

Chapter 5

Jul 14

Velvet and I sat in the back seat on the way home and didn't say one word to each other. Both of us just sat there with our mouths clamped shut and Mother kept talking about Christmas, how much she had to do, but it was all worth it, she guessed, because Arthur ^{would be} coming home.

We ~~hadn't~~ ^{didn't} heard too much from Arthur ~~recently~~ ^{after Thanksgiving*}. He did write that they had had a blizzard up in Connecticut and we read something in the paper about it too. Arthur said he nearly froze to death and his Algebra teacher got mad with him because all he did was sit in class and stare at the snow. ~~Mother said she didn't think the Algebra teacher should have gotten mad because Arthur was only adjusting himself to the north. She said she heartily believed Arthur would do better next year, after he got used to everything and all.~~

~~Arthur~~ ^{He} also wrote about their Christmas concert. He said

it was a tremendous success except one of the Wise Men let out this tremendous burp right in the middle of "Silent Night" and the whole audience got hysterical. Mother said she thought that was very crude of Arthur to write that and she hoped he wasn't losing his "fine feeling for things." You see, another odd thing about Arthur is he really seems to like music, not just jazz and stuff like that. He likes deep music too. That's why Mother let him take music lessons, ~~but of course, as you know, he was nothing but a failure.~~

Anyway, I thought it was pretty funny, that about the Wise Man. I think Father did too, but he didn't say anything when Mother started fussing around about it's being crude ~~and all.~~ ^{Mother} Too, she had also started having prostrations over Christmas. I can't understand why she does that. When it comes, she loves Christmas, but for weeks before hand she's mad at everybody and says not one soul will help her and that she's tired of always being the one that has to create the spirit in the house.

I try to help with decorating the tree and things like that, but it's all the other junk that makes her so furious. For days before Arthur actually got home she was busy "getting things ready" for him. She decorated the silver epergne and chandelier in the dining room with holly, and when she asked me how I thought Arthur would like it I said I thought he would, but I knew he probably wouldn't even notice it. Then we had to weave smilax all the way up the stairway, even to the third floor where Arthur's room is. Mother got furious with Isaiah and I because she said we had stuffed the railing

instead of weaving it gracefully. Mother is very partial to graceful things. On our door we have a boxwood wreath she makes herself instead of just a bought one. ~~It takes her for hours to make it, and everybody leaves her alone because she gets so furious making it.~~ ^{I think,} It's worth it, ~~though,~~ because it's very beautiful, ^{I think,} I think.

Well, it was just too bad Arthur's report card had to arrive the day before he did. It came winging in with all the Christmas cards, and at first I thought it was a bill. But then I saw the postmark. Arthur had made all "C's" and "D's", even though he had been put back a grade. I kept looking at the card and thinking how beautifully someone up there had written the letter "D."

But even without the report card I didn't think Arthur had changed very much. He got off the train, wrinkled and grinning, and I thought his hair had grown a lot and his socks were very wide and stretched at the top. Other than that, I couldn't see any real difference.

He did seem to have more energy, though. I did notice that and I heard Mother say, "He does seem to be more alert, don't you think, Allison?" But that was about all, except for this one very horrifying thing he started doing.

Arthur got home on Saturday, and on Sunday, Mother and Arthur and I went to church. The Reverend Agee had already left and they were having supply rectors until Mr. Ewing could go up to Virginia and persuade the fox-hunting rector to come to Ashton. Mother said we had to be loyal to the church and support the supply rectors. Father usually goes but he said

he thought he was getting flu and believed he would stay home this time. It was a good thing he did, too, because if he had gone he would have died of horror over Arthur.

See, our church is very small and low because we're Episcopalians. Just about everybody else in Ashton are Baptists or Methodists and we don't have any high Episcopalians because the South doesn't much like them. I used to be very ashamed of being Episcopalian because we have to kneel and Baptists and Methodists don't. I never used to kneel if I saw a Baptist in the church, but I got over it last year. Anyway, Mother always walks down the aisle first and then I and Arthur. That was what was so terrible. As soon as Arthur got inside the church he started CURTSYING!

It was terrible. Crossing himself and curtsying! He did it again when we got to our pew and Mother saw him this time. She just glanced at him and went right on singing "Stand Up, Stand Up For Jesus."

I punched Arthur and whispered, "What're you doing that for?" I could feel the red all over my face and even on my neck.

Arthur didn't say anything. He just looked at me ^{like} ~~as if~~ I ^{was} ~~were~~ an idiot. Then when the cross came by---down he went again and nearly knocked his knee cap off on the pew in front of him. It made this loud noise and I could have killed him.

Afterward, Mother asked him where he had learned to do that. And Arthur said "at school." Boys genuflected all over the place at school, he said. But Mother said she didn't believe it was a good idea to do that at home because no one

else ~~was~~ seemed to be doing it. She thought it was a good idea to follow the service just as we always had. Arthur said well maybe, but he was rubbing his knee, and I knew it hurt.

We had roast beef for Sunday dinner and Arthur started talking about school again. He had been talking about it all the night before and I thought we'd heard enough by that time. ~~One thing~~ ^{Frankly} I don't think I was terribly happy with the sort of atmosphere Arthur's return had caused in the house. No one could have cared less, even if I'd dropped dead right in the middle of the roast beef.

"They certainly do write pretty ^g D's up there, Arthur," I said. But Mother said since it was Sunday we shouldn't talk about that now and she smiled at Arthur.

"How are you getting along with your roommate now, Arthur?" she asked. "You haven't said a word about him."

Arthur frowned. "Horrible! He's the worst old bastard I ever saw. Everybody calls him 'Mr. Peabody!'"

Father's fork came down on the table and Mother said: "Arthur!" ~~Arthur Whitfield!~~

"Huh?" Arthur said, looking from Mother to Father.

~~"Such language!"~~ Mother said.

"We don't speak that way in this house," Father said.

"Well, that's what they call him."

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(I nearly passed out, but later we started talking about the way the school choir had sung "Yayzoo, Joy of Man's Desires" and everybody started beaming again. I was very afraid Arthur was going to bring up that about the Wise Man burping because he didn't know how horrified Mother was. But he didn't, thank goodness.) Most of the time Mother and Father are extremely

partial to Arthur. Grade time and when he does all those stupid things is the time they hate him.

Two days after Christmas he lost the new top coat he'd gotten. I heard Mother out in the hall, "You're the most careless child I've ever known! Well, you'll just have to freeze to death!"

Poor Arthur. He can't ever seem to do anything right. The atmosphere in the house was pretty bad after that. Arthur started his old sitting around and staring again. One afternoon I went into the library and there he was, rared back in Father's red leather chair by the Christmas tree. He was flipping through an old copy of THE SATURDAY EVENING POST. I was bored. I'd called up everybody in town and they all were doing something, at least nobody answered the phone.

"Have you ever been so bored you thought you'd scream?" I asked him.

"Uh uh," he said, which is his way of saying he doesn't want to talk. He kept right on flipping. He was all stretched out in the chair with his feet on the foot stool. He had on this T-shirt and khaki pants and I got to thinking it was strange that Arthur was so chubby round the waist. Everybody else in the family is so thin. I wish it had been I that ~~that~~ was ~~chubby~~ instead of him. It's pretty good to be chubby if you're a girl.

"Is everybody rich up there, Arthur?" I asked him in this very mild voice. I wanted him to talk. "Up there in Connecticut? Really rich?"

"Pretty," he said. Flip. Flip.

"Are they all rich?"

He looked at me then and started getting interested, because he stretched and the magazine fell on the floor.

"There's this one boy's father--he's from Pittsburgh and he owns the United States Steel Company and also Gulf Oil Company. ~~They even make him wash windows.~~" He started striking this match on his shoe.

"Is he nice?" I asked and laid down on my stomach on the sofa.

"He's not bad." He blew out the match. "You oughtta see when his mother and father come to school. They come up in this tremendous cadillac and everybody starts flying around all over the place. They're gonna give a building or something."

"Gosh," I said. "I don't think I'd like it up there." I was ~~thinking~~ ^{wondering} if anybody would fly around when Mother and Father came. I guess not. "Isn't everybody different and all?"

"Pretty. There's not another Southerner but me and they're always laughing at everything I do. They even laugh because the name of the train I come up on is named 'The Southerner.'"

"What's so funny about that?"

"I dunno. They just go around knocking themselves out over anything. Always talking about 'cotton-pickin' something or other.' They hate Georgia."

Poor Arthur. It isn't so good being the poor one when everybody else is so rich. I was wondering if that was why everybody laughed at him---because he was poorer than everybody and not just because he was a Southerner.

"Do you guess we'll ever be rich?" ^{I asked} ~~asked~~

"Nawww. Not a chance."

"Why?"

"Cause, shoot, you've got to live in the north."

"I don't see why. There're people in Atlanta that're rich. And the Ewings are."

"The Ewings aren't anything. Nobody's like they are up there. They've got the whole thing sewed up. Up there, there're people that own their own jets and stuff."

"Really?" I was wondering what it would be like to be that rich. "Would you want to live up there, Arthur? I mean if you could? Forever?"

"Nawwww."

"Why not?"

"They're just no good, that's all."

"Why?"

He started screwing up his mouth like he does sometimes when he's really thinking. "There's some pretty good folks up there, I guess, but most of them think they're pretty hot stuff."

"Snobs, you mean."

"Yeah."

"I wouldn't be a snob for anything. Would you?"

"Naw."

A red Christmas ball fell off the tree and crashed to the floor. I looked at it splattered on the floor, the silver insides. In a week it would be New Years, and we'd have to start taking the decorations down. After that Arthur'd be leaving again. "Do you want to go back?" I asked.

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"Oh, it'll do," he said and gave out this huge yawn.
"When you get to be a senior you can smoke and stuff."

"Not 'till then?"

"A pipe, that's all. You gotta go in this one room to do it."

"Gosh, you've got almost five more years before you can do that. I mean, being put back a grade and everything."

"Yeah, I guess so." He looked exceedingly tragic.

Then I asked him, and I don't know why I did, but I did. I said: "You've never really ever had a very good time, have you, Arthur? I mean a really good time?"

He looked up at the ceiling and his eyes behind his glasses looked wide. "I guess I have," he said. "I've had some pretty good times."

I wanted to cry, really this time. He literally hadn't ever had a good time, and I knew he didn't like it up in Connecticut either. He was just saying so. I guess he didn't want us to have to suffer for him ~~and all~~.

"I think you're going to be rich some day, Arthur," I said.

"Me?" ~~His voice kind of squeaked.~~ "Why?"

"I just do, that's all. You just sort of look rich."

"How does somebody look like that, for hell's sake?"

Arthur had started cursing all the time. I told him so. He picked up another match on Father's table and struck it. "Shoot, you oughtta hear what they say at school! Even the masters. Mother'd have one million fits."

"Even the masters?"

"Yep."

I sat up. "What'd they say? What do they say, Arthur?"

"Aw, they're always calling everybody bastards and stuff like that. Even worse."

"The masters?"

Out went the match. "Yeah, old Jimerson---he teaches history---one day the chalk broke off and he said 'goddam bastard'---right in front of everybody, and then he tried to cover it up. Everybody cusses in the north. It's not so bad when you think about it."

"I guess you have to, if everybody else does."

"Yep," he said. And I guess he was bored because he picked up the magazine and started looking through it again. I went on outside and decided when I got to be fourteen I was going to start calling everybody bastard. Everybody at school would die. I had just a little over two years before I could start.

That night at dinner we all had an unpleasantness. Father started it by talking about Mother's renegade cousin, Hugo, up in New York and Mother wanted to know why Father had to bring him up at the table.

"Because we've got a guest coming," Father said.

"Coming here?" Mother said. "Now, at this time?"

Then Father told her about that northern newspaperman.

"Did Hugo tell him about us?" She was using a very annoyed tone of voice because Hugo is a disgrace. He works on this news magazine up in New York that's always laughing about the South.

"I guess so," Father said. "He wants to come down for

the weekend. Hugo told him we were typical Southerners or something like that. I guess he wants our reactions."

"You mean about---?" Mother pointed at the kitchen which meant Velvet and Isaiah.

"I suppose." Father looked tired.

"You mean he's coming from town?" Arthur asked.

"What town?" I said.

"New Yorrrrrrk! dope. What else?"

~~"Don't call your sister a dope,"~~ Father said. "Yes," Father said, ~~he's coming from New York.~~ "He works there. Seems he also writes novels."

Arthur's eyes started getting very wide. I guess he was scared of meeting somebody that famous, too.

Mother plumped her coffee cup down on the saucer. "So we have to have him here?" she asked. ^{"Right after 7 p.m."} "At Christmastime?" I think that's rather nervy."

"He's on his way to Florida," Father said.

"Well, do we have to have him in the house?" I knew Mother would be mad.

"Where else?" Father asked.

"Oh, Allison! Now, I'm just not prepared to have another guest. Especially now when Arthur's home."

"I don't care," Arthur said. "This English teacher of mine---he used to be a newspaperman up there. Man, he worships Negroes. I know all about stuff like that."

Mother let out her exasperated sigh. "Oh, dear."

But I was out of ^{my} mind with glee. "You mean we're going to be written up?" I asked.

Mother's eyes got very blue. "Heavens, Allison! I hope not! Well, I just won't stand for it."

"Why?" Father asked. "Have you got something to hide?"

"Of course not. But I just don't like things like that! You know that." She really doesn't either. In Charleston it isn't good manners to be written up in newspapers---just when you're married and dead. Then it's all right. Other times it's common, as you know.

Father folded his napkin and pushed back the chair.

"Why, you'll be famous, Sarah. Don't you want to be famous?"

"No!"

They both left and Arthur and I just stayed on at the table. "Us written up!" I said.

"He doesn't want to write us up," Arthur said.

"What's he coming for then?"

"Just to look at us. People up there think we're peculiar or something."

"Why?" I asked. "I don't think we are."

"Well, they do."

I got to thinking about that. I knew a northern girl once. She came to Ashton visiting. She talked very fast and I couldn't hardly understand a word she said except that she said her father hadn't wanted her to come down here because everybody had worms. I told her nobody had worms but she said all Southerners did but didn't know it. I asked Mother and she said "no." I thought that girl was very peculiar herself. She had a white nurse.

"I'll betcha he wants to write us up," I said. "Just think. Us!"

"That's nothing," Arthur said. "There's this one boy at school and his father owns the New York Times and practically every other paper in town and he's written up practically every day." *Arthur had certainly met a lot of great people. It made you feel pretty pathetic.*
"Yeah, but us," I said. "Everybody in the north'll see it. Even in Connecticut."

Arthur kind of looked up at the ceiling and tried not to smile. I knew how thrilled he was. The people up there'd think we weren't so bad after all. I couldn't wait to tell Velvet and Isaiah. They'd die.

I went on back to the kitchen. Velvet was washing dishes and Isaiah was sitting on this small step ladder we've got in the pantry.

"Guess what?" I said.

"Whut?" Velvet was in a very bored mood. Isaiah didn't say anything. He was in a bored mood, too.

"We're all going to be written up---you and me and ^s Isaiah and everybody."

Velvet glanced around at me. "What^hu talkin' 'bout?"

"This newspaperman from New York is coming---" I could scarcely get it out---"and he's going to write us all up!"

"Whut for?" Velvet asked. She turned her mouth down and frowned at me in that way she has when she thinks I'm telling a story. (~~I~~ have a faculty sometimes of being untruthful.)

I looked at ^s Isaiah. His neck was getting awfully long. "Because we're all Southerners and because Father's president of the bank, I guess. He'll probably have to take our picture, too."

"Aint nobody gonna take Velvet's picture." She turned back to the sink.

"Aw, Velvet, just because you haven't had your open-faced crowns fixed yet." Velvet's gold crowns are always coming off her two front teeth and she despises her dentist. "Don't you think it's thrilling, Isaiah?"

Isaiah giggled. "Sho is." I knew he'd be glad.

Velvet took off her apron and took down her black hat.

"Get your crowns fixed tonight, Velvet! You'll look really pretty."

"That black dentist aint doin' nothin' but robbin' me blind." She put on her hat and opened the kitchen door. "Come on, Isaiah."

"See you tomorrow," I called after them.

"O---kay," Velvet said.

I stayed on in the kitchen for a while, but it was boring with everybody gone. I decided I'd go right on upstairs and brush my hair one thousand times. If they took our picture I certainly didn't want to look poor and hicky. I vowed I wasn't going to look that way if it killed me! I wanted Arthur's friends up in Connecticut to think we were nice.