

Chapter 12

It was pretty hard for Arthur to be sophisticated after flunking Algebra and everything. He had also made a D on European history, too, and all those teachers up there wrote notes on his grades. His history teacher, the one that curses all the time, said: "Arthur refuses to concentrate in class as evidenced by his complete failure to grasp the importance of the industrial revolution."

Mother said this was exactly what the principal of the grammar school had told her years ago, but Arthur said history was the most boring thing he had ever listened to and the only part he cared anything about was when Hitler started coming in. Arthur thought that about Hitler was "divine."

"Why don't we drop that word from our vocabulary," Father said.

"What word?" Arthur asked.



"Divine."

"Knox says it all the time."

"Maybe he does, but no man in Georgia says it."

"Yes, Arthur," Mother said. "And too I think you'd better start acting your natural way. You really were so silly when the boys came over this afternoon."

I knew what she meant. Arthur had got back in his sophisticated-malaria mood when Jack Findlay and the Foster twins came by to see him. We heard what Jack said later. He said Arthur had gone up north and got "daft."

9? Only Mother and I heard about it, though, and she made me promise I wouldn't tell Arthur. She said she didn't want to hurt him or anything, but it was best, she thought, for Arthur to start doing like the Romans do. I agreed, but he had a pretty hard time doing it.

Two days after he'd got home we had graduation exercises<sup>see</sup> at the Ashton Grammar School. Arthur said he didn't want to come. "What do I want to go to that for?" he asked, and began yawning all over the place again.

"Because your sister is graduating," Mother said, "and she's also going to make a little speech."

gal 45 I guess Arthur thought that was a pretty unsophisticated thing to have to do, go with your mother and father and watch a bunch of ~~six graders~~ <sup>Grammar-School people</sup> graduate. But it didn't hurt me too much. "I don't care whether he comes or not," I said. "I don't care if nobody comes."

That was pretty much the truth, too. I don't think I've ever been as scared about anything in all my life. Making the



speech was a kind of honor, but just about everybody was asked to do something. My speech, ~~though~~, was the most intellectual one. It started off: "Books! What valuable information they convey! Each one carrying little messages to all parts of the world." It went on for about three more paragraphs and I practised and practised until I could have said it even if I'd lost my brains.

Everybody at home got quite tired of hearing me say it. I was always interrupting them to practise it. If they were sitting around having a fascinating time talking about Connecticut or something, I'd suddenly interrupt with: "Books! What valuable information they convey!" and they'd all get pretty furious.

I recited it to velvet in the kitchen so many times she finally said: "I <sup>she</sup> will be grateful when you gets through with them books!"

I thought that was most unkind of her. If she'd had to make a speech somewhere I'd of listened to her with great interest. Mother was the kindest of all. I made it to <sup>mother</sup> ~~her~~ almost one million times and she was never bored.

"Gosh, I'm scared," I told her.

"There's no need to be," she said. "You certainly know it by now."

"I know, but all those people!"

"They don't want you to fail, Felicia. Remember that, no one sitting in an audience wants the person speaking to fail. It's just a human quality."

"I know that, but it's a pretty terrifying thing when you think about it. Me up there on the stage and everybody staring.



What if I just completely forget?"

"You won't."

Well, I didn't, but I had the most "heart-rendering" experience almost you've ever heard of. Miss <sup>white</sup> ~~Price~~, our teacher, started it off by giving the most excruciatingly sad speech you've ever heard of.

There we all were, sitting up there dressed-up on the stage, and Miss <sup>white</sup> ~~Price~~ shocked us all by first tip-toeing to the front. She hadn't done that when we were practising. I just thought we'd first sing "Home On The Range" like she'd told us to do, and then everybody would start performing.

She looked nicer, though, than I'd ever seen her. She had on lipstick and this yellow corsage and black high-heeled shoes with black straps around the ankles. I don't why it was so kind of pitiful seeing her so dressed up. I suppose it was because I don't think she'd ever had any other chances to dress up. It's funny, but you never really start thinking about somebody like a teacher until you see them at the end all dressed up. I'd never thought about Miss <sup>white</sup> ~~Price~~ maybe having a mother or father or anything. I don't think she'll ever have a beau either, not now anyway; she's about forty years old and, too, she chews her tongue. [Really, I mean.] When nobody's looking and she's trying to think, she just sits there behind her desk, chewing her tongue.

She didn't chew at all on graduation day, though, thank goodness; but she did get this very strange high, polite voice. It didn't sound like her in class at all, like when she says: "All right now, quit rattlin' that paper back there!" Sometimes



Miss <sup>white</sup> Price can sound pretty harassed, but I never blamed her too much. It's absolutely ex-as-perating teaching some children. She told me that once when I stayed to help her clean off the blackboard.

Anyway, as I said, Miss <sup>white's</sup> Price's speech was horribly sad. How strange life is--- You know, it's most ignorant of me, but I had been so worried about my own speech that I'd never once stopped to think how really sad graduating from the Ashton Grammar School really was. Just sitting up there listening to Miss <sup>white</sup> Price, though, I started thinking about all these very pitiful things. I started thinking about how this was my last day at school and how I'd never come back again or walk through the halls again or anything. For six long years the Ashton School had practically been my home and, just think, I'd never come back to it again. Not as long as I lived.

I looked out in the audience and there was Mother and Father and Arthur, all surrounded by all these other people that had one time or another graduated, too. They all looked so old and tired and bored, those people, and I got to thinking that in a few years I'd probably be sitting out there, too, looking old and tired and bored.

Miss <sup>white</sup> Price started off her speech in the most heart-rendering way. She said that everybody was gathered here today not only to say farewell to a graduating class but to also say farewell to "childhood." I nearly died. "Too soon," she said, "these young people you see behind me will be grown. They will be adult men and women."

That's when it all started! I started getting this kind of lump in my throat. You see, and I know it's unwarranted on my



part, but I'd actually never thought about soon becoming a woman. And, just frankly speaking, I'm not very partial to that word "woman." It reminds me of dark, unpleasant things like laxatives, church meetings and trailing, black wires on heating pads. Women never have a good time. They're always sitting around talking about gall bladders and things.

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Gosh, you don't know it and I don't act it most of the time, but I simply love gay things! I love, dearly love, happy times! For instance, one time in the morning I heard this very gay music over the radio and I did the most insane thing. You know what I did? I went out and simply ran down the jonquill hill. It was almost like flying. At the bottom of the hill I threw myself down and just lay there, laughing all to myself. ~~It was so gay, just lying there in all that dew and green and I kept thinking I could die of joy.~~ I know it's odd, but I get so very happy sometimes. ~~I love to feel the wind on my face. Don't you?~~

"How soon our youth is over," said Miss <sup>white</sup> Price very sadly. "We look back on those few short years, and, looking back, they seem to have been only a day, one day of precious, gay merriment. Then they are no more."

Sad! Poor Miss <sup>white</sup> Price. There she was just standing up there in her yellow corsage telling everybody about her happy youth. I guess she was trying to warn us, but I wish she hadn't.

"Those were our cherished years, my friends. One long, lovely / Spring day and then no more. And yet---and yet---" I was afraid she was going to start crying---"we are privileged to live that day again---in our own dear children. But so short a time. So short.... And so, to all you parents, I want to say, in fine, how very much



I have enjoyed knowing these children of yours. A-mer-i-can youth! What a rare commodity!" She looked down at this piece of paper in her hand. "And I may I say, too, that I hope I have had some small measure in their development along life's highway."

Life's highway! To me, that is a very beautiful saying. It's the most saddest expression in the world, I think. I decided I would start using it quite often in the summer. Life's highway! Life's highway! How true. Poor Miss <sup>white</sup> ~~rice~~. She hadn't had much of a highway. Always having to have operations and things.

"And to our children," she said, not turning around to us, "I would like to say farewell. Each of you, without exception, has a place in my heart---and---although I sha'nt be seeing much of you, I shall be watching you and applauding migh-ti-ly with each tiny triumph that comes your way." She turned round then and started frowning. For a minute I thought she was going to chew her tongue, but she didn't. She just raised her arms, the piano struck this chord, and we all stood up and very quickly sang "Home ON The Range."

It was most inspiring the way she did it and my throat was aching so, I couldn't hardly get out one word. ~~(I started thinking of the range as school and it was just like you were away somewhere thinking about your home but you knew you couldn't go to it because you were so terribly poor. The tears just about were ready to pop out of my eyes.)~~

Just think! My youth was all over and there wouldn't ever again be any joy. "One long, lovely Spring day and then no more." It was the most excruciating thing you've ever heard. But then I got kind of terrified. What if when I got up to make my speech



I started crying all over the place. Everybody out there would think I was an idiot and die of horror over me.

I decided I'd better stop thinking about not having my childhood any more or I'd mess up everything, so I started listening to how Melissa Stewart made her speech. It was a poem about shooting an arrow into the air and where it went she didn't know where. It's a very nice poem and Melissa did it very well and fast. But there I still was with my huge lump, waiting. I kept swallowing so it would go away. Finally, it did and I heard my name being called out.

"Books! What valuable information they convey...." I started hearing my own voice and it was like a dream. Still, and I don't understand it, everybody was smiling at me! There was nothing in my speech to smile about, nothing at all. As I told you, it was the most intellectual one of all. But even Arthur was smiling! I started looking at Melissa Stewart's sister, the one that's in college, and she was beaming all over the place. My face started getting terribly hot.

Honestly, older people can be so odd at times. There we all were, up there saying good-bye to our childhood and me talking deep about books, and then them out there grinning away like maniacs. When I get older and I start going to the Ashton Grammar School graduations, I'm not going to grin when there's some pitiful girl up there saying good-bye to her childhood. I'll remember that until the day I die. I mean it.

I did all right, though. I didn't miss a word. When it was all over, I had many congratulations on it. But you know what? I didn't even say good-bye to Miss <sup>White</sup>~~White~~. I know I should have



and Mother urged me to. She said I was being absolutely unappreciative not doing it. But, ~~frankly, I couldn't.~~ I was afraid I'd start crying and the last thing in the world I wanted to do was stand up there bawling in front of Miss ~~Price~~<sup>white</sup> and everything.

~~That would've been just about as bad as if I'd done it while I was making my speech.~~

In the car Mother said: "Honestly, Felicia, you are the strangest child sometimes. Don't you think Felicia should have said a little something to Miss ~~Price~~<sup>white</sup>, Allison?"

"Certainly do."

"Let's not talk about it any more," I said.

"Well, all right," Mother said, "but I do think you should have expressed your appreciation in some way. It was a lovely little talk she gave. She must be a dear person."

"I said let's not talk about it any more!"

"Don't use that tone of voice to your mother!" Father said.

~~My lower lip started trembling, but~~ I just let out this huge sigh.

"I thought you did pretty good up there," Arthur said.

I turned around to him. "I saw you out there," ~~I said~~ and my voice was trembling all over the place. "What were you grinning so for?"

"I wasn't grinning for hellsakes!"

"Arthur!" Mother said. "I don't like that language. You've got almost crude this last year."

"Well, I wasn't grinning."

"Yes, you were too, everybody was," ~~I said~~. I turned back to Mother. "Did I do all right?"



"Yes! I thought you were excellent."

"Why was everybody grinning then?"

"They weren't grinning. They were just smiling because they were so happy for you."

"Oh!"

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But I wasn't happy. We had lunch and afterwards I went out and sat on this bench underneath the chinaberry tree. I just wanted to think for a while. It's very odd about me, but I have to think quite often. Father does too. I guess I inherited it from him. Anyway, I got to thinking about how I'd better start acting grown<sup>+</sup>up. My childhood was over now and there weren't many pleasures left for me. Soon, I'd have to start sitting around talking about the price of cotton and colored people. I guess I'd also have to join a study club and have a bunch of women over to eat salads ~~and talk about gall bladders~~. It was all so vastly boring. I just kept sitting there thinking about it all and finally I got to literally hating myself. ~~Have you ever done that? Start just hating your own self?~~ I hated myself so much I could have just thrown myself down on the <sup>ground</sup> ~~ground~~ and started beating my head on a rock.

~~Finally, though, I started hearing the pencil sharpener going on on the back porch. It was Arthur.~~

~~"Hey, what'ya doing? Getting ready for Miss Esther?"~~

~~"Uh huh."~~

~~Poor Arthur. I guess he hates himself too sometimes. He hadn't been home more than six hours before Mother started getting Miss Esther on the phone to come over and try to tutor him. She came over the very next afternoon and Arthur really was pretty ignorant. I listened to them in the living room.~~

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~~Miss Esther would say.~~

"Now, Arthur," ~~said Miss Esther.~~ "If X comes down the stream and Y goes up the stream, where is Z?"

"I dunno," ~~Arthur said.~~ <sup>would say.</sup> He didn't know anything.

"Now think, Arthur," ~~Miss Esther said and she started getting mad.~~ That was a pretty bad first day. So

I decided I'd better go on in and see what was happening this time.

I just stood out in the hall, listening. It was quite fascinating because they were having a horrible time with this problem about a train going to Chicago. Some man on the train, see, throws a ball and you're supposed to find out something---I couldn't exactly get it straight--- But after they had been over it and over it, Miss Esther said she was going to have to rap Arthur's knuckles if he didn't start thinking.

"No, you're not either," Arthur said and I nearly passed out. ~~Arthur talking to Miss Esther like that!~~

"I think I'm just going to have to have a little talk with your mother," she said.

But Arthur didn't say anything and there was this very long silence. I peaked into the living room and there was Arthur, leaning back in his chair with his arms crossed in front of him. Even with his glasses on you could tell how furious he was. He wasn't even looking at Miss Esther; he was just staring at Grandfather Whitfield's portrait as if he could've killed ~~Grandfather.~~

"You don't want to be a little dummy all your life, do you?" ~~Miss Esther said.~~

"I'm not one!" ~~Arthur said and then Velvet came up behind me.~~



"Whatchu doin', Felicia? You know what yo Mama told you 'bout spyin' on folks."

I started to back away but then Arthur did this very terrible thing. He threw his pencil and it hit Miss Esther on the arm.

"Lawd hep us!" Velvet said and Arthur got up from the card table and left Miss Esther sitting there.

"Arthur," I said. "That was terrible."

"Yo mama's gwina whup you good," Velvet said.

Arthur didn't say anything and just went on outside.

Miss Esther came out then, hugging her Algebra book and her notebooks and this very large, sad-looking black pocket-book.

"Is your mother here, Felicia?" she asked me.

"No," I said. "She's at church fixing the alter for communion."

"Your brother has been very rude to me. Will you tell her I shall call her."

"Yes ma'am," I said and then she went to the front door and started struggling with it. You could tell by the way she fought with it that she was madder than a jay-bird.

I opened it right away and she didn't smile or anything.

"Good afternoon, Felicia," was all she said.

Poor Miss Esther. So intellectual and having to fool with somebody like us.

That night Father said that if Arthur didn't stop acting like a juvenile delinquent, he wasn't going to let Isaiah teach him <sup>how</sup> to drive the car. You see, that's the only thing Arthur said he wanted to do this summer. Of course he can't drive until



he's sixteen but he wanted to learn how anyway.

This was at the dinner table, all this fuss, and Mother just sat there, tapping her fingers and staring at Arthur with these steel-blue eyes. Arthur didn't say anything and I felt horribly sorry for him. It's terrible to be treated so slovenly, especially when you've been to a lot of night clubs and everything.

"She called him a dummy," I said.

"And well she might," Father said. He was pretty mad.

"I don't think it's very cultivated to call people that,"

I said.

"Miss Esther is an older woman and she has a right to call a young boy anything she wants to," Mother said. "Really, Arthur. That isn't like you---throwing a pencil. It's like a silly child. Why did you do it?"

"For your information," Arthur said, "it was because she just happened to spray on me."

"Exactly what do you mean?" Father asked.

"She sprayed all the way across the card table."

"I don't like that, Arthur," Mother said. "I don't like it at all. You've gotten very ~~gross~~ vulgar this year."

"Well---" Arthur started to say.

Father pushed his chair back and folded his napkin. "Now I think you had better call Miss Esther and apologize. Right this minute."

"I don't see why I have to do that!"

"Well, you go up in your room and think about it then," Father said. "Then you come down and call her."

Arthur dragged up to his room and stayed for a long time. I guess he was hating himself too. The atmosphere was pretty bad in



the house, but at least it made me forget my sad experiences at graduation.

Finally, Arthur came back down and we heard him out in the hall:

"Hey, Miss Esther?" he said in this very cheery voice. "This is Arthur Whitfield. Yeh! Ar-thur.... Hey, Miss Esther? You know when I kind of flipped that pencil over and it hit you in the arm? You remember? Well, look, Miss Esther---see---I don't know how that happened. It must have sort of just kind of been an accident. Yeh! It just happened. I surely am sorry, Miss Esther." There was a pause and then Arthur said: "Sure! My square roots? Sure, Miss Esther. I'm studying them now. And don't worry about that pencil or anything. Okay, ~~Miss Esther~~. See you Wednesday. Bye, Miss Esther."

He came dragging into the library, humiliated. Still, he had this kind of pleased look on his face.

"Now, don't you feel better?" Mother asked.

"I guess so."

"All right then," Father said. "Now we won't mention it any more. But you get busy and study!"

Arthur sat down in the wing-backed chair and for a while it was very silent. I knew Mother was still pretty mad about what he'd done. But I don't much blame Arthur. If somebody sat across the table spraying at me, I think I'd throw something too. Maybe. I wouldn't tell Mother that, though, for anything. As I said, she and Father are terribly partial to Miss Esther.

Anyway, it was the biggest relief in the world when the front door rang and it was Mr. and Mrs. Ewing coming to see Mother and Father. Father gave them a high ball and everybody was happy again.



That night, though, Father said we were going back to Ponte Vedra again and I could have died of joy. ~~Ponte Vedra's~~ <sup>and</sup> ~~in Florida~~ and I love the ocean. I have enjoyed my most enjoyable pastimes of my entire life there. The only thing is the Woods from Richmond, Virginia are always there when we are and they're extremely rich and snobbish people. I just hoped we wouldn't have to see them!