

SIDE 'H' ELYMA, LYMAN

ACT II

Only a few minutes have elapsed since the close of Act 1. Our characters now are patiently trying to pass the time as best they can. Tyrrell has taken out his guitar and, after tuning it, begun to play a soft, melancholy cowboy ballad as he sits at the same table. He keeps his music an almost unnoticeable part of the background. Bo fingers in the corner up R., a picture of troubled dejection. Cherie has found a movie magazine which she sits at one of the tables and reads. Dr. Lyman continues sitting at the bar, sipping his drink and courting Elma, although Elma does not realize she is being courted. She is immensely entertained by him. She sits on a stool behind counter.

ELMA. . . and where else did you teach?

DR. LYMAN. My last position was at one of those revolting little progressive colleges in the East, where they offer a curriculum of what they call functional education. Educators, I am sure, have despaired of ever teaching students anything, so they have decided the second-best thing to do is to understand them. (Bo sits on bench by window.) Every day there would be a meeting of everyone on the entire faculty, with whom the students ever came into any contact, from the President down to the chambermaids, and we would put our collective heads together to try to figure out why little Jane or little Mary was not getting out of her classes what she should. The suggestion that perhaps she wasn't studying was too simple, and if you implied that she simply did not have the brains for a college education, you were being undemocratic.

ELMA. You must have disapproved of that college.

DR. LYMAN. My dear girl, I have disapproved of my entire life.

ELMA. Really?

DR. LYMAN. Yes, but I suppose I couldn't resist living it over again. (There is a touch of sadness about him now.)

ELMA. Did you resign from that position?

DR. LYMAN. One day I decided I had had enough. I walked blithely into the Dean's office and said, "Sir! I graduated *Magna*

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Cum Laude from the University of Chicago, I studied at Oxford on a Rhodes Scholarship, and returned to take my Ph.D. at Harvard, receiving it with highest honors. I think I have the right to expect my students to try to understand me."

ELMA. (Very amused.) What did he say?

DR. LYMAN. Oh, I didn't wait for a response. I walked out of the door and went to the railroad station, where I got a ticket for the farthest place I could think of, which happened to be Las Vegas. And I have been traveling ever since. It's a merry way to go to pot. (She chuckles.)

ELMA. I had thought I might teach one day, but you don't make it sound very attractive.

DR. LYMAN. Ah, suit yourself. Don't let me influence you one way or the other. (Elma smiles and Dr. Lyman gives in to the sudden compulsion of clasping her hand.) You're a lovely young girl.

ELMA. (Very surprised.) Why . . . thank you, Dr. Lyman.

DR. LYMAN. (Clears his throat and makes a fresh approach.)

Did you tell me you plan to go to Topeka tomorrow?

ELMA. (Looking at clock. Removes hand.) You mean today. Yes.

I have a ticket to hear the Kansas City Symphony. They come to Topeka every year to give a concert.

DR. LYMAN. (Peeling his way.) You say . . . you stay with your sister there?

ELMA. (Rises.) Yes, then I take an early morning bus back here, in time for school Monday. Then after school, I come here to work for Grace.

DR. LYMAN. (Obviously he is angling for something.) Didn't you say there was a university in Topeka?

ELMA. Yes. Washburn University.

DR. LYMAN. Washburn University—of course! You know, it just occurs to me that I should stop there to check some references on a piece of research I'm engaged on.

ELMA. Oh, I've been to Washburn library lots of times.

DR. LYMAN. You have? (He shows some cunning, but obviously Elma does not see it.) Perhaps you would take me there!

ELMA. (Hesitant.) Well, I . . .

DR. LYMAN. I'll arrive in Topeka before you do, then meet your bus . . .

ELMA. If you really want me to.

DR. LYMAN. You can take me to the library, then perhaps we

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could have dinner together, and perhaps you would permit me to take you to the symphony.

ELMA. (Overjoyed.) Are you serious?

DR. LYMAN. Why, of course I'm serious. Why do you ask?

ELMA. I don't know. Usually, older people are too busy to take notice of kids. I'd just love to.

DR. LYMAN. Then I may depend on it that I have an engagement?

ELMA. Yes. Oh, that'll be lots of fun. I can't wait.

DR. LYMAN. But, my dear . . . let's not tell anyone of our plans, shall we? (Cherie rises, crosses R and puts magazine back in rack. Bo rises, expectant. Cherie stands near door, watching Virgil.)

ELMA. Why not?

DR. LYMAN. You see . . . I have been married, and I am somewhat older than you, though perhaps not quite as old as you might take me to be . . . anyway, people might not understand.

ELMA. Oh!

DR. LYMAN. So let's keep our plans to ourselves. Promise?

ELMA. O.K. If you think best.

DR. LYMAN. (Rises. Pats her hand. Crosses R. to book rack, looks at books. Elma sits, knits.) I think it best. (Virgil has finished playing a ballad and Cherie applauds.)

CHERIE. That was real purty, Virgil.

VIRGIL. Thank ya, Miss. (From his corner, Bo has seen the moment's intimacy between them. He winces. Cherie goes over to the counter and speaks to Elma.)

CHERIE. Isn't there some other way of me gettin' back to Kansas City?

ELMA. I'm sorry. The bus comes through here from Topeka, and it can't get through, either, until the road's cleared.

CHERIE. I was jest gettin' sorta restless. (She sits at center table and lights a cigarette. Suddenly, the front door swings open and Will appears carrying a thermos jug.)

WILL. (Crossing to counter.) Elma, fill this up for me, like a good girl.

ELMA. Sure, Will. (Takes thermos from him and starts to fill it at urn.)

WILL. I'm goin' down the highway a bit to see how the men are gettin' on. Thought they'd enjoy some hot coffee.

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ELMA. Good idea, Will.

WILL. (With a look around.) Everyone behavein'?

ELMA. Of course.

WILL. (Puzzled.) Grace not down yet?

ELMA. No.

WILL. I didn't see Carl any place outside. Suppose something coulda happened to him?

ELMA. I wouldn't worry about him, Will.

WILL. I s'pose he can take care of himself. (Elma hands him thermos.) Thank you, Elma. (He pays her, then starts back out, saying for the benefit primarily of Bo and Dr. Lyman.) Oh, Elma, if anyone should be wantin' me, I won't be gone very long. (He looks around to make sure everyone has heard him, then goes out front door. Bo has heard and seen him, and suddenly turns from his corner and comes angrily down to Virgil. Dr. Lyman drifts to window and sits.)

BO. That dang sheriff! If it wasn't fer him, I'd git Cherry now and . . . I . . .

VIRGIL. Where would ya take her, Bo?

BO. There's a justice a the peace down the street. You can see his sign from the window.

VIRGIL. Bo, ya can't force a gal to marry ya. Ya jest can't do it. That sheriff's a stern man and he'd shoot ya in a minute if he saw it was his duty. Now why don't ya go over to the counter and have yourself a drink . . . like the professor?

BO. I never did drink and I ain't gonna let no woman drive me to it.

VIRGIL. Ya don't drink. Ya don't smoke or chew. Ya oughta have some bad habits to rely on when things with women go wrong. (Bo thinks for a moment then sits opposite Virgil.)

BO. Virge. I hate to sound like some pitiable weakkin' of a man, but there's been times the last few months, I been so lonesome, I . . . I jest didn't know what t'do with m'self.

VIRGIL. It's no disgrace to feel that way, Bo.

BO. How 'bout you, Virge? Don't you ever git lonesome, too?

VIRGIL. A long time ago, I gave up romancin' and decided I was just gonna take bein' lonesome for granted.

BO. I wish I could do that, but I can't. (They now sit in silence. Cherie, at the counter, lifts her damp eyes to Elma seeking a confidante.)

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