

## Chapter 4

Mrs. Foster is very large at the top. ~~[You know what I mean.]~~?  
She can't help it or anything, but there's no one else in Ashton like her. Mother told Father one time that she didn't think sweaters were very becoming to Mrs. Foster, but Father said he was rather partial to her in sweaters and they had an argument. The thing is my father doesn't have much taste about women's clothes. I guess I don't either because, even though I literally loathe mentioning it, I think Mrs. Foster has beautiful clothes. When she came in she made Mother and Mrs. Ewing look actually pathetic. Both of them had on these old beat-up-looking tweed suits but Mrs. Foster had on this white wool dress with a gold belt and her shoes matched! She really is pretty. Her hair is short and she turned grey even when she was twenty-five. Then, too, she has these wide brown eyes and exceedingly white teeth. The only thing about her



is she wears too much perfume. It comes soft of floating into the room and before long you're practically gasping for breath. She also dangles with bracelets.

I don't know why it is but Mrs. Foster always makes me feel pathetic. Never in my entire life have I ever had any clothes I like. I like pink and blue dresses and all I ever get are these sad-looking plaids and dark blues. Even in the summertime, nothing but checks and plaids and they have to be made! I've never had a bought dress in my life. ~~[So you see how it is, don't you? There is Mrs. Foster, all shining and dangling and perfumed, and there I am---NOTHING!]~~

h?

She came into the room just like I knew she would, all breathy as if she'd been running or something and then she started trotting around the room kissing everybody. I despise beginnings with people. ~~[Don't you?]~~ I mean people you know very well but haven't seen for a while. You're supposed to act like you're over-whelmed to meet them and you have to hug and kiss and faint all over the place. ~~[I hate it, even with relatives. I'm always glad when that's over.]~~

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h?

"Aaaaallison, you cutie pie," she said to Father and pecked him on the cheek.

Father pretended he was overjoyed, but I knew he wasn't because right away he started asking her what she wanted to drink. But she didn't say anything, she just kept on her rounds and poor Mr. Ewing had to stand up.

"You deserve one too, Bill," she said and amack! I thought I was going to throw up.

Mrs. Ewing just glanced up from her knitting needles and



didn't say anything, but Mr. Ewing was overjoyed and suddenly became this very gay person. He never carries on like that with just Mother and Father.

"Now that's the kind of greeting I like," he said and started jerking his shoulders up and down. Why is it some older people are always acting so stupid? It's embarrassing even to watch. Mother and Father never act that way.

Poor Mr. Foster was just standing there, trying to smile. It's very peculiar about him, but he doesn't look like someone who would be timid. He's short, but he has this close-cropped hair and thousands of muscles. He looks like he could have been a cheer leader or something but you know he never was because he would have died of embarrassment.

Mother shook hands with him and then, I knew it, Mrs. Foster got around to me. I got up from the bench and stretched out my pathetic hand and started to curtsy, but she didn't take my hand and started patting me on top of the head.

"Ohhhh, Sarah!" she said to Mother. "How pretty this child is getting!"

Lies! Nothing but lies! I'm not pretty. I wish I were, but I'm not.

"Her hair! Such a pretty blond!" She brushed my bangs back further. "I love the way she wears it---just straight! Don't ever give her a permanent."

See. See what I mean? What she meant was that Mother ought to do something about my hair. What she was really thinking was that I should have a permanent. I wish I could have one, but I can't. Mother won't let me have one, so I go around with this sad straight hair and my plaid dresses.



For one million years practically I even had to wear high socks. Nobody else in Ashton did---nobody but me!

"Such a pretty forehead," she said. I guess that was the only thing she could think of to say that was pretty. But who wants a pretty forehead?! I just smiled at her and looked at Mother. Everybody was staring. The whole room was staring.

"I think Felicia's going to be all right some day," was all Mother said and she didn't smile or anything.

I was never so glad in all my life when Father handed Mrs. Foster her high ball. ~~Down I went, back on the bench~~ ~~again!~~ I decided I'd give her time enough for two sips, then I'd go on my rounds with the nuts again.

Mrs. Foster flopped down on the sofa and held her feet up so everybody could see her shoes. "Ahhhh," she said, "I love this place!"

Mrs. Ewing glanced up from her knitting again and Mrs. Foster saw her:

"How was New York, Margaret?" she asked Mrs. Ewing. You could tell she was sort of afraid of Mrs. Ewing, because every time she said anything to her she used a different voice, lower and not nearly as loud. Mrs. Ewing **has** a way of scaring a lot of people. I think it's because she's so rich and knits and too she sort of goes around looking bored all the time and you feel as if you've got to make her unbored. ~~It's strange.~~

"We weren't in New York long," Mrs. Ewing said. "Bill had some business there, that's all." Mr. Ewing is the only man in Ashton ~~who~~ <sup>that's</sup> ever had any business in New York, but also you could tell Mrs. Ewing was mad about the question be-



cause the Ewings don't ever like for anybody to know what they're doing. Even if they go to Europe they don't want anybody to know before hand. They just sort of pop up there, rich as ever.

There wasn't much else for Mrs. Foster to say, but she doesn't ever like to be quiet for long. "Allison!" she said. "You promised me. You Pro-mised me." She started wagging her finger at Father. Her fingernail was violently red.

"What's that, Elaine?" Father said. He had just put another log on the fire and was rubbing his hands.

"You promised to show me around. You promised to show me everything!"

"I'm afraid you'll ruin your shoes, Elaine," Mother said. "It's rather damp out."

Mrs. Foster never even looked at Mother. "You promised me, Allison," she said and began pouting in this babyish way.

"Show the lady around, Allison," Mr. Ewing said and he was just sitting there, grinning and staring at Mrs. Foster's top. I don't think anybody else noticed, but I did. He was sitting beside her and I could see. I don't know why it is that men that are married and all, even older ones, do that.

9? They're always going around looking at women's tops, especially Mrs. Foster's.

"I want to see the spring you've been telling me about," she said, "and the barn and the ittle, bittie chicks."

I told you! I told you! Mrs. Foster is the worst person



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in Ashton. Even Mother despises women that go around talking baby talk and Mother really doesn't despise anybody. But if you think about it, maybe that's why Mrs. Foster was so popular when she was young. There's this girl, <sup>My sister</sup> Virgie Harris, in Ashton, and she goes around talking baby-talk all the time. She's exceedingly popular with boys, but I don't think I could do it if it killed me. People would think I was insane.

Poor Father he had to get up and go out in the cold and show Mrs. Foster around the farm. He started putting on this ancient jacket he has. "How about you, Harry?" he said to Mr. Foster. "Would you like the tour, too?"

"Well, yes. Yes, I would. Thanks, Allison," he said in this very pathetic voice. Mr. Foster is always going around thanking people.

Actually, though, I really don't think Father minded too much, I mean showing them around and everything. Even in November, Father is partial to the earth. He tries so hard to give Arthur and me an appreciation of it. He thinks even a blade of grass is beautiful. One time he picked this blade and told Arthur and I, said, "Now this was a living thing. Life--a great, moving, stirring thing." I could have cried. I don't know why. His voice was so filled with sorrow ~~and all.~~

It's tragic but I don't think even Arthur cares much about the farm. The only thing he likes is the peach orchard and that's because he likes to eat them. Arthur and I both are completely lacking in any spiritual sense and it's very peculiar because all our family, on both sides, have always enjoyed one. Even our connections in Charleston are fond of



flowers. Of course I like flowers, but I can't gasp and scream around about them like a lot of women do. I just don't understand how anybody could, but I don't understand a lot of things about a lot of people.

~~For instance,~~ when Father and them had gone, Mr. Ewing leaned back on the sofa and said, "Astonishing. Astonishing girl!" He was talking about Mrs. Foster, but I don't know why he called her a girl. She's Mother's age.

"She's so very pretty," Mother said. Mother had just sat down on this straight-backed chair and I thought she was pretty, too, much prettier than Mrs. Foster really. The glow of the fire was in her hair and I like the hollows in her cheeks. Mrs. Foster doesn't have hollows. Her face is like a valentine box. Mother also sits very daintily. She never lounges around like I do. ~~Velvet says I sit on my spine. Velvet doesn't think I'm a thing like Mother. She said they must have found me in the cotton patch or something. It makes Velvet perfectly furious because I sit on my spine and still go walking around with my hip out of joint. She says I'm just "plain silly."~~

Anyway---and I knew they would---they started talking about the Episcopal Church, Mr. and Mrs. Ewing and Mother. Mr. Ewing is the Senior Warden and, as I've told you before, he owns the church. Mother started it, that about the Episcopal Church. And you could tell Mrs. Ewing was interested because she stopped knitting. They were talking about firing the rector---poor, pitiful Reverend Agee. They fired him because he read his pitiful sermons and his wife didn't have

cut here  
or later  
(when new man  
comes)



any graces.

"Does he know, Bill?" Mother asked. She was talking about the Reverend Agee.

"Yes," Mrs. Ewing said, answering for Mr. Ewing. "The Bishop came over and had a little talk with him. It was so hard on Bill. Bill had to chat with him afterwards himself--- tell him what the vestry's reasons were."

"Oh dear," Mother said. "It's just such a sensitive thing. I really hope he isn't hurt."

Mr. Ewing started lighting his pipe. "Well," he said, cupping his hand around the bowl and lighting it, "I don't think he's very upset. He just never was the one for St. Peter's and I think he knew it."

"No, he wasn't the one for St. Peter's," Mrs. Ewing said. "He had absolutely no idea about finances either. He just went wild when it came to money." She looked over at her knitting bag. "Frankly, I'm very pleased he's leaving."

"He was good with the young people, though," Mother said. "Arthur seemed to like him and all the young boys. He was very good with the Sunday School."

"Perhaps," Mr. Ewing said. "But they were a peculiar couple."

"Imagine her, refusing the Ashton Study Club!" Mrs. Ewing said.

"Perhaps she just wasn't interested in it," Mother said.

I got up and passed the nuts around again, but nobody took one. I didn't want to sit there and listen about the



Ashton Study Club. It's this small group of women that sit around and some speaker comes in and reads a play or reviews a book or something. Afterwards they go and stand around the dining room table and eat everything in sight. They're always black-balling everybody and if you do get in it's practically the greatest thing in the world. ~~The men in Ashton don't have a study club, just the women. Father says they ought to sit around and read "The Face On the Barroom Floor" to each other. He was just being funny, but Mother didn't think it was very funny. She thinks the Ashton Study Club is "sweet and quaint" even if just about everybody in it is about to die of old age.~~

They didn't talk <sup>about</sup> it, though, thank goodness. They talked about who they were going to get to take the Reverend Agee's place. Mr. and Mrs. Ewing said they wanted someone that had sympathy with the South---about colored people and all---and someone with background that would fit in with the families at St. Peter's. Mr. Ewing said he was extremely partial to this man in Virginia that went around fox-hunting all the time but he didn't know whether he could get him to come to Ashton.

"Well, I want someone I wouldn't mind having bury me," Mother said and both Mr. and Mrs. Ewing laughed. I didn't think it was very funny. I don't much like to talk about dying. Mother simply adores to. She says there's no sense in being silly about it, that it's only practical to discuss it. Mother can be exceedingly morbid sometimes.

They didn't get to finish about who was going to take the Reverend Agee's place because Father and the Fosters came



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bouncing back into the room. The Fosters are Methodists and I guess the Ewings didn't want them to hear. So---they started talking about Arthur! Mrs. Foster started it, by asking about him. Mother said they were exceedingly happy with the school so far and she thought it was just "grand" for a young boy to get a change of atmosphere. I guess she shouldn't have said that because the Foster twins aren't getting a change of atmosphere. They're just right here in Ashton, running around in the same old atmosphere. But I guess Mrs. Foster didn't mind too much.

"That cutie pie," she said. She was talking about Arthur. "He's so terribly serious about everything. I used to see him walking home from school and he looked like he had the weight of the world on his shoulders. He's absolutely precious with his little glasses and everything."

See! That's exactly like Mrs. Foster. She doesn't think Arthur's precious at all. Her twin sons don't wear glasses and they're supposed to be marvelously handsome with their black eyes and dimples and all.

"Well, Arthur's going to be an interesting man," Mrs. Ewing said. "I gave him a ride home once and he kept me perfectly fascinated talking about catsup."

"About catsup!" Mother said.

"Yes, he went into considerable detail about how bad it was for you."

I laughed, too. I knew where Arthur got that. Velvet used to tell this story about a boy she knew that kept eating catsup and one by one his legs and arms kept falling off and then finally his head! Arthur and I used to be terrified the boy's head would



come floating into our rooms at night.

"Children pick up the strangest things," Mrs. Ewing said.

They all ~~have~~ <sup>had</sup> another high ball and I thought they'd never leave. Father and Mr. Ewing started talking about colored people again. Mr. Ewing was in a pretty bad mood about colored people because he'd had to pay nine-hundred dollars to save his cook's house. She'd forgotten to make payments on it and the loan company was going to put it up for sale.

"They'd just bought a four-hundred-dollar television set and a car," he said.

Father just shook his head. "I know," he said. And he does too. Father's always having to help out Isaiah and people. He sipped his drink and kind of leaned forward. "Had a letter yesterday---from a newspaperman in New York. Seems he wants to come down and write something about this situation."

Mr. Ewing frowned. "Well, for godsake tell him not to come! We've got enough trouble without those birds stirring up any more."

"I don't think he's that sort," Father said. "He said he was a friend of one of Sarah's cousins. Newspaperman, too."

"Yes, well, they're all alke. There hasn't been a decent word written about the South in ten years---not a word in one of those damn yankee newspapers."

Father kind of laughed. "They don't seem to understand us. Do they?"

Mr. Ewing leaned back. "Hell, no. I wish some of those left-wing liberals would come down here and pay that last bill I paid."

I was violently interested in this---not about colored



people but about that newspaperman. I know I shouldn't have interrupted or anything but I just wanted to know. I asked Father just right out: "Will that man stay with us? In our house and everything?"

Father winked at me and put his finger to his lips. "I haven't told your mother yet."

I knew what he meant. Father's always asking people to come and visit us and Mother has to do all the junk about them. Father just doesn't understand how much work it is having people all the time. Still, we never have had anything like that in our house---I mean somebody like a northern newspaperman!

I wanted to hear more about it, but Mrs. Foster butted in. "Aaaaaallison," she said. "I want you to get Harry and me a little farm. I want one just like this---with some little calves and eeeverything."

Throw up! I got up with my nuts again. Mr. Foster took one and asked me how school was. That's about all he ever asks, but at least he asks. I said: "Fine."

But, frankly, I was exasperated out of my mind. ~~That bench was getting horribly hard and I didn't want to just sit there listening to Mrs. Foster. Father had to talk to her, though, and Mr. Ewing was staring at her top again.~~ So what I did was I went on back to the kitchen. Right away I saw this glass on the sink and it had a lot of high ball still left in it. I guess it was Mother's, because she really isn't wild about drinking very much.

"Hey, Velvet," I said, but she just kind of made a noise



in her throat and didn't take her hands down from her face.

"Well, I do declare," I said, and took a huge swallow out of the glass. It tasted just lovely, so I took another one.

"Feeeeee-licia!" Velvet said.

"I'm drunk! I'm drunk! I'm drunk!" I said and started weaving around in the kitchen. "I'm the biggest drunkard in town!"

"Now you stop that!" Velvet said. "You oughtta be shamed."

"I'ze so drunk I can't even sheeee," I started slurping around all over the place.

Velvet took the glass from my hand.

"Give it to me," I said. "I've gotta have my booze. Gotta have it." I got the glass back and some of it slopped on the floor.

"You aint funny."

"Wheeeee," I said. "I'm drunk-...-I'm drunk...." And started staggering over toward the stove.

But then I heard Velvet. She was out in the living room!

"Miz Sarah, you better come 'ere. Feeeelicia been drinking whiskey agin."

I put the glass down. They were all laughing. Velvet! I could have killed her. In front of the Ewings and everybody. Telling on me, in front of everybody. She hates me. Everybody hates me. They worship Arthur, but they hate me---Velvet, Mother-- Father---all of them. They despise me! I went on back by the refrigerator on the back porch and waited for Velvet and Mother to start shouting at me. But then I heard Mr.



Foster's voice---loud--from the living room.

He let out a kind of yell. "The South's gonna RIIISE agin!"

I nearly dropped dead. Pitiful Mr. Foster must have got drunk.