

Chapter 21

Poor Winky. We didn't know until that night it was her birthday. We were all sitting in the upstairs drawing room and she came in all dressed up in a black cotton dress. Her cheap-rich northern beau was giving a party for her, "and I'm in kind of a hurry," she said.

"Winky, not again," Aunt Ann said. "You're not going to Tom's apartment again? It just doesn't look right."

She was just standing up there by the door and we were all staring.

"The party's for me and I can't exactly not go," she said. You could tell she was pretty furious with Aunt Ann.

"I don't like you to go driving about alone at night," Uncle Petrie said.

"I'll be all right."

"Why doesn't Tom come and call for you here?" Aunt Ann said. "I don't think that boy ever heard of manners."

"Well, you just sit there and fume about that for a while," Winky said. "I'm late now."

We heard the downstairs door close and Aunt Ann let out this loud sigh. "Twenty-eight-years-old and still not married."

I didn't think that was too nice of Aunt Ann, saying that in front of us. You shouldn't expose that someone's an Old Maid.

"I don't think it's so important to marry so young," Mother said. "The English girls don't marry until later, and their marriages always seem more succesful than ours. Winky seems a fairly happy girl."

"Well, she's not," Aunt Ann said. She looked at Uncle Petrie. "I really don't like her going to that boy's apartment that way, Petrie."

"Trash," Aunt Pett said. "I tell you Charleston is changing. Jets flying over all day, and our girls marrying the Lord-knows-who. You ought to see some of the families the girls are marrying into. Nothing's been the same since Taber died. Nothing, absolutely nothing."

Taber was the colored doorman at the St. Cecelia Ball. Mother used to tell me about him. He was always dressed in a high silk hat, long coat, and white gloves. He knew every guest by name and had even opened carriage doors for the debutantes' grandparents. He died a few years ago.

"Everything's changing except Sam Stoney." (~~He's the walking book of knowledge in Charleston.~~)

I just kind of leaned on the arm of the settee and started staring at the old harp I was going to inherit. If we were go-

ing to sit there and talk about Charleston changing and all, at least I was going to get comfortable. I got ^{sc}scrunched down and waited for the long, boring talk to come on. Thank goodness, though, Aunt Ann didn't want to hear about Charleston changing either. She looked at Mother.

"Seyruh, they're simply terrible ~~ter~~people," she said.

"Who?" Mother asked.

"Those---Gibbons^m or whatever their names are, the parents of this Tom."

"Yes," Aunt Pett said. (She doesn't care whether anybody's talking to her or not. She just speaks up anyway.) "They came down here from one of those places up there. Probably crept out of a mine or something. Wanted Charleston to absolutely fall at their feet because of their money!" She moved her shoulders. "Those people think money's everything, you know."

"They bought the old LaJeune plantation," Uncle Petrie said.

"Yes, Winky told us."

"But now, really, Pett," Uncle Petrie ^{went on} ~~went on~~ "The father---Gibbons^m---must be a rather gifted fellow. They wouldn't have made him president of the company if he hadn't been."

"Industrial trash," Aunt Pett said. "Seyruh, Charleston is being absolutely ruined by these---these people moving in. You've never seen anything ^{like} some of the ^{at northern} women."

"I thought you always enjoyed going to Canada in the summer, Pett," Mother said. "You always said there were some lovely people there."

"Mostly Southerners," ^{Aunt} Pett said. "And from Boston."

Boston has some breeding."

"Well, what's so wrong with the boy's family?" Mother asked.

"They sit on the floor," Aunt Pett said.

"Now, Pett," Uncle Petrie said.

"Letitia told me. She sat right where you're sitting, Seyruh, and told me all about it. Letitia's just as bad as Ann--- both of them going around with the Lord knows who, just to get people to work for the church."

gal 17 → "They are good workers, some of the new people," Aunt Ann said. "And some of them are really quite nice."

"Letitia sat right there and told me all about going there for dinner," Aunt Pett said.

Uncle Petrie wanted to know if that was when they sat on the floor, but he kind of chuckled.

"They certainly did! All got drunk and after dinner that Gibbings man sat his large self right down on the floor."

"Did Letitia sit on the floor, too?" Mother asked.

"Of course not! They played jazz records and danced like common taxi drivers. Letitia told me all about it."

"Where in the world did Letitia meet them?" Mother asked. For some reason she ^{thought} all that was pretty funny.

"In the church," Aunt Pett said. "They joined Grace Church when they moved here. Probably never heard of the Episcopal Church before. That's what they all do, these northerners, come down here and think they can get in with everybody by joining the Episcopal Church!"

"That's a mighty spiritual feeling you have, Pett," Uncle Petrie said and winked at Mother.

Aunt Pett must not have seen the wink. "I tell you, Seyruh,

everything's changing. Mr. Waring down there at the newspaper telling everybody to be Republicans and---"

Uncle Petrie said he didn't think Tom Waring was wrong. He asked Aunt Pett if she wanted to cast her vote with all that Democratic rabble in the north.

"They're no different now than they've always been." She held up her empty sherry glass. "Here, Petrie, give me another one."

Uncle Petrie got up and took her glass. "Would you two like something, some Scotch maybe?" He was asking Mother and Aunt Ann. He just ignored me.

"Fine, Petrie," Aunt Ann said. "How about you, Seyruh?"

"Yes, that might be nice. Just a little, Petrie, please."

They all seemed much happier after it was decided there'd be some booze on the scene. People always are, you know.

"Is Winky going to marry that boy?" I thought then was the time to ask.

"Heavens, just don't speak about it," Aunt Ann said. She looked at Mother. "It worries me so, Seyruh. Really, it does. You know for years Winky never went with anybody but Roman Catholics. One right after the other. I was sick, really sick. And now this---"

I guess I didn't tell you that people in Charleston aren't very partial to Roman Catholics. If you're French, the best thing you can be is be a Huguenot---not Catholic. I don't know why they think that's so terrible, being Catholic. I wouldn't mind being one too much. I think it would be kind of nice, going into a church with this veil on your head. You'd be all alone with this lighted candle and everything. Some boy would see you and know right then and there you were the kind of human being he

wanted to marry. You'd have to wear a blue veil, though, sort of like the one the Virgin Mary was always going around wearing.

"Well, I wouldn't worry too much about Winky," Mother said. "Has she ever indicated she was really serious?" I guess Mother didn't want Aunt Ann to know Winky had already talked to us about it. Mother can be very loyal like that sometimes.

"No, but she sees him all the time," Aunt Ann said. "They go over there to his apartment and cook dinners and listen to records and all that foolishness."

"I told you," Aunt Pett said, "I told you if you sent her to that college up there she'd get all sorts of fool-hardy notions."

"Where did the boy go to school?" Mother asked.

"Yale," Aunt Ann said.

"Humph," Aunt Pett said. "Just like them. Always have to send their children to a name school. Trying to hide behind the name of a college. They don't have anything else. Trash. Common."

"He's also fat," Aunt Ann said and let out this really tremendous sigh. "But he does have a rather nice face---a bit ordinary, but nice features."

"Winky thinks he's amusing," Aunt Pett said. "I told her--- I said never marry a funny man. Funny men never succeed in life. Always too busy trying to be the center of things. Never saw a funny man yet who ever succeeded in anything."

Uncle Petrie came in with the tray of drinks. "Lavinia's broken three more glasses, Ann."

"Oh dear, these colored people you get nowadays. Nothing's

been the same since my dear Millie died. I miss her to death."

"It's the N.A.A.C.P.," Aunt Pett said. "Absolutely ruined every one of them. They don't half work and all they're interested in is sitting at the dime store. They're--- Seyruh! That article was a disgrace! I was so ashamed I tore it right up. What in the world were you thinking about?"

I knew it! I knew it! I knew we'd get around to it. I sat up.

"Yes, it was extremely unfortunate," Mother said.

"And letting your child's picture be displayed like that!"

"We didn't ^{know} anything about that," Mother said.

They all looked at me.

"He just took it," I said and blurted out this horrible laugh.

Nobody else laughed. They just looked back at Mother.

"Thank heaven, they didn't use your name," Aunt Pett said.

"But, of course, everyone who knows us knew who it was. After all, there was Felicia's picture."

"Most disgraceful thing I ever heard of," Aunt Pett said.

"Made everyone of you sound like ^{darkies} ~~stupid~~."

gal 78
"No," Mother said, "he said Allison and I were 'charming, well-intentioned people.' Don't you remember?"

set
"Well-intentioned!" Aunt Pett said. "Just because you don't go around waiting on your own servants. What's the matter with those people up there? They're all alike. Never had any back-ground, never been anywhere decent. They're---"

"They're so conscientious now," Uncle Petrie said. "Sudden-ly after seventy-five years of saying nothing, the north has finally decided to get quite saintly about conditions here---but only here,

in the South."

"Exactly," Mother said. "You know I read so much nowadays, so much criticism and, really, hypocrisy, that it's--well, I told Allison it's turning me against the colored man."

"I know," Uncle Petrie said. "It's very sad, this feeling that is developing." He lifted his glass. "We're the minority in this country now. The Southern white man. Thank the Lord for a newspaperman like Tom Waring!"

"Yes," Aunt Pett said. "They had all that fuss around here about Fort Sumter last month. People making speeches--fine speeches. Fire works. All that. And where are we? We're just about where we were one hundred years ago, mad enough to secede."

"With two exceptions, Pett," Uncle Petrie said. "The Russians and the moon."

"Savages!" Aunt Pett said. "I'm tired of having to fool with savages! All this fuss about the Russians!"

"You don't want them coming over here, do you?" Uncle Petrie asked her. "As conquerors?"

"Wouldn't be any worse than the Yankees! Wouldn't be a bit worse than what the Yankees did to us during the War!"

Mother laughed. "Ah, Pett, there'll never be another like you."

"Well, it's the truth if I ever said it! Those New Englanders brought the darkies down here, expected us to civilize them in one generation, when for a thousand generations they've been eating people in the jungle. New Englanders never have understood us and we don't want to understand them."

Boring. Aunt Pett didn't care a thing about the Russians ~~and that was in~~ ^{everybody going up in} space. That's pretty interesting to me, but it's also pretty scary. I can just see all these Russians running around in Ashton. I'd die. Anyway, though, we weren't talking about the magazine article anymore. Thank goodness, Mother didn't say anything about me lying. She'd probably tell Aunt Ann and Uncle Petrie about it later. That's what she usually does.

"I wish we had seceded," Aunt Pett said. "It wouldn't ^{have} made any difference. We're like another country anyway." set

"That's what Allison's always saying," Mother said.

"Why, yes! We're---"

I got up and started walking toward the door. I almost put my hip out of joint but I remembered where I was. I've got to stop doing that because I may really forget some day and do it at a cocktail party or something.

"Where're you going, Felicia?" Mother asked.

"Downstairs. Out in the garden."

"All right, but don't stay long. We're all going to bed soon. You want to be alert for the party tomorrow, remember."

"All right." Frankly, I wasn't feeling very alert right then. It's the most peculiar thing about me but I can just be sitting up in a drawing room somewhere, listening to other people talk, and I can almost go to sleep. Sometimes I really have to fight ~~to~~ almost to keep my eyes open. I think I've probably developed some kind of disease, but then I'm always thinking that. You can just mention you've got something and right away I start aching all over and feeling horrible.

I felt much more alert, though, when I got outside. It was

a warm night and the wisteria on the side of the house was blooming violently. I walked around the garden for a while and it wasn't too spooky because the lights from the house kind of lighted things up some.

After awhile I got to thinking about what all Aunt Pett had said. She doesn't really hate colored people. I don't know why she carries on like that. She's all the time doing things for colored people and once when Minnie, her cook for simply centuries, nearly died from this contagious disease she got, Aunt Pett stayed with her for three whole days and nights and never once left her side. None of Minnie's family would do it because they said they'd heard "death bells." When colored people hear "death bells", they just ^{go} on and give up the ghost, but Aunt Pett didn't ~~and~~ Minnie got well. Aunt Pett's all the time doing things like that, but she wouldn't've ever invited Minnie to a cocktail party. Minnie set thought drinking whiskey was sinful anyway.

What I think is the truth is that Aunt Pett is just paying hombrage to the glorious Southern war dead. Which is nice of her, I think. Most people go flying around and forget what somebody did once. The Northerners really were terrible to us during the War, just like Aunt Pett said, and they weren't cultivated people at all, as you know. The North just doesn't understand and, too, when they freed the colored people, many of the colored were simply a disgrace because they didn't know how to conduct themselves. We had to put up with all that and, too, when you think of it, colored people really haven't been cultivated very long---I mean in our ways. I guess they had their own ways over in the jungle. ~~But still---you know what?~~ I think it was terrible of the New Englanders

to make them leave their home in the jungle in the first place. Sometimes when you think about that you could almost die of pity for them. I certainly do. But I don't pity them now because I wouldn't want anybody to go around pitying me. ~~Would you?~~

gal 79
 Anyway, I don't want to talk about that any more. Charleston in the Spring is the nicest place in the entire universe. This very warm breeze came floating in from the water and I did the craziest thing. I just held out my arms to it, as if I could somehow encircle the whole night---the bay, the water, steeples, all of it---and I got to thinking about growing up and being a part of everything, going on trips maybe and coming back. Always coming back. Have you ever done anything like that? I mean when you were alone? Sort of felt like crying and yet you were violently happy? It's really peculiar.

I went over to the little stone bench by the old oak tree and I don't know how long I sat there. After a while, though, I heard a car door slam. I jerked around. Winky or somebody was coming through the gate. It was Winky. But she just stood there for a spell and then I saw her put this handkerchief to her eyes. She was crying.

"Winky?"

She jerked the handkerchief away.

"Winky?" I asked again.

She came over toward me. I couldn't see her too well, but I knew by her voice she really had been crying.

"What're you doing out here, Felicia?"

"I don't know," I said in this very kind voice. "They're up there talking about Charleston changing and stuff. That doesn't fascinate me too much."

She sat down beside me and I knew I'd have to think up some really wise things to say.

"You didn't stay very long," I said. "Didn't you have a good time, Winky?"

"Not very." Her voice was shaky and she blew her nose.

I sort of wished I'd been ninety-nine instead of thirteen. I really wanted to help her. "D'you sit on the floor and everything?"

She glanced at me. "You've been listening to Aunt Pett, I see."

"No," I said. "We didn't mention Tom or his family or you or anything after you left." (Forgive me, Lord.)

She kind of slumped her shoulders. "That jerk! He asked me to marry him! That fat---!"

"Tom did?" I wanted to shout with joy. "How wonderful, Winky! You're gonna be married!"

"For godsake," she said. "I wouldn't marry him if he were the last man on earth!"

"Oh," I said. I didn't know what to say.

"I don't know why Mother and Awnt Pett have been carrying on so. I told you and Awnt Seyruh, you know, down in ~~the~~ ^{Poste} Vedra. He was just somebody to---a friend. You have to have somebody to talk to. It's so---" She shook her head.

Poor Winky. I knew what it was like to be an old maid.

"You're not going to be an old maid, Winky," I said. "Everybody likes you and English girls never marry until later. It isn't so important to marry so young."

She looked at me again. "You really have a lot of sense for someone your age."

"I think an awful lot," I said. "Velvet's always telling me I put her in mind of somebody old."

She just gave this short laugh and then said, "Damn! The nerve of that weak---"

"Didn't you like him at all?"

"Yes, I liked him. He was a friend of this other boy I used to go with at Yale. You know the one I---" her voice started up shaking again---"Tom just showed me the clipping from The Times tonight. He's married, the one I used to--- He just got married---"

"Oh, Winky," I said. That was the reason she was crying. She had been betrayed.

"Uh huh, I had a letter from him just a few weeks ago. He actually said he was coming down here. He---"

I sort of folded my hands in front of me and leaned forward. I was trying desperately to think up something to say. It was terrible.

"Everybody's in New York," she said. "All my friends at college. And where is Winky? Charleston---good, old, conservative, quaint Charleston!"

I thought she was going to cry again. "I guess they want you to marry someone with good connections, Winky. I mean somebody from Charleston and all."

"Well, who?" she asked. "A cousin or something?"

"Don't lots of people here marry their cousins?" I thought I'd heard Mother say they did.

"Not first cousins, for heaven sakes!"

"Oh!"

"I've got to get out of here. Somehow I'm going to get out of here."

"Tom was sort of like your friends up there, wasn't he? I mean he just kind of reminded you of them."

"Something like that." She just sat there and didn't say anything for literally hours. Finally she said, "He'd bought this damn ring and everything. He showed me the clipping about Bob's marrying and then handed me the ring! I could have killed him! He hasn't even --" She didn't finish.

I searched my brains for something to say. "I know what you mean, Winky. Why don't you go on back to New York? I wouldn't mind going there. Arthur just hates it at home. He's all the time wishing he was back in New York." Another lie. Oh me

"I can't go. I'm stuck. No money, no thing!"

"Want they give you some? Aunt Ann and Uncle Petrie?"

gal 80 "They'd rather die than see me working in New York." She shook her head again. "Everybody here's married. There's no-thing. Absolutely nothing."

Nothing but old oak trees, I was thinking---and moss---long, hanging, grey moss. I really let out a sigh. It was tragic.

"Well, things aren't all that bad," she said, getting up. "But, look, Felicia, pu-leese don't say anything about all this. You know how it is. Aunt Pett and Mother and---"

I stood up with my hands clenched. "I won't, Winky! I never will as long as I live. I'll never tell anybody!"

"Good girl," she said. And we walked very sadly back to the house.

But poor Winky. How would you like to be some old maid in a place like Charleston where everybody else goes around all happy and married and things? It's terrible. Really. Still, to me,

that was one of the most inspirational things that's ever happened to me. I mean some twenty-eight-year-old person talking to me about their troubles. Winky is one of the most inspirational people in the entire world. You've absolutely never seen anybody like her. And, too, she didn't even mention my disgrace about being in the magazine. ^{she} Didn't even bring it up. How like her! So kind. She knew how I was feeling. ~~When you go to Charleston, go to see her. Her real name is Antoinette and she needs company.~~

When we started inside, I said, "Anyway, Winky, there's going to be the cocktail party tomorrow! Guess we'll have to be alert for it." I was trying to cheer her up.

"Great," she said, and sounded almost disgusted. I guess she was just trying not to cry or anything. I decided I was going to wear lipstick. I'd have to borrow some, though. Pitiful.