifties, a tall, dark, spare man, a little stoop-shouldered, more than a little bald, dressed with an awkward attempt at sober respectability imposed upon an innate heedlessness of clothes. His long face has large, irregular, undistinguished features, but he has fine, shrewd, humorous gray eyes.)

(SID DAVIS, his brother—in—law, is forty—five, short and fat, bald—headed, with the puckish face of a Peck's Bad Boy who has never grown up. He is dressed in what had once been a very natty loud light suit but is now a shapeless and faded nondescript in cut and color.)

SID *(as they appear)*: Oh, I like the job first rate, Nat. Waterbury's a nifty old town with the lid off, when you get to know the ropes. I rang in a joke in one of my stories that tickled the folks there pink, Waterwagon—Waterbury—Waterloo!

MILLER *(grinning)*: Darn good!

SID *(pleased)*: I thought it was pretty fair myself. *(Goes on a bit ruefully, as if oppressed by a secret sorrow)* Yes, you can see life in Waterbury, all right—that is, if you're looking for life in Waterbury!

MRS. MILLER: What's that about Waterbury, Sid?

SID: I was saying it's all right in its way—but there's no place like home. *(As if to punctuate this remark, there begins a series of bangs from just beyond the porch outside, as TOMMY inaugurates his celebration by setting off a package of firecrackers. The assembled family jump in their chairs.)*

MRS. MILLER: That boy! *(She rushes to the screen door and out on the porch, calling)* Tommy! You mind what your Pa told you! You take your crackers out in the back yard, you hear me!

ARTHUR *(frowning scornfully)*: Fresh kid! He did it on purpose to scare us.

MILLER *(grinning through his annoyance)*: Darned youngster! He'll have the house afire before the day's out.

SID *(grins and sings)*

"Dunno what ter call 'im
But he's mighty like a Rose—velt."

(They all laugh.)

LILY! Sid, you Crazy! *(SID beams at her. MRS. MILLER comes back from the porch, still fuming.)*

MRS. MILLER: Well, I've made him go out back at last. Now we'll have a little peace. *(As if to contradict this, the bang of firecrackers and torpedoes begins from the rear of the house, left, and continues at intervals throughout the scene, not nearly so loud as the first explosion, but sufficiently emphatic to form a disturbing punctuation to the conversation.)*

MILLER: Well, What's on the tappee for all of you today?
Sid, you're coming to the Sachem Club picnic with me, of course.

SID *(a bit embarrassedly)*: You bet. I mean I'd like to, Nat—that is, if—

MRS. MILLER (*regarding her brother with smiling suspicion*): Hmm! I know what that Sachem Club picnic's always meant!

LILY (*breaks in in a forced joking tone that conceals a deep earnestness*): No, not this time, Essie. Sid's a reformed character since he's been on the paper in Waterbury. At least, that's what he swore to me last night.

SID (*avoiding her eyes, humiliated—joking it off*): Pure as the driven snow, that's me. They're running me for president of the W.C.T.U. (*They all laugh.*)

MRS. MILLER: Sid, you're a caution. You turn everything into a joke. But you be careful, you hear? We're going to have dinner in the evening tonight, you know—the best shore dinner you ever tasted and I don't want you coming home—well, not able to appreciate it.

LILY! Oh, I know he'll be careful today. Won't you, Sid?

SID (*more embarrassed than ever—joking it off melodramatically*): Lily, I swear to you if any man offers me a drink, I'll kill him—that is, if he changes his mind! (*They all laugh except LILY, who bites her lip and stiffens.*) ,

MRS. MILLER: No use talking to him, Lily. You ought to know better by this time. We can only hope for the best.

MILLER: Now, you women stop picking on Sid. It's the Fourth of July and even a downtrodden newspaperman has a right to enjoy himself when he's on his holiday.

MRS. MILLER: I wasn't thinking only of Sid.

MILLER (*with a wink at the others*):" What, are you insinuating I ever—

MRS. MILLER: Well, to do you justice, no, not what you'd really call— But I've known you to come back from this darned Sachem Club picnic— Well, I didn't need any little bird to whisper that you'd been some place besides to the Well! (She smiles good-naturedly. MILLER chuckles.)

SID (*after a furtive glance at the stiff and silent LILY— changes the subject abruptly by turning to ARTHUR*):
How are you spending the festive Fourth, Boola—Boola?

(*ARTHUR stiffens dignifiedly*).

MILDRED (*teasingly*): I can tell you, if he won't.

MRS. MILLER (*smiling*): Off to the Rands', I suppose.

ARTHUR (*with dignity*): I and Bert Turner are taking Elsie and Ethel Rand canoeing. We're going to have `a picnic lunch on Strawberry Island. And this evening I'm staying at the Rands' for dinner.

MILLER: You're accounted for, then. How about you, Mid?

MILDRED! I'm going to the beach to Anne Culver's.

ARTHUR (*sarcastically*): Of course, there won't be any boys present. Johnny Dodd, for example?

MILDRED (*giggles—then with a coquettish toss of her head*):
Pooh! What do I care for him? He's not the only pebble on the beach. `

MILLER: Stop your everlasting teasing, you two. How about you and Lily, Essie?

MRS. MILLER: I don't know. I haven't made any plans, Have you, Lily? '

LILY (*quietly*): No. Anything you want to do.

MRS. MILLER: Well, I thought we'd just sit around and rest and talk.

MILLER: You can gossip any day. This is the Fourth. Now, I've got a better suggestion than that. What do you say to an automobile ride? I'll get out the Buick and we'll drive around town and out to the lighthouse and back. Then Sid and I will let you off here, or anywhere you say, and we'll go on to the picnic.

MRS. MILLER: I'd love it. Wouldn't you, Lily?

LILY: It would be nice. '

MILLER: Then, that's all settled.

SID (*embarrassedly*): Lily, want to come with me to the fireworks display at the beach tonight?

MRS. MILLER: That's right, Sid. You take her out. Poor Lily never has any fun, always sitting home with me.

LILY (*flustered and grateful*): I—I'd like to, Sid, thank you. (*Then an apprehensive look comes over her face*) Only not if you come home—you know.

SID (*again embarrassed and humiliated—again joking it off, solemnly*): Evil-minded, I'm afraid, Nat. I hate to say it of your sister. (*They all laugh. Even LILY cannot suppress a smile.*)

ARTHUR (*with heavy jocular*ity): Listen, Uncle Sid. Don't let me catch you and Aunt Lily spooning on a bench tonight—or it'll be my duty to call a cop! (*SID and LILY both look painfully embarrassed at this, and the joke falls*

flat, except for MILDRED who can't restrain a giggle at the thought of these two ancients spooning.)

MRS. MILLER (*rebukingly*): Arthur!

MILLER (*dryly*): That'll do you. Your education in kicking a football around Yale seems to have blunted your sense of humor. '

MRS. MILLER (*suddenly—startledly*): But where's Richard? We're forgetting all about him. Why, where is that boy? I thought he came in with us from breakfast.

MILDRED: I'll bet he's off somewhere writing a poem to Muriel McCornber, the silly! Or pretending to write one. I think he just copies—

ARTHUR (*looking back toward the dining—room*): He's still in the dining—room, reading a book. (*Turning back—scornfully*) Gosh, he's always reading now. It's not my idea of having a good time in vacation.

MILLER (*caustically*): He read his school books, too, strange as that may seem to you. That's why he came out top of his class. I'm hoping before you leave New Haven they'll find time to teach you reading is a good habit.

MRS. MILLER (*sharply*): That reminds me, Nat. I've been meaning to speak to you about those awful books Richard is reading. You've got to give him a good talking to— (*She gets up from her chair*) I'll go up and get them right now. I found them where he'd hid them on the shelf in his Wardrobe. You just wait till you see what— (*She bustles off, rear right, through the front parlor.*)

MILLER (*plainly not relishing whatever is coming—to SID, grumblingly*): Seems to me she might wait until the

Fourth is over before bringing up— *(Then with a grin)* I know there's nothing to it, anyway. When I think of the books I used to sneak off and read when I was a kid.

SID: Me, too. I suppose Dick is deep in Nick Carter or Old Cap Collier.

MILLER: No, he passed that period long ago. Poetry's his red meat nowadays, I think—love poetry—and socialism, too, I suspect, from some dire declarations he's made. *(Then briskly)* Well, might as well get him on the carpet. *(He calls)* Richard. *(No answer—louder)* Richard. *(No answer—then in a bellow)* Richard!

ARTHUR *(shouting)*: Hey, Dick, wake up! Pa's calling you.

RICHARD'S VOICE *(from the dining—room)*: All right. I'm coming. `

MILLER: Darn him! When he gets his nose in a book, the house could fall down and he'd never—

(RICHARD appears in the doorway from the back parlor, the book he has been reading in one hand, a finger marking his place. He looks a bit startled still, reluctantly called back to earth from another world.)

(He is going on seventeen, just out of high school. In appearance he is a perfect blend of father and mother, so much so that each is convinced he is the image of the other. He has his mother's light—brown hair, his father's gray eyes; his features are neither large nor small; he is of medium height, neither fat nor thin. One would not call him a handsome boy; neither is he homely. But he is definitely different from both of his parents, too. There is something of extreme sensitiveness added—a restless, apprehensive, defiant, shy, dreamy, self—conscious

intelligence about him. In manner he is alternately plain simple boy and a posey actor solemnly playing a role. He is dressed in prep school reflection of the college style of ARTHUR.)

RICHARD: Did you want me, Pa?

MILLER: I'd hoped I'd made that plain. Come and sit down a while. *(He points to the rocking chair at the right of table near his.)*

RICHARD *(coming forward—seizing on the opportunity to play up his preoccupation—with apologetic superiority)*: I didn't hear you, Pa. I was off in another world.

(MILDRED slyly shoves her foot out so that he trips over it, almost falling. She laughs gleefully. So does ARTHUR.)

ARTHUR: Good for you, Mid! That'll wake him up!

RICHARD *(grins sheepishly—all boy now)*: Darn you, Mid! I'll show you! *(He pushes her back on the sofa and tickles her with his free hand, still holding the book in the other. She shrieks.)*

ARTHUR: Give it to her, Dick!

MILLER: That's enough, now. No more roughhouse. You sit down here, Richard. *(RICHARD obediently takes the chair at right of table, opposite his father)* What were you planning to do with yourself today? Going out to the beach with Mildred?

RICHARD *(scornfully superior)*: That silly skirt party! I should say not!

MILDRED: He's not coming because Muriel isn't. I'll bet he's got a date with her somewhere.

RICHARD (*flushing bashfully*): You shut up! (*Then to his father*) I thought I'd just stay home, Pa—this morning, anyway.

MILLER: Help Tommy set off firecrackers, eh?

RICHARD (*drawing himself up—with dignity*): I should say not! (*Then frowning portentously*) I don't believe in this silly celebrating the Fourth of July—all this lying talk about liberty—when there is no liberty!

MILLER (*a twinkle in his eye*): Hmm.

RICHARD (*getting warmed up*): The land of the free and the home of the brave! Home of the slave is what they ought to call it—the wage slave ground under the heel of the capitalist class, starving, crying for bread for his children, and, all he gets is a stone! The Fourth of July is a stupid farce!

MILLER (*putting his hand to his mouth to conceal a grin*):
Hmm. They are mighty strong words. You'd better not repeat such sentiments outside the bosom of the family or they'll have you in jail.

SID: And throw away the key.

RICHARD (*darkly*): Let them put me in jail. But how about the freedom of speech in the Constitution, then? That must be a farce, too. (*Then he adds grimly*) No, you can celebrate your Fourth of July. I'll celebrate the day the people bring out the guillotine again and I see Pierpont Morgan being driven by in a tumbrel! (*His father and SID are greatly amused; LILY is shocked but, taking her cue*

from them, smiles. MILDRED stares at him in puzzled wonderment, never having heard this particular line before. Only ARTHUR betrays the outraged reaction of a patriot.)

ARTHUR: Aw say, you fresh kid, tie that bull outside! You ought to get a punch in the nose for talking that way on the Fourth!

MILLER (*solemnly*): Son, if I didn't know it was you talking, I'd think we had Emma Goldman with us.

ARTHUR: Never mind, Pa. Wait till We get him down to Yale. We'll take that out of him!

RICHARD (*with high scorn*): Oh, Yale! You think there's nothing in the world besides Yale. After all, what is Yale?

ARTHUR: You'll find out what!

SID (*provocatively*): Don't let them scare you, Dick. Give 'ern hell!

LILY (*shocked*): Sid! You shouldn't swear before—

RICHARD: What do you think I am, Aunt Lily—a baby? I've heard worse than anything Uncle Sid says.

MILDRED: And said worse himself, I bet!

MILLER (*with a comic air of resignation*): Well, Richard, I've always found I've had to listen to at least one stump speech every Fourth. I only hope getting your extra strong one right after breakfast will let me off for the rest of the day. (*They all laugh now, taking this as a cue.*)

RICHARD (*somberly*): That's right, laugh! After you, the deluge, you think! But look out! Supposing it comes

before? Why shouldn't the Workers of the World unite and rise? They have nothing to lose but their chains! (*He recites threateningly*) "The days grow hot, O Babylon! 'Tis cool beneath thy willow trees!"

MILLER: Hmm. That's good. But where's the connection, exactly? Something from that book you're reading?

RICHARD (*superior*): No. That's poetry. This is prose.

MILLER: I've heard there was a difference between 'em. What is the book?

RICHARD (*importantly*): Carlyle's "French Revolution."

MILLER: Hmm. So that's where you drove the tumbrel from and piled poor old Pierpont in it. (*Then seriously*) Glad you're reading it, Richard. It's a darn line book.

RICHARD (*with unflattering astonishment*): What, have you read it? ,

MILLER: Well, you see, even a newspaper owner can't get out of reading a book every now and again.

RICHARD (*abashed*): I—I didn't mean—I know you— (*Then enthusiastically*) Say, isn't it a great book, though—that part about Mirabeau—and about Marat and Robespierre—

MRS. MILLER (*appears from the front parlor in a great state of flushed annoyance*): Never you mind Robespierre, young man! You tell me this minute where you've hidden those books! They were on the shelf in your Wardrobe and now you've gone and hid them somewhere; else. You go right up and bring them to your father!

(*RICHARD, for a second, looks suddenly guilty and crushed. Then he bristles defensively.*)

MILLER (*after a quick understanding glance at him*) : Never mind his getting them now. We'll waste the whole morning over those darned books. And anyway, he has a right to keep his library to himself—that is, if they're not too— What books are they, Richard?

RICHARD (*self—consciously*): Well—there's—

MRS. MILLER: I'll tell you, if he won't—and you give him a good talking to. (*Then, after a glance at RICHARD, mollifiedly*) Not that I blame Richard. There must be some boy he knows who's trying to show off as advanced and wicked, and he told him about—

RICHARD: No! I read about them myself, in the papers and in other books.

MRS. MILLER: Well, no matter how, there they were on his shelf. Two by that awful Oscar Wilde they put in jail for heaven knows what wickedness.

ARTHUR (*suddenly—solemnly authoritative*): He committed bigamy. (*Then as SID smothers a burst of ribald laughter*) What are you laughing at? I guess I ought to know. A fellow at college told me. His father was in England when this Wilde was pinched—and he said he remembered once his mother asked his father about it and he told her he'd committed bigamy.

MILLER (*hiding a smile behind his hand*): Well then, that must be right, Arthur. ,

MRS. MILLER: I wouldn't put it past him, nor anything else. One book was called the Picture of something or other.

RICHARD: “The Picture of Dorian Gray.” It’s one of the greatest novels ever written!

MRS. MILLER: Looked to me like cheap trash. And the second book was poetry. The Ballad of I forget what.

RICHARD: “The Ballad of Reading Gaol,” one of the greatest poems ever written. (He pronounces it Reading Goal [as in goalpost].)

MRS. MILLER: All about someone who murdered his wife and got hung, as he richly deserved, as far as I could make out. And then there were two books by that Bernard Shaw

RICHARD: The greatest playwright alive today!

MRS. MILLER: To hear him tell it, maybe! You know, Nat, the one who wrote a play about—well, never mind— that was so vile they Wouldn’t even let it play in New York! ’

MILLER: Hmm. I remember.

MRS. MILLER: One was a book of his plays and the other I had a long title I couldn’t make head or tail of, only it wasn’t a play.

RICHARD (*proudly*): “The Quintessence of Ibsenism.”

MILDRED: Phew! Good gracious, what a name! What does it mean, Dick? I’ll bet he doesn’t know.

RICHARD (*outraged*): I do, too, know! It’s about Ibsen, the greatest playwright since Shakespeare!

MRS. MILLER: Yes, there was a book of plays—by that Ibsen there, too! And poems by Swin something—

RICHARD: “Poems and Ballads” by Swinburne, Ma. The greatest poet since Shelley! He tells the truth about real love!

MRS. MILLER: Love! Well, all I can say is, from reading here and there, that if he wasn’t flung in jail along with Wilde, he should have been. Some of the things I simply couldn’t read, they were so indecent— All about— Well, I can’t tell you before Lily and Mildred.

SID (*with a wink at RICHARD—jokingly*): Remember, I’m next on that one, Dick. I feel the need of a little poetical education.

LILY (scandalized, but laughing): Sid! Aren’t you ashamed?

MRS. MILLER: This is no laughing matter. And then there was Kipling—but I suppose he’s not so bad. And last there was a poem—a long one—the Rubay— What is it, Richard?

RICHARD: “The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam.” That’s the best of all!

MILLER: Oh, I’ve read that, Essie—got a copy down at the office.

SID (enthusiastically): So have I. It’s a pippin!

LILY (with shy excitement): I—I’ve read it, too—at the library. I like—some parts of it.

MRS. MILLER (scandalized): Why, Lily!

MILLER: Everybody’s reading that now, Essie—and it don’t seem to do them any harm. There’s Hue things in it, seems to me—true things.

MRS. MILLER (*a bit bewildered and uncertain now*): Why,
Nat, I don't see how you— It looked terrible blasphemous
—parts I read.

SID: Remember this one: (*He quotes rhetorically*) "Oh Thou,
who didst with pitfall and gin beset the path I was to
wander in—" Now, I've always noticed how beset my
path was with gin—in the past, you understand!

(*He casts a joking side glance at LILY. The others laugh.
But LILY is in a melancholy dream and hasn't heard
him.*)

MRS. MILLER (tartly, but evidently suppressing her usual
smile where he is concerned): You would pick out the
ones with liquor in them!

LILY (suddenly—with a sad pathos, quotes awkwardly and
shyly): I like—because it's true:

"The Moving Finger writes, and having writ,
Moves on: nor all your Piety nor Wit
Shall lure it back to cancel half a Line,
Nor all your Tears wash out a Word of it."

MRS. MILLER (*astonished, as are all the others*): Why, Lily,
I never knew you to recite poetry before!

LILY (*immediately guilty and apologetic*): I—it just stuck in
my memory somehow.

RICHARD (*looking at her as if he had never seen her
before*): Good for you, Aunt Lily! (*Then enthusiastically*)
But that isn't the best. The best is:

"A Book of Verses underneath the Bough,
A jug of Wine, A Loaf of Bread—and Thou
Beside me singing in the Wilderness—"

ARTHUR (*who, bored to death by all this poetry quoting, has wandered over to the window at rear of desk, right*): Hey! Look who's coming up the walk— Old Man McComber!

MILLER (*irritably*): Dave? Now what in thunder does that damned old— Sid, I can see where we never are going to get to that picnic. '

MRS. MILLER (*vexatiously*): He'll know we're in this early, too. No use lying. (*Then appalled by another thought*) That Norah—she's that thick, she never can answer the front door right unless I tell her each time. Nat, you've got to talk to Dave. I'll have her show him in here. Lily, you run up the back stairs and get your things on. I'll be up in a second. Nat, you get rid of him the first second you can! Whatever can the old fool want— (*She and LILY hurry out through the back parlor.*)

ARTHUR: I'm going to beat it—just time to catch the eight—twenty trolley.

MILDRED: I've got to catch that, too. Wait till I get my hat, Art! (*She rushes into the back parlor.*)

ARTHUR (*shouts after her*): I can't Wait. You can catch up with me if you hurry. (*He turns at the back parlor door—with a grin*) McComber may be coming to see if your intentions toward his daughter are dishonorable, Dick! You'd better beat it while your shoes are good!

(*He disappears through the back parlor door, laughing.*)

RICHARD (*a bit shaken, but patting on a brave front*): Think I'm scared of him?

MILLER (*gazing at him—frowning*): Can't imagine what — But it's to complain about something, I know that. I only

wish I didn't have to be pleasant with the old buzzard—
but he's about the most valuable advertiser I've got.

SID (*sympathetically*): I know. But tell him to go to hell,
anyway. He needs that ad more than you.

*(The sound of the bell comes from the rear of the house,
off left from back parlor.)*

MILLER: There he is. You clear out, Dick—but come right
back as soon as he's gone, you hear? I'm not through with
you, yet.

RICHARD: Yes, Pa.

MILLER: You better clear out, too, Sid. You know Dave
doesn't approve jokes.

SID: And loves me like poison! Come on, Dick, We'll go out
and help Tommy celebrate. *(He takes RICHARD'S arm
and they also disappear through the back parlor door.
MILLER glances through the front parlor toward the
front door, then calls in a tone of strained heartiness.)*

MILLER: Hello, Dave. Come right in here. What good wind
blows you around on this glorious Fourth?

*(A flat, brittle voice answers him: "Good morning," and a
moment later DAVID McCOMBER appears in the
doorway from the front parlor. He is a thin, dried up little
man with a head too large for his body perched on a
scrawny neck, and a long solemn horse face with deep-set
little black eyes, a blunt formless nose and a tiny slit of a
mouth. He is about the same age as MILLER but is
entirely bald, and looks ten years older. He is dressed
with a prim neatness in shiny old black clothes.)*

MILLER: Here, sit down and make yourself comfortable.

(Holding out the cigar box) Have a cigar?

McCOMBER *(sitting down in the chair at the right of table—acidly)* : You're forgetting. I never smoke.

MILLER *(forcing a laugh at himself)*: That's so. So I was.
Well, I'll smoke alone then. *(He bites off the end of the cigar viciously, as if he wished it were McCOMBER's head, and sits down opposite him.)*

Mc COMBER! You asked me what brings me here, so I'll come to the point at once. I regret to say it's something disagreeable—disgraceful would be nearer the truth—and it concerns your son, Richard!

MILLER *(beginning to bristle—but calmly)*: Oh, come now, Dave, I'm sure Richard hasn't—

Mc COMBER *(sharply)*: And I'm positive he has. You're not accusing me of being a liar, I hope.

MILLER: No one said anything about liar. I only meant you're surely mistaken if you think—

Mc COMBER: I'm not mistaken. I have proof of everything in his own handwriting!

MILLER *(sharply)*: Let's get down to brass tacks. Just what is it you're charging him with?

Mc COMBER: With being dissolute and blasphemous—with deliberately attempting to corrupt the morals of my young daughter, Muriel.

MILLER: Then I'm afraid I will have to call you a liar, Dave!

Mc COMBER (*without taking offense—in the same flat, brittle voice*): I thought you'd get around to that, so I brought some of the proofs with me. I've a lot more of 'em at home. (*He takes a wallet from his inside coat pocket, selects five or six slips of paper, and holds them out to MILLER*) These are good samples of the rest. My wife discovered them in one of Muriel's bureau drawers hidden under the underwear. They're all in his handwriting, you can't deny it. Anyway, Muriel's confessed to me he wrote them. You read them and then say I'm a liar. (*MILLER has taken the slips and is reading them frowningly. Mc COMBER talks on*) Evidently you've been too busy to take the right care about Richard's bringing up or what's he's allowed to read—though I can't see why his mother failed in her duty. But that's your misfortune, and none of my business. But Muriel is my business and I can't and I won't have her innocence exposed to the contamination of a young man whose mind, judging from his choice of reading matter, is as foul—

MILLER (*making a tremendous effort to control his temper*): Why, you damned old fool! Can't you see Richard's only a fool kid who's just at the stage when he's out to rebel against all authority, and so he grabs at everything radical to read and wants to pass it on to his elders and his girl and boy friends to show off what a young hellion he is! Why, at heart you'd find Richard is just as innocent and as big a kid as Muriel is! (*He pushes the slips of paper across the table contemptuously*) This stuff doesn't mean anything to me—that is, nothing of what you think it means. If you believe this would corrupt Muriel, then you must believe she's easily corrupted! But I'll bet you'd find she knows a lot more about life than you give her

credit for—and can guess a stork didn't bring her down your chimney!

Mc COMBER: Now you're insulting my daughter. I won't forget that.

MILLER: I'm not insulting her. I think Muriel is a darn nice girl. That's why I'm giving her credit for ordinary good sense. I'd say the same about my own Mildred, who's the same age.

Mc COMBER: I know nothing about your Mildred except that she's known all over as a flirt. (*Then more sharply*) Well, I knew you'd prove obstinate, but I certainly never dreamed you'd have the impudence, after reading those papers, to claim your son was innocent of all Wrongdoing!

MILLER: And what did you dream I'd do?

Mc COMBER: Do what it's your plain duty to do as a citizen to protect other people's children! Take and give him a hiding he'd remember to the last day of his life! You'd ought to do it for his sake, if you had any sense—unless you want him to end up in jail!

MILLER (*his fists clenched, leans across the table*): Dave, I've stood all I can stand from you! You get out! And get out quick, if you don't want a kick in the rear to help you!

Mc COMBER (*again in his flat, brittle voice, slowly getting to his feet*): You needn't lose your temper. I'm only demanding you do your duty by your own as I've already done by mine. I'm punishing Muriel. She's not to be allowed out of the house for a month and she's to be in bed every night by eight sharp. And yet she's blameless, compared to that—

MILLER: I said I'd had enough out of you, Dave! (*He makes a threatening movement.*)

Mc COMBER: You needn't lay hands on me. I'm going. But there's one thing more. (*He takes a letter from his wallet*) Here's a letter from Muriel for your son. (*Puts it on the table*) It makes clear, I think, how she's come to think about him, now that her eyes have been opened. I hope he heeds what's inside—for his own good and yours—because if I ever catch him hanging about my place again I'll have him arrested! And don't think I'm not going to make you regret the insults you've heaped on me. I'm taking the advertisement for my store out of your paper—and it won't go in again, I tell you, not unless you apologize in writing and promise to punish—

MILLER: I'll see you in hell first! As for your damned old ad, take it out and go to hell!

Mc COMBER: That's plain bluff. You know how badly you need it. So do I. (*He starts stiffly for the door.*)

MILLER: Here! Listen a minute! I'm just going to call your bluff and tell you that, whether you want to reconsider your decision or not, I'm going to refuse to print your damned ad after tomorrow! Put that in your pipe and smoke it! Furthermore, I'll start a campaign to encourage outside capital to open a dry goods store in opposition to you that won't be the public swindle I can prove yours is!

McCOMBER (*a bit shaken by this threat—but in the same flat tone*): I'll sue you for libel.

MILLER: When I get through, there won't be a person in town will buy a dishrag in your place!

Mo COMBER (*more shaken, his eyes shifting about furtively*): That's all bluff. You wouldn't dare— (*Then finally he says uncertainly*) Well, good day. (*And turns and goes out. NAT stands looking after him. Slowly the anger drains from his face and leaves him looking a bit sick and disgusted. SID appears from the back parlor. He is nursing a burn on his right hand, but his face is one broad grin of satisfaction.*)

SID: I burned my hand with one of Tommy's damned firecrackers and came in to get some Vaseline. I was listening to the last of your scrap. Good for you, Nat! You sure gave him hell! `

MILLER (*drily*): Much good it'll do. He knows it was all talk.

SID: That's just what he don't know, Nat, The old skinflint has a guilty conscience.

MILLER: Well, anyone who knows me knows I wouldn't use my paper for a dirty, spiteful trick like that—no matter what he did to me.

SID: Yes, everyone knows you're an old sucker, Nat, too decent for your own good. But McComber never saw you like this before. I tell you you scared the pants off him. (*He chuckles.*)

MILLER (*still dejectedly*): I don't know what made me let go like that. The hell of skunks like McComber is that after being with them ten minutes you become as big skunks as they are.

SID (*notices the slips of paper on the table*): What's this? Something he brought? (*He picks them up and starts to read.*)

MILLER (*grimly*): Samples of the new freedom—from those books Essie found—that Richard's been passing on to Muriel to educate her. They're what started the rumpus. (*Then frowning*) I've got to do something about that young anarchist or he'll be getting me, and himself, in a—peck of trouble. (*Then pathetically helpless*) But what can I do? Putting the curb bit on would make him worse. Then he'd have a harsh tyrant to defy. He'd love that, darn him!

SID (*has been reading the slips, a broad grin on his face — suddenly he whistles*): Phew! This is a Warm lulu for fair! (*He recites with a joking intensity*)

“My life is hitter with thy love; thine eyes
Blind me, thy tresses burn me, thy sharp sighs
Divide my flesh and spirit with soft sound—”

MILLER (*with a grim smile*): Hmm. I missed that one. That must be Mr. Swinburne's copy. I've never read him, but I've heard something like that was the matter with him.

SID: Yes, it's labeled Swinburne—“Anactoria.” Whatever that is. But wait, watch and listen! The worst is yet to come! (*He recites with added comic intensity*)

“That I could drink thy veins as wine, and eat
Thy breasts like honey, that from face to feet
Thy body were abolished and consumed,
And in my flesh thy very flesh entombed!”

NIILLER (*an irrepressible boyish grin coming to his face*): Hell and hallelujah! Just picture old Dave digesting that for the first time! Gosh, I'd give a lot to have seen his face! (*Then a trace of shocked reproof showing in his voice*) But it's no joking matter. That stuff is warm—too damned warm, if you ask me! I don't like this a damned

bit, Sid. That's no kind of thing to be sending a decent girl. *(More worriedly)* I thought he was really stuck on her—as one gets stuck on a decent girl at his age—all moonshine and holding hands and a kiss now and again. But this looks—I Wonder if he is hanging around her to see what he can get? *(Angrily)* By God, if that's true, he deserves that licking McComber says it's my duty to give him! I've got to draw the line somewhere!

SID: Yes, it won't do to have him getting any decent girl in trouble.

MILLER: The only thing I can do is put it up to him straight. *(With pride)* Richard'll stand up to his guns, no matter what. I've never known him to lie to me.

SID *(at a noise from the back parlor, looks that way—in a whisper)*: Then now's your chance. I'll beat it and leave you alone—see if the women folks are ready upstairs. We ought to get started soon—if we're ever going to make that picnic. *(He is halfway to the entrance to the front parlor as RICHARD enters from the back parlor, very evidently nervous about Mc COMBER'S call.)*

RICHARD *(adopting a forced, innocent tone)*: How's your hand, Uncle Sid?

SID: All right, Dick, thanks—only hurts a little. *(He disappears. MILLER watches his son frowningly. RICHARD gives him a quick side glance and grows more guiltily self-conscious.)*

RICHARD *(forcing a snicker)*: Gee, Pa, Uncle Sid's a bigger kid than Tommy is. He was throwing firecrackers in the air and catching them on the back of his hand and throwing 'em off again just before they went off—and

one came and he wasn't quick enough, and it went off almost on top of—

MILLER: Never mind that. I've got something else to talk to you about besides firecrackers.

RICHARD (*apprehensively*): What, Pa?

MILLER (*suddenly puts both hands on his shoulders—quietly*): Look here, Son. I'm going to ask you a question, and I want an honest answer. I warn you beforehand if the answer is "yes" I'm going to punish you and punish you hard because you'll have done something no boy of mine ought to do. But you've never lied to me before, I know, and I don't believe, even to save yourself punishment, you'd lie to me now, would you?

RICHARD (*impressed—with dignity*): I won't lie, Pa.

MILLER: Have you been trying to have something to do with Muriel—something you shouldn't—you know what I mean.

RICHARD (*stares at him for a moment, as if he couldn't comprehend—then, as he does, a look of shocked indignation comes over his face*): No! What do you think I am, Pa? I never would! She's not that kind! Why, I—I love her! I'm going to marry her—after I get out of college! She's said she would! We're engaged!

MILLER (*with great relief*): All right. That's all I wanted to know. We won't talk any more about it. (*He gives him an approving pat on the back.*)

RICHARD: I don't see how you could think— Did that old idiot McComber say that about me?

MILLER (*joking now*): Shouldn't call your future father-in-law names, should you? 'Tain't respectful. (*Then after a glance at RICHARD's indignant face— points to the slips of paper on the table*) Well, you can't exactly blame old Dave, can you, when you read through that literature you wished on his innocent daughter?

RICHARD (*sees the slips for the first time and is overcome by embarrassment, which he immediately tries to cover up with a superior carelessness*): Oh, so that's why. He found those, did he? I told her to be careful— Well, it'll do him good to read the truth about life for once and get rid of his old foggy ideas.

MILLER: I'm afraid I've got' to agree with him, though, that they're hardly fit reading for a young girl. (*Then with subtle flattery*) They're all well enough, in their way, for you who're a man, but— Think it over, and see if you don't agree with me.

RICHARD (*embarrassedly*): Aw, I only did it because I liked them—and I wanted her to face life as it is. She's so darned afraid of life—afraid of her Old Man— afraid of people saying this or that about her—afraid of being in love—afraid of everything. She's even afraid to let me kiss her. I thought, maybe, reading those things —they're' beautiful, aren't they, Pa?—I thought they would give her the spunk to lead her own life, and not be—always thinking of being afraid.

MILLER: I see. Well, I'm afraid, she's still afraid. (*He takes the letter from the table*) Here's a letter from her he said to give you. (*RICHARD takes the letter from him uncertainly, his expression changing to one of apprehension. MILLER adds with a kindly smile*) You better be prepared for a bit of a blow. But never mind.

There's lots of other fish in the sea. (*RICHARD is not listening to him, but staring at the letter with a sort of fascinated dread. MILLER looks into his son's face a second, then turns away, troubled and embarrassed*) Darn it! I better go upstairs and get rigged out or I never will get to that picnic. (*He moves awkwardly and self-consciously out through the front parlor. RICHARD continues to stare at the letter for a moment—then girds up his courage and tears it open and begins to read swiftly. As he reads his face grows more and more wounded and tragic, until at the end his mouth draws down at the corners, as if he were about to break into tears. With an effort he forces them back and his face grows flushed with humiliation and wronged anger.*)

RICHARD (*blurts out to himself*): The little coward! I hate her! She can't treat me like that! I'll show her! (*At the sound of voices from the front parlor, he quickly shoves the letter into the inside pocket of his coat and does his best to appear calm and indifferent, even attempting to whistle "Waiting at the Church." But the whistle peters out miserably as his mother, LILY and SID enter from the front parlor. They are dressed in all the elaborate paraphernalia of motoring at that period—linen dusters, veils, goggles, SID in a snappy cap.*)

MRS. MILLER: Well, We're about ready to start at last, thank goodness! Let's hope no more callers are on the way. What did that McComber want, Richard, do you know? Sid couldn't tell us.

RICHARD: You can search me. Ask Pa.

MRS. MILLER (*immediately sensing something "down" in his manner—going to him worriedly*): Why, Whatever's

the matter with you, Richard? You sound as if you'd lost your last friend! What is it?

RICHARD (*desperately*): I— I don't feel so Well—my stomach's sick.

MRS. MILLER (*immediately all sympathy—smoothing his hair back from his forehead*): You poor boy! What a shame—on the Fourth, too, of all days! (*Turning to the others*) Maybe I better stay home with him, if he's sick.

LILY: Yes, I'll stay, too.

RICHARD (*more desperately*): No! You go, Ma! I'm not really sick. I'll be all right. You go. I want to be alone! (*Then, as a louder bang comes from in back as TOMMY sets off a cannon cracker, he jumps to his feet*) Damn Tommy and his darned firecrackers! You can't get any peace in this house with that damned kid around! Damn the Fourth of July, anyway! I wish we still belonged to England! (*He strides off in an indignant fury of misery through the front parlor.*)

MRS. MILLER (*stares after him worriedly—then sighs philosophically*): Well, I guess he can't be so very sick—after that. (*She shakes her head*) He's a queer boy. Sometimes I can't make head or tail of him.

MILLER (*calls from the front door beyond the back parlor*): (Come along folks. Let's get started. .

SID: We're coming, Nat. (*He and the two women move off through the front parlor.*)

Curtain

ACT TWO

SCENE—*Dining room of the MILLER home—a little after 6 o'clock in the evening of the same day. The room is much too small for the medium-priced, formidable dining room set, especially now when all the leaves of the table are in. At left, toward rear, is a double doorway with sliding doors and portieres leading into the back parlor. In the rear wall, left, is the door to the pantry. At the right of door is the china closet with its display of the family cut glass and fancy china. In the right wall are two windows looking out on a side lawn. In front of the windows is a heavy, ugly sideboard with three pieces of old silver on its top. In the left wall, extreme front, is a screen door opening on a side porch. A dark rug covers most of the floor. The table, with a chair at each end, left and right, three chairs on the far side, facing front, and two on the near side, their backs to front, takes up most of the available space. The walls are papered in a somber brown and dark red design.*

MRS. MILLER is supervising and helping the Second Girl, NORAH, in the setting of the table. NORAH is a clumsy, heavy-handed, heavy-fooled, long-jawed, beamingly good-natured young Irish girl—a “greenhorn.”

MRS. MILLER: I really think you better put on the lights, Norah. It's getting so cloudy out, and this pesky room is so dark, anyway.

NORAH: Yes, Mum. *(She stretches awkwardly over the table to reach the chandelier that is suspended from the middle*

of the ceiling and manages to turn one light on — scornfully) Arrah, the contraption!

MRS. MILLER (*worriedly*): Careful!

NORAH: Careful as can be, Mum. (*But in moving around to reach the next bulb she jars heavily against the table.*)

MRS. MILLER: There! I knew it! I do wish you'd watch—I

NORAH (*a flustered appeal in her voice*): Arrah, what have I done wrong now?

MRS. MILLER (*draws a deep breath—then sighs helplessly*):
Oh, nothing. Never mind the rest of the lights. You might as well go out in the kitchen and wait until I ring.

NORAH (*relieved and cheerful again*): Yes, Mum. (*She starts for the pantry.*)

MRS. MILLER: But there's one thing— (*NORAH turns apprehensively*) No, two things—things I've told you over and over, but you always forget. Don't pass the plates on the wrong side at dinner tonight, and do be careful not to let that pantry door slam behind you. Now you will try to remember, won't you?

NORAH: Yes, Mum. (*She goes into the pantry and shuts the door behind her with exaggerated care as MRS. MILLER watches her apprehensively. MRS. MILLER sighs and reaches up with difficulty and turns on another of the four lights in the chandelier. As she is doing so, LILY enters from the back parlor.*)

LILY: Here, let me do that, Essie. I'm taller. You'll only strain yourself. (*She quickly lights the other two bulbs.*)

MRS. MILLER (*gratefully*): Thank you, Lily. It's a stretch for me, I'm getting so fat.

LILY: But where's Norah? Why didn't she—

MRS. MILLER (*exasperatedly*): Oh, that girl! Don't talk about her! She'll be the death of me! She's that thick, you honestly wouldn't believe it possible.

LILY (*smiling*): Why, what did she do now?

MRS. MILLER: Oh, nothing. She means all right.

LILY: Anything else I can do, Essie?

MRS. MILLER: Well, she's got the table all wrong. We'll have to reset it. But you're always helping me. It isn't fair to ask you—in your vacation. You need your rest after teaching a pack of wild Indians of kids all year.

LILY (*beginning to help with the table*): You know I love to help. It makes me feel I'm some use in this house instead of just sponging—

MRS. MILLER (*indignantly*): Sponging! You pay, don't you?

LILY: Almost nothing. And you and Nat only take that little to make me feel better about living with you. (*Forcing a smile*) I don't see how you stand me—having a cranky old maid around all the time.

MRS. MILLER: What nonsense you talk! As if Nat and I Weren't only too tickled to death to have you! Lily Miller, I've no patience with you when you go on like that. We've been over this a thousand times before, and still you go on! Crazy, that's what it is! (*She changes the subject abruptly*) What time's it getting to be?

LILY (*looking at her watch*): Quarter past six.

MRS. MILLER: I do hope those men folks aren't going to be late for dinner. (*She sighs*) But I suppose with that darned Sachem Club picnic it's more likely than not. (*LILY looks worried, and sighs. MRS. MILLER gives her a quick side glance*) I see you've got your new dress on.

LILY (*embarrassedly*): Yes, I thought—if Sid's taking me to the fireworks—I ought to spruce up a little.

MRS. MILLER (*looking away*): Hmm. (*A pause—then she says with an effort to be casual*) You mustn't mind if Sid comes home feeling a bit—gay. I expect Nat to— and we'll have to listen to all those old stories of his about when he was a boy. You know what those picnics are, and Sid'd be running into all his old friends.

LILY (*agitatedly*): I don't think he will—this time—not after his promise.

MRS. MILLER (*avoiding looking at her*): I know. But men are weak. (*Then quickly*) That was a good notion of Nat's, getting Sid the job on the Waterbury Standard. All he ever needed was to get away from the rut he was in here. He's the kind that's the victim of his friends. He's easily led—but there's no real harm in him, you know that. (*LILY keeps silent, her eyes downcast. MRS. MILLER goes on meaningly*) He's making good money in Waterbury, too—thirty-five a week. He's in a better position to get married than he ever was.

LILY (*stiffly*): Well, I hope he finds a woman who's willing—though after he's through with his betting on horse races, and dice, and playing Kelly pool, there won't be much left for a wife?—even if there was nothing else he spent his money on.

MRS. MILLER: Oh, he'd give up all that—for the right woman. (*Suddenly she comes directly to the point*) Lily, why don't you change your mind and marry Sid and reform him? You love him and always have—

LILY (*stiffly*): I can't love a man who drinks.

MRS. MILLER: You can't fool me. I know darned well you love him. And he loves you and always has.

LILY: Never enough to stop drinking for. (*Cutting off MRS. MILLER'S reply*) No, it's no good in your talking, Essie. We've been over this a thousand times before and I'll always feel the same as long as Sid's the same. If he gave me proof he'd—but even then I don't believe I could. It's sixteen years since I broke off our engagement, but what made me break it off is as clear to me today as it was then. It was what he'd be liable to do now to anyone who married him—his taking up with bad women.

MRS. MILLER (*protests halfheartedly*): But he's always sworn he got raked into that party and never had anything to do with those harlots.

LILY: Well, I don't believe him—didn't then and don't now. I do believe he didn't deliberately plan to, but— Oh, it's no good talking, Essie. What's done is done. But you know how much I like Sid—in spite of everything. I know he was just born to be what he is—irresponsible, never meaning to harm but harming in spite of himself. But don't talk to me about marrying him—because I never could.

MRS. MILLER (*angrily*): He's a dumb fool—a stupid dumb fool, that's what he is!

LILY (*quietly*): No. He's just Sid.

MRS. MILLER: It's a shame for you—a measly shame—you that would have made such a wonderful wife for any man—that ought to have your own home and children!

LILY (*winces but puts her arm around her affectionately—gently*): Now don't you go feeling sorry for me. I won't have that. Here I am, thanks to your and Nat's kindness, with the best home in the world; and as for the children, I feel the same love for yours as if they were mine, and I didn't have the pain of bearing them. And then there are all the boys and girls I teach every year. I like to feel I'm a sort of second mother to them and helping them to grow up to be good men and women. So I don't feel such a useless old maid, after all.

MRS. MILLER (*kisses her impulsively—her voice husky*): You're a good woman, Lily—too good for the rest of us. (*She turns away, wiping a tear furtively—then abruptly changing the subject*) Good gracious, if I'm not forgetting one of the most important things! I've got to warn that Tommy against giving me away to Nat about—the Fish. He knows, because I had to send him to market for it, and he's liable to burst out laughing—

LILY! Laughing about what?

MRS. MILLER (*guiltily*): Well, I've never told you, because it seemed sort of a sneaking trick, but you know how Nat carries on about not being able to eat bluefish.

LILY: I know he says there's a certain oil in it that poisons him.

MRS. MILLER (*chuckling*): Poisons him, nothing! He's been eating bluefish for years—only I tell him each time it's weakfish. We're having it tonight—and I've got to warn that young imp to keep his face straight.

LILY (laughing): Aren't you ashamed, Essie!

MRS. MILLER: Not much, I'm not! I like bluefish! *(She laughs)* Where is Tommy? In the sitting room?

LILY: No, Richard's there alone. I think Tommy's out on the piazza with Mildred. *(MRS. MILLER bustles out through the back parlor. As soon as she is gone, the smile fades from LILY's lips. Her face grows sad and she again glances nervously at her watch. RICHARD appears from the back parlor, moving in an aimless way. His face wears a set expression of bitter gloom; he exudes tragedy. For RICHARD, after his first outburst of grief and humiliation, has begun to take a masochistic satisfaction in his great sorrow, especially in the concern which it arouses in the family circle. On seeing his aunt, he gives her a dark look and turns and is about to stalk back toward the sitting room when she speaks to him pityingly)*
Feel any better, Richard?

RICHARD *(somberly)*: I'm all right, Aunt Lily. You mustn't worry about me.

LILY *(going to him)*: But I do worry about you. I hate to see you so upset.

RICHARD: It doesn't matter. Nothing matters.

LILY *(puts her arm around him sympathetically)*: You really mustn't let yourself take it so seriously. You know, something happens and things like that come up, and we think there's no hope—

RICHARD: Things like what come up?

LILY: What's happened between you and Muriel.

RICHARD (*with disdain*): Oh, her! I wasn't even thinking about her. I was thinking about life.

LILY: But then—if we really, really love—why, then something else is bound to happen soon that changes everything again, and it's all as it was before the misunderstanding, and everything works out all right in the end. That's the way it is with life.

RICHARD (*with a tragic sneer*): Life! Life is a joke! And everything comes out all wrong in the end!

LILY (*a little shocked*): You mustn't talk that way. But I know you don't mean it.

RICHARD: I do too mean it! You can have your silly optimism, if you like, Aunt Lily. But don't ask me to be so blind. I'm a pessimist! (*Then with an air of cruel cynicism*) As for Muriel, that's all dead and past. I was only kidding her, anyway, just to have a little fun, and she took it seriously, like a fool. (*He forces a cruel smile to his lips*) You know what they say about women and trolley cars, Aunt Lily: there's always another one along in a minute.

LILY (*really shocked this time*): I don't like you when you say such horrible, cynical things. It isn't nice.

RICHARD: Nice! that's all you women think of! I'm proud to be a cynic. It's the only thing you can be when you really face life. I suppose you think I ought to be heartbroken about Muriel—a little coward that's afraid to say her soul's her own, and keeps tied to her father's apron strings! Well, not for mine! There's plenty of other fish in the sea! (*As he is finishing, his mother comes back through the back parlor.*)

MRS. MILLER: Why, hello. You here, Richard? Getting hungry, I suppose?

RICHARD (*Indignantly*): I'm not hungry a bit! That's all you think of, Ma—food!

MRS. MILLER: Well, I must say I've never noticed you to hang back at meal times. (*To LILY*) What's that he was saying about fish in the sea?

LILY (*smiling*): He says he's through with Muriel now.

MRS. MILLER (*tartly—giving her son a rebuking look*): She's through with him, he means! The idea of your sending a nice girl like her things out of those indecent books! (*Deeply offended, RICHARD disdains to reply but stalks woundedly to the screen door at left front, and pats a hand on the knob*) Where are you going?

RICHARD (*quotes from "Candida" in a hollow voice*): "Out, then, into the night with me!" (*He stalks oat, slamming the door behind him,*)

MRS. MILLER (*calls*): Well, don't you go far, 'cause dinner'll be ready in a minute, and I'm not coming running after you! (*She turns to LILY with a chuckle*) Goodness, that boy! He ought to be on the stage! (*She mimics*) "Out—into the night"—and it isn't even dark yet! He got that out of one of those books, I suppose. Do you know, I'm actually grateful to old Dave McComber for putting an end to his nonsense with Muriel. I never did approve of Richard getting so interested in girls. He's not old enough for such silliness. Why, seems to me it was only yesterday he was still a baby. (*She sighs—then matter—of—factly*) Well, nothing to do now till those men turn up. No use standing here like gawks. We might as well go in the sitting—room and he comfortable.

LILY (*the nervous, worried note in her voice again*): Yes, We might as well. (*They go out through the back parlor. They have no sooner disappeared than the screen door is opened cautiously and RICHARD comes back in the room*

RICHARD (*stands inside the door, looking after them—quotes bitterly*): “They do not know the secret in the poet’s heart.” (*He comes nearer the table and surveys it, especially the cut—glass dish containing olives, with contempt and matters disdainfully*) Food! (*But the dish of olives seems to fascinate him and presently he has approached nearer, and stealthily lifts a couple and crams them into his mouth. He is just reaching out for more when the pantry door is opened slightly and NORAH peers in.*)

NORAH: Mister Dick, you thief, lave them olives alone, or the missus’ll be swearing it was me at them!

RICHARD (*draws back his hand as if he had been stung—too flustered to be anything but guilty boy for a second*): I—I wasn’t eating—

NORAH: Oho, no, of course not, divil fear you, you was only feeling their pulse! (*Then warningly*) Mind what I’m saying now, or I’ll have to tell on you to protect me good name! (*She draws back into the pantry, closing the door. RICHARD stands, a prey to feelings of bitterest humiliation and seething revolt against everyone and everything. A low whistle comes from just outside the porch door. He starts. Then a masculine voice calls: “Hey, Dick.” He goes over to the screen door grumpily—then as he recognizes the owner of the voice, his own as he answers becomes respectful and admiring.*)

RICHARD: Oh, hello, Wint. Come on in. (*He opens the door and WINT SELBY enters and stands just inside the door. SELBY is nineteen, a classmate of ARTHUR'S at Yale. He's a typical, good-looking college boy of the period, not the athlete but the hell-raising sport type. He is tall, blond, dressed in extreme collegiate cut.*)

WINT (*as he enters—warningly, in a low tone*): Keep it quiet, Kid. I don't want the folks to know I'm here. Tell Art I want to see him a second—on the Q.T.

RICHARD: Can't. He's up at the Rands'—won't be home before ten, anyway.

WINT (*irritably*): Damn, I thought he'd be here for dinner. (*More irritably*) Hell, that gums the works for fair!

RICHARD (*ingratiatingly*): What is it, Wint? Can't I help?

WINT (*gives him an appraising glance*): I might tell you, if you can keep your face shut.

RICHARD: I can.

WINT: Well, I ran into a couple of swift babies from New Haven this after. and I dated them up for tonight, thinking I could catch Art. But now it's too late to get anyone else and I'll have to pass it up. I'm nearly broke and I can't afford to blow them both to drinks.

RICHARD (*with shy eagerness*): I've got eleven dollars saved up. I could loan you some.

WINT (*surveys him appreciatively*): Say, you're a good sport. (*Then shaking his head*) Nix, Kid, I don't want to borrow your money. (*Then getting an idea*) But say, have you got anything on for tonight?

RICHARD: No.

WINT: Want to come along with me? *(Then quickly)* I'm not trying to lead you astray, understand. But it'll be a help if you would just sit around with Belle and feed her a few drinks while I'm off with Edith. *(He winks)* See what I mean? You don't have to do anything, not even take a glass of beer—unless you want to.

RICHARD *(boastfully)*: Aw, what do you think I am—a rube?

WINT: You mean you're game for anything that's doing?

RICHARD: Sure I am!

WINT: Ever been out with any girls—I mean, real swift ones that there's something doing with, not these dead Janes around here?

RICHARD *(lies boldly)*: Aw, what do you think? Sure I have!

WINT: Ever drink anything besides sodas?

RICHARD: Sure. Lots of times. Beer and sloe gin fizz and — Manhattans.

WINT *(impressed)*: Hell, you know more than I thought. *(Then considering)* Can you fix it so your folks won't get wise? I don't want your old man coming after me. You can get back by half—past ten or eleven, though, all right. Think you can cook up some lie to cover that? *(As RICHARD hesitates--encouraging him)* Ought to be easy—on the Fourth.

RICHARD: Sure. Don't worry about that.

WINT: But you've got to keep your face closed about this, you hear?—to Art and everybody else. I tell you straight, I wouldn't ask you to come if I wasn't in a hole —and if I didn't know you were coming down to Yale next year, and didn't think you're giving me the straight goods about having been around before. I don't want to lead you astray.

RICHARD (*scornfully*): Aw, I told you that was silly.

WINT: Well, you be at the Pleasant Beach House at half—past nine then. Come in the back room. And don't forget to grab some cloves to take the booze off your breath.

RICHARD: Aw, I know what to do.

WINT: See you later, then. (*He starts out and is just about to close the door when he thinks of something*) And say I'll say you're a Harvard freshman, and you back me up. They don't know a damn thing about Harvard. I don't want them thinking I'm travelling around with any high school kid.

RICHARD: Sure. That's easy.

WINT: So long, then. You better beat it right after your dinner while you've got a chance, and hang around until it's time. Watch your step, Kid.

RICHARD: So long. (*The door closes behind WINT. RICHARD stands for a moment, a look of utter, defiant rebellion coming over his face, and mutters to himself*) I'll show her she can't treat me the way she's done! I'll show them all! (*Then the front door is heard slamming, and a moment later TOMMY rushes in from the back parlor.*)

TOMMY: Where's Ma?

RICHARD (*surlily*): In the sitting—room. Where did you think, Bonehead?

TOMMY: Pa and Uncle Sid are coming. Mid and I saw them from the front piazza. Gee, I'm glad. I'm awful hungry, ain't you? (He rushes out through the back parlor, calling) Ma! They're coming! Let's have dinner quick! (*A moment later MRS. MILLER appears from the back parlor accompanied by TOMMY, who keeps insisting urgently*) Gee, but I'm awful hungry, Ma!

MRS. MILLER: I know. You always are. You've got a tapeworm, that's what I think.

TOMMY! Have we got lobsters, Ma? Gee, I love lobsters.

MRS. MILLER: Yes, we've got lobsters. And fish. You remember what I told you about that fish. (*He snickers*) Now, do be quiet, Tommy! (*Then with a teasing smile at RICHARD*) Well, I'm glad to see you've got back out of the night, Richard. (*He scowls and turns his back on her. LILY appears through the back parlor, nervous and apprehensive. As she does so, from the front yard SID's voice is heard singing "Poor John!" MRS. MILLER shakes her head forebodingly—but, so great is the comic spell for her even in her brother's voice, a humorous smile hovers at the corners of her lips*) Mmm! Mmm! Lily, I'm afraid—

LILY (*bitterly*): Yes, I might have known. (*MILDRED runs in through the back parlor. She is laughing to herself a hit shamefacedly. She rushes to her mother.*)

MILDRED: Ma, Uncle Sid's— (*She whispers in her ear.*)

MRS. MILLER: Never mind! You shouldn't notice such things—at your age! And don't you encourage him by laughing at his foolishness, you hear!

TOMMY! You needn't whisper, Mid. Think I don't know? Uncle Sid's soused again.

MRS. MILLER (*shakes him by the arm indignantly*): You be quiet! Did I ever! You're getting too smart! (*Gives him a push*) Go to your place and sit right down and not another word out of you!

TOMMY (*aggrieved—rubbing his arm as he goes to his place*): Aw, Ma!

MRS. MILLER: And you sit down, Richard and Mildred. You better, too, Lily. We'll get him right in here and get some food in him. He'll be all right then. (*RICHARD, preserving the pose of the bitter, disillusioned pessimist, sits down in his place in the chair at right of the two whose backs face front. MILDRED takes the other chair facing back, at his left. TOMMY has already slid into the end chair at right of those at the rear of table facing front. LILY sits in the one of those at left, by the head of the table, leaving the middle one [SID's] vacant. While they are doing this, the front screen door is heard slamming and NAT's and SID's laughing voices, raised as they come in and for a moment after, then suddenly cautiously lowered. MRS. MILLER goes to the entrance to the back parlor and calls peremptorily*) You come right in here! Don't stop to wash up or anything. Dinner's coming right on the table.

MILLER'S VOICE (*jovially*): All right, Essie. Here We are! Here we are!

MRS. MILLER (*goes to pantry door, opens it and calls*): All right, Norah. You can bring in the soup. (*She comes back to the back parlor entrance just as MILLER enters. He isn't drunk by any means. He is just mellow and benignly ripened. His face is one large, smiling, happy beam of utter appreciation of life. All's right with the world, so satisfyingly right that he becomes sentimentally moved even to think of it.*)

MILLER: Here We are, Essie! Right on the dot! Here We are! (*He pulls her to him and gives her a smacking kiss on the ear as she jerks her head away. MILDRED and TOMMY giggle. RICHARD holds rigidly aloof and disdainful, his brooding gaze fixed on his plate. LILY forces a smile.*)

MRS. MILLER (*pulling away—embarrassedly, almost blushing*): Don't, you Crazy! (*Then recovering herself—tartly*) So I see, you're here! And if I didn't, you've told me four times already!

MILLER (*beamingly*): Now, Essie, don't be critical. Don't be carpingly critical. Good news can stand repeating, can't it? 'Course it can! (*He slaps her jovially on her fat buttocks. TOMMY and MILDRED roar with glee. And NORAH, who has just entered from the pantry with a huge tureen of soup in her hands, almost drops it as she explodes in a merry guffaw.*)

MRS. MILLER (*scandalized*): Nat! Aren't you ashamed!

MILLER: Couldn't resist it! Just simply couldn't resist it! (*NORAH, still standing with the soup tureen held out stiffly in front of her, again guffaws.*)

MRS. MILLER (*turns on her with outraged indignation*): Norah! Bring that soup here this minute! (*She stalks with*

stiff dignity toward her place at the foot of the table, right.)

NORAH (*guiltily*): Yes, Mum. (*She brings the soup around the head of the table, passing MILLER.*)

MILLER (*jovially*): Why, hello, Norah!

MRS. MILLER: Nat! (*She sits down stiffly at the foot of the table.*)

NORAH (*rebuking him familiarly*): Arrah now, don't be making me laugh and getting me into trouble!

MRS. MILLER: Norah!

NORAH (*a bit resentfully*): Yes, Mum. Here I am. (*She sets the soup tureen down with a thud in front of MRS. MILLER and passes around the other side, squeezing with difficulty between the china closet and the backs of chairs at the rear of the table.*)

MRS. MILLER: Tommy! Stop spinning your napkin ring!
How often have I got to tell you? Mildred! Sit up straight in your chair! Do you want to grow up a humpback?
Richard! Take your elbows off the table!

MILLER (*coming to his place at the head of the table, rubbing his hands together genially*): Well, well, well. Well, well, well. It's good to be home again. (*NORAH exits into the pantry and lets the door slam with a bang behind her.*)

MRS. MILLER (*jumps*): Oh! (*Then exasperatedly*) Nat, I do wish you wouldn't encourage that stupid girl by talking to her, when I'm doing my best to train-

MILLER (*beamingly*): All right, Essie. Your word is law!
(*Then laughingly*) We did have the darndest fun today!
And Sid was the life of that picnic! You ought to have
heard him! Honestly, he had that crowd just rolling on the
ground and splitting their sides! He ought to be on the
stage.

MRS. MILLER (*as NORAH comes back with a dish of
saltines --begins ladling soup into the stack of plates
before her*): He ought to be at this table eating something
to sober him up, that's what he ought to be! (*She calls*)
Sid! You come right in here! (*Then to NORAH, handing
her a soup plate*) Here, Norah. (*NORAH begins passing
soup*) Sit down, Nat, for goodness sakes. Start eating,
everybody. Don't wait for me. You know I've given up
soup.

MILLER (*sits down but bends forward to call to his wife in a
confidential tone*): Essie--Sid's sort of embarrassed about
coming-I mean I'm afraid he's a little bit-not too much,
you understand-but he met such a lot of friends and-well,
you know, don't be hard on him. Fourth of July is like
Christmas-comes but once a year. Don't pretend to notice,
eh? And don't you kids, you hear! And don't you, Lily.
He's scared of you.

LILY (*with stiff meekness*): Very Well, Nat.

MILLER (*beaming again-calls*): All right, Sid. The coast's
clear. (*He begins to absorb his soup ravenously*) Good
soup, Essie! Good soup! (*A moment later SID makes his
entrance from the back parlor. He is in a condition that
can best be described as blurry. His movements have a
hazy uncertainty about them. His shiny fat face is one
broad, blurred, Puckish, naughty boy grin; his eyes have
a blurred, wondering vagueness. As he enters he makes a*

solemnly intense effort to appear casual and dead, cold sober. He waves his hand aimlessly and speaks with a silly gravity.)

SID: Good evening. *(They all answer "Good evening," their eyes on their plates. He makes his way vaguely toward his place, continuing his grave effort at conversation)*
Beautiful evening. I never remember seeing a more beautiful sunset. *(He bumps vaguely into LILY'S chair as he attempts to pass behind her—immediately he is all grave politeness)* Sorry-sorry, Lily-deeply sorry.

LILY *(her eyes on her plate-stiffly)*: It's all right.

SID *(manages to get into his chair at last—mutters to himself)*:
Wha' was I sayin'? Oh, sunsets. But why butt in? Hasn't sun-perfect right to set? Mind y'r own business. *(He pauses thoughtfully, considering this—then looks around from face to face, fixing each with a vague, blurred, wondering look, as if some deep puzzle were confronting him. Then suddenly he grins mistily and nods with satisfaction)* And there you are! Am I right?

MILLER *(humoring him)*: Right.

SID: Right! *(He is silent, studying his soup plate, as if it were some strange enigma. Finally he looks up and regards his sister and asks with wondering amazement)* Soup?

MRS. MILLER: Of course, it's soup. What did you think it was? And you hurry up and eat it.

SID *(again regards his soup with astonishment)*: Well! *(Then suddenly)* Well, all right then! Soup be it! *(He picks up his spoon and begins to eat, but after two tries in which he finds it difficult to locate his mouth, he addresses the spoon plaintively)* Spoon, is this any Way to treat a pal?"

(Then suddenly comically angry, putting the spoon down with a bang) Down with spoons! (He raises his soup plate and declaims) "We'll drink to the dead already, and hurrah for the next who dies." (Bowing solemnly to right and left) Your good health, ladies and gents. (He starts drinking the soup. MILLER guffaws and MILDRED and TOMMY giggle. Even RICHARD forgets his melancholy and snickers, and MRS. MILLER conceals a smile. Only LILY remains stiff and silent.)

MRS. MILLER *(with forced severity)*: Sid!

SID *(peers at her muzzily, lowering the soup plate a little from his lips)*: Eh?

MRS. MILLER: Oh, nothing. Never mind.

SID *(solemnly offended)*: Are you—publicly rebuking me before assembled—? Isn't soup liquid? Aren't liquids drunk? *(Then considering this to himself)* What if they are drunk? It's a good man's failing. *(He again peers mistily about at the company)* Am I right or wrong?

MRS. MILLER: Hurry up and finish your soup, and stop talking nonsense!

SID *(turning to her—again offendedly)*: Oh, no, Essie, if I ever so far forget myself as to drink a leg of lamb, then you might have some-excuse for—Just think of waste effort eating soup with spoons-fifty grueling lifts per plate—billions of soup-eaters on globe—why, it's simply staggering! *(Then darkly to himself)* No more spoons for me! If I want to develop my biceps, I'll buy Sandow Exerciser! *(He drinks the rest of his soup in a gulp and beams around at the company, suddenly all happiness again)* Am I right, folks?

MILLER (*who has been choking with laughter*): Haw, haw!
You're right, Sid.

SID (*peers at him blurredly and shakes his head sadly*): Poor old Nat! Always Wrong-»but heart of gold, heart of purest gold. And drunk again, I regret to note. Sister, my heart bleeds for you and your poor fatherless chicks!

MRS. MILLER (*restraining a giggle—severely*): Sid! Do shut up for a minute! Pass me your soup plates, everybody. If we wait for that girl to take them, we'll be here all night. (*They all pass their plates, which MRS. MILLER stacks up and then puts on the sideboard. As she is doing this, NORAH appears from the pantry with a platter of broiled fish. She is just about to place these before MILLER when SID catches her eye mistily and rises to his feet, making her a deep, uncertain bow.*)

SID (*raply*): Ah, Sight for Sore Eyes, my beautiful Macushla, my star-eyed Mavourneen—

MRS. MILLER: Sid!

NORAH (*immensely pleased-gives him an arch, flirtatious glance*): Ah sure, Mister Sid, it's you that have kissed the Blarney Stone, when you've a drop taken!

MRS. MILLER (*outraged*): Norah! Put down that fish!

NORAH (*flusteredly*): Yes, Mum. (*She attempts to put the fish down hastily before MILLER, but her eyes are fixed nervously on MRS. MILLER and she gives MILLER a nasty swipe on the side of the head with the edge of the dish.*)

MILLER: Ouch! (*The children, even RICHARD, explode into laughter.*)

NORAH (*almost lets the dish fall*): Oh, glory be to God! Is it hurtled you are?

MILLER (*rubbing his head-good-naturedly*): No, no harm done. Only careful, Norah, careful.

NORAH (*gratefully*): Yes, sorr. (*She thumps down' the dish in front of him with a sigh of relief.*)

SID (who is still standing--with drunken gravity): Careful, Mavourneen, careful! You might have hit him some place besides the head. Always aim at his head, remember—so as not to worry us. (*Again the children explode. Also NORAH. Even LILY suddenly lets out an hysterical giggle and is furious with herself for doing so.*)

LILY: I'm so sorry, Nat. I didn't mean to laugh. (*Turning on SID furiously*) Will you please sit down and stop making a fool of yourself? (*SID gives her a hurt, mournful look and then sinks meekly down on his chair.*)

NORAH (*grinning cheerfully, gives LILY a reassuring pat on the back*): Ah, Miss Lily, don't mind him. He's only under the influence. Sure, there's no harm in him at all.

MRS. MILLER: Norah! (*NORAH exits hastily into the pantry, letting the door slam with a crash behind her. There is silence for a moment as MILLER serves the fish and it is passed around. NORAH comes back with the vegetables and disappears again, and these are dished out.*)

MILLER (*is about to take his first bite--stops suddenly and asks his wife*): This isn't, by any chance, bluefish, is it, my dear?

MRS. MILLER (*with a warning glance at TOMMY*): Of course not. You know we never have bluefish, on account of you.

MILLER (*addressing the table now with the gravity of a man confessing his strange peculiarities*): Yes, I regret to say, there's a certain peculiar oil in bluefish that invariably poisons me. (*At this, TOMMY cannot stand it anymore but explodes into laughter. MRS. MILLER, after a helpless glance at him, follows suit; then LILY goes off into uncontrollable, hysterical laughter, and RICHARD and MILDRED are caught in the contagion. MILLER looks around at them with a weak smile, his dignity now ruffled a bit*) Well, I must say I don't see what's so darned funny about my being poisoned.

SID (*peers around him—then with drunken cunning*): Alia! Nat, I suspect-plot! This fish looks blue to me—very blue—in fact despondent, desperate, and—(*He points his fork dramatically at MRS. MILLER*) See how guilty she looks a ver—veritable Lucretia Georgia! Can it be this Woman has been slowly poisoning you all these years? And how well-you've stood it! What an iron constitution! Even now, when you are invariably at death's door, I can't believe—(*Everyone goes off into uncontrollable laughter.*)

MILLER (*grumpily*): Oh, give us a rest, you darned fool! A joke's a joke, but—(*He addresses his wife in a wounded tone*) Is this true, Essie?

MRS. MILLER (*wiping the tears from her eyes-defiantly*): Yes, it is true, if you must know, and you'd never have suspected it, if it weren't for that darned Tommy, and Sid poking his nose in. You've eaten bluefish for years and thrived on it and it's all nonsense about that peculiar oil.

MILLER (*deeply offended*): Kindly allow me to know my own constitution! Now I think of it, I've felt upset afterwards every damned time we've had fish! (*He pushes his plate away from him with proud renunciation*) I can't eat this.

MRS. MILLER (*insultingly matter-of-fact*): Well, don't then. There's lots of lobster coming and you can fill up on that. (*RICHARD suddenly bursts out laughing again.*)

MILLER (*turns to him caustically*): You seem in a merry mood, Richard. I thought you were the original of the Heart Bowed Down today.

SID (*with mock condolence*): Never mind, Dick. Let them—scoff! What can they understand about girls whose hair sizzchels, whose lips are fireworks, whose eyes are red-hot sparks—

MILDRED (*laughing*): Is that what he wrote to Muriel? (*Turning to her brother*) You silly goat, you!

RICHARD (*surlily*): Aw, shut up, Mid. What do I care about her? I'll show all of you how much I care!

MRS. MILLER: Pass your plates as soon as you're through, everybody. I've rung for the lobster. And that's all. You don't get any dessert or tea after lobster, you know. (*NORAH appears bearing a platter of cold boiled lobsters which she sets before MILLER, and disappears.*)

TOMMY: Gee, I love lobster! (*MILLER puts one on each plate, and they are passed around and everyone starts in pulling the cracked shells apart.*)

MILLER (*feeling more cheerful after a couple of mouthfuls-determining to give the conversation another turn, says to his daughter*): Have a good time at the beach, Mildred?

MILDRED: Oh, fine, Pa, thanks. The water was Wonderful and warm.

MILLER: Swim far?

MILDRED: Yes, for me., But that isn't so awful far.

MILLER: Well, if you ought to be a good swimmer, if you take after me. I used to be a regular water rat when I was a boy. I'll have to go down to the beach with you one of these days-though I'd be rusty, not having been in in all these years. (*The reminiscent look comes into his eyes of one about to embark on an oft-told tale of childhood adventure*) You know, speaking of swimming, I never go down to that beach but what it calls to mind the day I and Red Sisk went in swimming there and I saved his life. (*By this time the family are beginning to exchange amused, guilty glances. They all know what is coming.*)

SID (*with a sly, blurry wink around*): Hal Now We—have it again!

MILLER (*turning on him*): Have what?

SID: Nothing—go on with your swimming—don't mind me.

MILLER (*glares at him—but immediately is overcome by the reminiscent mood again*): Red Sisk—his father kept a blacksmith shop Where the Union Market is now-we kids called him Red because he had the darndest reddest crop of hair—

SID (*as if he were talking to his plate*): Remarkable!—the curious imagination—of little children.

MRS. MILLER (*as she sees MILLER about to explode—interposes tactfully*): Sid! Eat your lobster and shut up! Go on, Nat.

MILLER (*gives SID a withering look—then is off again*): Well, as I was saying, Red and I went swimming that day. Must have been—let me see—Red was fourteen, bigger and older than me, I was only twelve—forty-five years ago—wasn't a single house down there then—but there was a stake out where the whistling buoy is now, about a mile out. (*TOMMY, who has been having difficulty restraining himself, lets out a stifled giggle. MILLER bends a frowning gaze on him*) One more sound out of you, young man, and you'll leave the table!

MRS. MILLER (*quietly interposing, trying to stave off the story*): Do eat your lobster, Nat. You didn't have any fish, you know.

MILLER (*not liking the reminder—pettishly*): Well, if I'm going to be interrupted every second anyway—(*He turns to his lobster and chews in silence for a moment.*)

MRS. MILLER (*trying to switch the subject*): How's Anne's mother's rheumatism, Mildred?

MILDRED: Oh, she's much better, Ma. She was in wading today. She says salt water's the only thing that really helps her bunion.

MRS. MILLER: Mildred! Where are your manners? At the table's no place to speak of—

MILLER (*fallen into the reminiscent obsession again*): Well, as I was saying there was I and Red, and he dared me to race him out to the stake and back. Well, I didn't let anyone dare me in those days. I was a spunky kid. So I

said all right and we started out. We swam and swam and were pretty evenly matched; though, as I've said, he was bigger and older than me, but finally I drew ahead. I was going along easy, with lots in reserve, not a bit tired, when suddenly I heard a sort of gasp from behind me-like this-"Help" (*He imitates. Everyone's eyes are firmly fixed on his plate, except SID's*) And I turned and there was Red, his face all pinched and white, and he says weakly: "Help, Nat! I got a cramp in my leg!" Well, I don't mind telling you I got mighty scared. I didn't know what to do. Then suddenly I thought of the pile. If I could pull him to that, I could hang on to him till someone'd notice us. But the pile was still—well, I calculate it must have been two hundred feet away.

SID: Two hundred and Fifty!

MILLER (*in confusion*): What's that?

SID: Two hundred and fifty! I've taken down the distance every time you've saved Red's life for thirty years and the mean average to that pile is two hundred and fifty feet! (*There is a burst of laughter from around the table. SID continues complainingly*) Why didn't you let that Red drown, anyway, Nat? I never knew him but I know I'd never have liked him.

MILLER (*really hurt, forces a feeble smile to his lips and pretends to be a good sport about it*): Well, guess you're right, Sid. Guess I have told that one too many times and bored everyone. But it's a good true story for kids because it illustrates the danger of being foolhardy in the water-

MRS. MILLER (*sensing the hurt in his tone, comes to his rescue*): Of course it's a good story—and you tell it

whenever you've a mind to. And you, Sid, if you were in any responsible state, I'd give you a good piece of my mind for teasing Nat like that.

MILLER (*with a sad, self-pitying smile at his wife*): Getting old, I guess, Mother—getting to repeat myself. Someone ought to stop me.

MRS. MILLER: No such thing! You're as young as you ever were. (*She turns on SID again angrily*) You eat your lobster and maybe it'll keep your mouth shut!

SID (*after a few chews—irrepressibly*): Lobster! Did you know, Tommy, your Uncle Sid is the man invented lobster? Fact! One day—when I was building the Pyramids—took a day off and just dashed off lobster. He was bigger'n' older than me and he had the darndest reddest crop of hair but I dashed him off just the same! Am I right, Nat? (*Then suddenly in the zones of a side-show barker*) Ladies and Gents—

MRS. MILLER: Mercy sakes! Can't you shut up?

SID: In this cage you see the lobster. You will not believe me, ladies and gents, but it's a fact that this interesting bivalve only makes love to his mate once in every thousand years—but, dearie me, how he does enjoy it! (*The children roar. LILY and MRS. MILLER laugh in spite of themselves—then look embarrassed. MILLER guffaws—then suddenly grows shocked.*)

MILLER: Careful, Sid, careful. Remember you're at home.

TOMMY (*suddenly in a hoarse whisper to his mother, with an awed glance of admiration at his uncle*): Ma! Look at him! He's eating that claw, shells and all!

MRS. MILLER (*horrificed*): Sid, do you want to kill yourself?
Take it away from him, Lily!

SID (*with great dignity*): But I prefer the shells. All famous epicures prefer the shells—to the less delicate, coarser meat. It's the same with clams. Unless I eat the shells there is a certain, peculiar oil that invariably poisons—
Am I right, Nat?

MILLER (*good-naturedly*): You seem to be getting a lot of fun kidding me. Go ahead, then. I don't mind.

MRS. MILLER: He better go right up to bed for a while,
that's what he better do.

SID (*considering this owlshly*): Bed? Yes, maybe you're right. (*He gets to his feet*) I am not at all well—in very delicate condition—we are praying for a boy. Am I right, Nat? Nat, I kept telling you all day I was in delicate condition and yet you kept forcing demon chowder on me, although you knew full well—even if you were full—that there is a certain, peculiar oil in chowder that invariably—(*They are again all laughing—LILY, hysterically.*)

MRS. MILLER: Will you get to bed, you idiot!

SID (*mutters graciously*): Immediately—if not sooner. (*He turns to pass behind LILY, then stops, staring down at her*) But wait. There is still a duty I must perform. No day is complete without it. Lily, answer once and for all, will you marry me?

LILY (*with an hysterical giggle*): No, I won't—never!

SID (*nodding his head*): Right! And perhaps it's all for the best. For how could I forget the pre—precepts taught me

at mother's dying knee. "Sidney," she said, "never marry a woman who drinks! Lips that touch liquor shall never touch yours!" (*Gazing at her mournfully*) Too bad! So fine a woman once—and now such a slave to rum! (*Turning to NAT*) What can we do to save her; Nat? (*In a hoarse, confidential whisper*) Better put her in institution Where she'll be removed from temptation! The mere smell of it seems to drive her frantic!

MRS. MILLER (*struggling with her laughter*): You leave Lily alone, and go to bed!

SID: Right! (*He comes around behind LILY'S chair and moves toward the entrance to the back parlor—then suddenly turns and says with a bow*) Good night, ladies—and gents. We will meet—bye and bye! (*He gives an imitation of a Salvation Army drum*) Boom! Boom! Boom! Come and be saved, Brothers! (*He starts to sing the old Army hymn*)

"In the sweet
Bye and bye
We will meet on that beautiful shore."

(He turns and marches solemnly out through the 'back parlor, singing)

"Work and pray
While you may.
We will meet in the sky bye and bye."

(*MILLER and his wife and the children are all roaring with laughter. LILY giggles hysterically.*)

MILLER (*subsiding at last*): Haw, haw. He's a case, if ever there was one! Darned if you can help laughing at him—even when he's poking fun at you!

MRS. MILLER: Goodness, but he's a caution! Oh, my sides ache, I declare! I was trying so hard not to—but you can't help it, he's so silly! But I suppose we really shouldn't. It only encourages him. But, my lands—!

LILY (*suddenly gets up from her chair and stands rigidly, her face working—jerkily*): That's just it—you shouldn't—even I laughed—it does encourage—that's been his downfall—everyone always laughing everyone always saying what a card he is, what a case, what a caution, so funny—and he's gone on—and we're all responsible-making it easy for him—we're all to blame-and all we do is laugh!

MILLER (*worriedly*): Now, Lily, now, you mustn't take on so. It isn't as serious as all that.

LILY (*bitterly*): Maybe—it is—to me. Or was—once. (*Then contritely*) I'm sorry, Nat. I'm sorry, Essie. I didn't mean to—I'm not feeling myself tonight. If you'll excuse me, I'll go in the front parlor and lie down on the sofa awhile.

MRS. MILLER: Of course, Lily. You do whatever you've a mind to. (*LILY goes out.*)

MILLER (*frowning—a little shamefaced*): Hmm. I suppose she's right. Never knew Lily to come out with things that way before. Anything special happened, Essie?

MRS. MILLER: Nothing I know—except he'd promised to take her to the fireworks.

MILLER: That's so. Well, supposing I take her? I don't want her to feel disappointed.

MRS. MILLER (*shaking her head*): Wild horses couldn't drag her there now.

MILLER: Hmm. I thought she'd got completely over her foolishness about him long ago.

MRS. MILLER: She never will.

MILLER: She'd better. He's got fired out of that Waterbury job—told me at the picnic after he'd got enough Dutch courage in him.

MRS. MILLER: Oh, dear! Isn't he the fool!

MILLER: I knew something was wrong when he came home. Well, I'll find a place for him on my paper again, of course. He always was the best news-getter this town ever had. But I'll tell him he's got to stop his damn nonsense.

MRS. MILLER (*doubtfully*): Yes.

MILLER: Well, no use sitting here mourning over spilt milk. (*He gets up, and RICHARD, MILDRED, TOMMY and MRS. MILLER follow his example, the children quiet and a bit awed*) You kids go out in the yard and try to keep quiet for a while, so's your Uncle Sid'll get to sleep and your Aunt Lily can rest.

TOMMY (*mournfully*): Ain't we going to set off the skyrockets and Roman candles, Pa?

MILLER: Later, Son, later. It isn't dark enough for them yet anyway.

MILDRED: Come on, Tommy. I'll see he keeps quiet, Pa.

MILLER: That's a good girl. (*MILDRED and TOMMY go out through the screen door. RICHARD remains standing, sunk in bitter, gloomy thoughts. MILLER glances at him—then irritably*) Well, Melancholy Dane, what are you doing?

RICHARD (*darkly*): I'm going out—for a while. (*Then suddenly*) Do you know what I think? It's Aunt Lily's fault, Uncle Sid's going to ruin. It's all because he loves her, and she keeps him dangling after her, and eggs him on and ruins his life—like all women love to ruin men's lives! I don't blame him for drinking himself to death! What does he care if he dies, after the way she's treated him! I'd do the same thing myself if I were in his boots!

MRS. MILLER (*indignantly*): Richard! You stop that talk!

RICHARD (*quotes bitterly*)

“Drink! for you know not whence you come nor why.

Drink! for you know not why you go nor where!”

MILLER (*losing his temper--harshly*): Listen here, young man! I've had about all I can stand of your nonsense for one day! You're growing a lot too big for your size, seems to me! You keep that damn fool talk to yourself, you hear me--or you'll be going to regret it! Mind now! (*He strides angrily away through the back parlor.*)

MRS. MILLER (*still indignant*): Richard, I'm ashamed of you, that's what I am. (*She follows her husband. RICHARD stands for a second, hither, humiliated, wronged, even his father turned enemy, his face growing more and more rebellious. Then he forces a scornful smile to his lips.*)

RICHARD: Aw, what the hell, do I care? I'll show them! (*He turns and goes out the screen door.*)

Curtain

