

Chapter 12

Arthur certainly looked different. In the first place he had lost weight, a lot of it and his hair was cut short all over. He was wearing his dark blue suit and right away I noticed his white shoes and the newspaper tucked up under his arm. But the funny thing was he wasn't smiling or anything. He didn't even seem glad to see us. He came down the train steps, slowly, and Mother rushed up to him and hugged him. He half-way reacted to this, smiling only slightly. Then he suddenly backed away from her a few steps and looked into her face as if he were examining it. "Welll, helllllooooo therrrrre, Motherrrrrr," he said in the strangest accent I'd ever heard. Then he looked at Father. "How arrrrre you, sirrrrr?" He shook Father's hand. "And, Felicia," he said, looking at me as if I were some mere child. Then he straightened his shoulders and looked about. "Wellll, I see the little town is just about the same." He sighed an almost tired

sigh.

We walked to the car in silence. Arthur sat up front with Father and I could see him slowly moving his head and looking at everything. When we passed the post office he said, "Nooo, nothing has realllly changed."

"You've gotten a new way of talking up there, haven't you, Arthur?" Father said.

"Why, nooo," Arthur said. "I don't realllly think so."

Mother didn't say anything and I was afraid to somehow. But just before we got to the house, Arthur took out this PIPE and started knocking it on the window.

"What's that?" Father asked.

Arthur glanced at him. "Just a pipe," he said casually.

"Arthur!" Mother said. "Do you smoke?"

"Once in a while," he said. "The Head smokes a pipe, you know."

"Who's that?" Mother asked.

"Who?"

"The Head!"

Arthur turned to her. "Realllly, Motherrrrr. The Headmaster. Mr. Sykes."

"Oh," Mother said, a little pathetically, I thought.

Arthur held up this hand-painted tobacco pouch and glanced at Father again. "Two bucks at Penn Station," he said. "Good stuff, realllly!"

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"Pretty fancy, isn't it?" was all Father said. It had a picture of mountains and trees on it.

"Made in Japan," Arthur said and started cupping his hand

over the bowl of the pipe to light it.

We drove the rest of the way home in a cloud of smoke. Arthur's tobacco made the worst-smelling smoke I'd ever smelled and Mother coughed once, but she tried to smother it in her handkerchief. I don't know why she didn't say anything to him then about smoking, or Father either, but Arthur was so strange I guess they didn't want to right then. He didn't have any expression on his face and he yawned all the time.

When we got to our driveway, Mother said: "Look, there's Velvet and Isaiah. They're waiting for you. How nice of them."

Arthur didn't say anything; he just yawned again.

"Wave at them, Arthur! They're so glad to have you home."

"Realllly, Motherrrrr," Arthur said again.

I thought that was terrible of Arthur, so I started waving at them. They must have thought that was pretty peculiar of me because I'd just seen them ~~twaty~~ minutes before.

Arthur got out of the car with a trail of smoke following him. And in this sort of swaggering walk, he went up and shook hands with Velvet.

"How arrrrre you, Velllllvet?" he said in that same peculiar accent.

Velvet immediately stopped grinning and started pouting out her lower lip.

"You'rrrrre looking well, Velvet," he said. Then he turned to Isaiah. "And Isaiah, ~~he said.~~ How arrrrre you?"

Isaiah didn't say anything either; he just stood there, staring at Arthur's pipe.

Mother and Velvet looked at each other and both of them had this sort of peaceful look on their faces. Velvet and Mother pretty

much understand each other without even saying things. Velvet has had just about as much trouble with Isaiah as Mother has had with Arthur. Velvet's got two sons, not just Isaiah. The other one's name is Extra. But Isaiah got in bad one time, gambling at the country club and that's when he came to work for us. Extra serves at the country club; everyone's quite partial to him.

Isaiah began to giggle. "What's that thang, Arthur?" he said, pointing to Arthur's pipe.

"Just a pipe."

"It sho do stank," Isaiah said and fell forward, clapping his hand like he does when he really thinks something's funny.

Arthur frowned for the first time, and then started yawning again.

"Let's go inside," Father said.

At the door I caught Velvet's eye and pointed my finger at Arthur and then at my brain.

"Lawdeee merceeee," Velvet said and in we went.

While Arthur was upstairs helping Isaiah bring up his bags I asked Mother: "What's the matter with him?" But Father answered * He said he said he thought Arthur was getting malaria again. "He looks just the way he did when he first got malaria-drained and wrung out."

"No," Mother said. "I think he's just being sophisticated."

"Sophisticated!?" Father said. "Good lord!"

12 *Funny thing* *went on* *sometimes*
But as the morning progressed Arthur occasionally forgot his new accent and at times sounded almost like the Arthur we had always known. I looked at him sitting in the winged-back chair and I wanted to ask him where his accent had gone but Mother and Father were beaming so and he was talking so much I didn't have

a chance. He was talking away about school and Knox Campbell and somebody else we didn't even know about. Suddenly he knocked out his pipe and said he had a kind of surprise for us.

"Another one?" Father asked.

Arthur looked at him questioningly and then got up from the chair. "It's an award I got."

"An award?" Mother said and her eyes got very blue and wide.

"Uh huh. I'll go get it."

He ran up the stairs three at a time and we just sat there waiting. It was funny but with Arthur out of the room we couldn't think of a thing to say to each other.

"Let's see!" Mother said when he came back down all breathless. He was holding a rolled-up piece of paper and he handed it to Mother still rolled up.

"What is it?" I asked, getting up to look at it too.

"Just a minute," Mother said and unrolled the paper. She read it slowly and then all radiant got up from the chair and with the paper still in her hand hugged Arthur. "I'm so proud of you, Arthur. It's just wonderful!"

"Can I have a look at it, too?" Father asked.

"Read it, Allison!" Mother said. "It's the grandest thing I ever saw."

Arthur was so excited he twirled all the way around on his left foot. He glanced at me and, all grinning and gasping, seemed to be saying: "See! I did it! I did it!"

"What is it?" I asked.

"Well, now, Arthur, that's just fine," Father said. "I'll have to congratulate you." He got up and shook Arthur's hand and Arthur just looked down at the floor, trying to be humble.

"What is it?" I asked again and went over to the sofa and unrolled the piece of paper. It was written in this very old-fashioned writing and it said:

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To Arthur Lagare Whitfield, who, during the School year nineteen hundred and sixty, distinguished himself by washing more windows and with the best spirit of any other single student at the Follett School. We, therefore, the Masters and Board of Trustees, hereby present him this Certificate of Merit.

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I just stared at it.

"Isn't that fine, Felicia?" Mother asked.

I looked at Arthur. He was nodding his head in agreement.

"Yeah, it surely is," I said.

"I knew I was gonna get it before I did," Arthur said.

"Mr. Woodford told me I'd been elected because I'd started showing all this spirit."

"Well, I'd rather get an award for fine spirit than anything I can think of," Mother said.

"Uh huh," Arthur agreed again. "You should have seen old Knox when I got it. Mr. and Mrs. Campbell were there and they started patting me on the back and stuff. Knox didn't get anything."

"I've started wearing stockings, Arthur," I said.

Arthur just looked at me with this kind of dazed look.

"Just on Sundays," Mother said. "For Sunday School and church."

"She can't keep them up, though," Father said and laughed.

"^{up} I can, ~~so,~~" I said. "I tie knots in the garters. Velvet showed me how."

"I bet that looks cute," Arthur said and started reading his award again. Arthur can be extremely selfish sometimes.

"Well, we're just so pleasdd about this, Arthur," Mother

said.

I just yawned. I thought it was about time we stopped talking about Arthur's award. It's thoughtless to dwell on such things too long.

"Maybe you can give Isaiah a hand in washing our windows," Father said. But his eyes were smiling and I knew how happy everybody was. I wondered if it was going to be this way all summer--- everybody patting Arthur on the back and thinking about him as if he were some kind of king or something. I think I liked Arthur better when he stared and flipped through worthless magazines all the time.

I went outside and thought how sad the world is, how tragic it is to be hated in your own home. One time I read this story about a girl that was an orphan and had to live with this woman that did nothing but sit and tear up little bits of paper all the time. She despised the girl and made her wait on the table and drink water and bread. There was this one sentence in there where the girl cries and says: "The world is sad. The world is tragic. Not one star in all the heaven will shine for me." I thought about this for ages and even the Chinaberry tree looked pathetic.

After a while, though, I went back inside and stood in the hall. I heard them still talking in the living room, so I didn't go in there. But then I heard Mother saying, "But Ar-thur! You just didn't work at it. We're so disappointed in you."

I listened and I could feel my heart begin to beat faster. Arthur had failed Algebra! Everybody was furious again. Poor, poor Arthur. He's such a kindly human being and he has suffered

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so. Never in his entire life has he hardly ever been able to do one thing right. It just isn't fair that he has to undergo all the "tribations." I started wishing I wasn't so highly "articulated." Pitiful.

I went on back in the living room. "Gosh, Arthur," I said. "It's so nice to have you home again."