Chapter Six

That night Mrs. McBee had a dream. She saw John Bedford sitting upright in a bright green plastic-covered mahogany chair, his eyes unblinking as he stared fixedly at an enormous television set. On the screen was T. J. Flemming, his brown hat jauntily placed, ~~on the back of his head~~, his head thrown back and his mouth stretched wide. Beside him stood Bertha Mae and Mrs. Flemming wearing flowered-cotton dresses and looking down at hymnals in their hands. There was no sound but Mr. Flemming seemed to be singing or

dancing, thrusting his hands out to an unseen audience, to John Bedford himself, like some comical itinerant preacher begging with outstretched fingers for the people "...to come--Come. Be saved." John Bedford then walked into the set, and the screen went black like Damnation itself.

Mrs. McBee awoke, startled. Her breathing was labored. It was only a nightmare. Then, blessedly, the darkness yielded the outlines of the familiar objects in her room. It must have been the pork chops. "Pork," she mumbled to the black room and felt foolish. But the image of the three Flemmings stayed with her. All at once she was wide awake. She sat up.

"Bertha Mae, she don't want to turn out like LoJean, she aims to make sumpin of herself." Mrs. Flemming's loud voice seemed to fill the room. Then it all came clear. Everything. All the while the girl had been plotting in that dumb head of hers. The way she would make "sumpin of herself" was to marry John Bedford!

"I won't have it. I just won't have it!" Mrs. McBee cried to the night.

Yes. She saw it all. John Bedford was susceptible enough. Doing nothing all day. Staring at trees "thinking." Any little twitch of a girl could come along and sweep him off his feet. Mrs. McBee thought of the years ahead:

11/13

She herself would be dead, of course. And there would be John Bedford and that girl living here at the house. She saw lines and lines of diapers whipping in the breeze and the house slowly decaying with the garden full of weeds and beer cans. She saw John Bedford grown fat with idleness and drink and Mrs. Flemming like some huge mountain woman shouting at him as he lay in a hammock:

"Devil! Devil! Come to destroy us all..."

18 pts.

"Devils," said Mrs. McBee to the darkened room. And the sound of her own voice frightened her. She could feel the accelerating of her heart. She turned on the bed lamp. The room was hazy and strange, unreal. It was as if she were the only living person on earth. She glanced at her watch. Two-twenty. One of the beagles howled outside, and the sound, a living sound, brought momentary sanity again.

You need your sleep, she said to herself. Silly. She had been thinking silly thoughts. John Bedford would never be that stupid. She sat humped in the middle of the bed. The sleeveless pink night gown was too flimsy. She felt the chill on her arms and reached over to turn out the light.

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The room was still. She turned over, seeking the comfort of the cool pillow and rest in a saner night. She would sleep now. But she did not. Images and old scenes weaved in and out her brain like leaden pageants.

And Sunday broke bright and sunny. ~~There was less wind than yesterday. Mrs. McBee always tested the wind by the swaying of the pine trees. She cupped her hands at the window and saw them standing tall and straight in the high sun. But she herself was worn, exhausted from the sleepless night.~~ Mrs. McBee ~~She~~ dressed slowly and trudged down the steps, her body heavy. She set about making breakfast. She would make it for two, though the Lord only knew when John Bedford would come down. He always liked to sleep late on Sundays, he said, though Mrs. McBee could see no difference from any other day.

She was scowling down at the eggs in the skillet when the breakfast room door opened and there stood John Bedford. His hair was combed, his shirt freshly laundered, and he was wearing nicely pressed pants. He was smiling and for all the world Mrs. McBee believed he looked almost happy.

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18 pts.

"Aren't you going to church this morning?" he asked.

"Why, of course." Then in the light of things Mrs. McBee dared the question: "Wouldn't you like to come along?" Aside from the spiritual value of the matter, she was thinking it would be nice to ride in a car to church instead of taking the bus.

"No, I think I'll just take a walk through the woods."

Instantly a picture of T. J. Flemming's face with his curled-up eyelashes appeared among the scrambling eggs. "With whom?" she asked, not turning to him.

"With whom what?"

"Never mind. Just never you mind," she said mysteriously. She went into the breakfast room and sat upright before the table, her arms folded in front of her.

John Bedford began to whistle, a happy little tune

that sent a rage straight through her. Yes, he'll send his mother off to church on a bus while he cavorts in the woods with trash. She drummed her fingers on the table.

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"What good does walking in the woods do you?" she asked Mrs. McBee.

do not leave a space here

John Bedford glanced up at her. "Iconoclast. That's what you are -- an iconoclast."

"Don't big word me," she said, still drumming her fingers.

"What's the matter? You look tired."

"I didn't sleep very well. Something, something I saw yesterday afternoon -- on the highway."

"Did you take your pill?"

"No. They make me feel funny."

"Better do what Dr. Wilson says. That great scientific mind--"

"Mrs. Flemming is going to quit."

John Bedford did not look up from his plate. "Good. She's a crow anyway."

"That may be all well and good for you to say,"

said Mrs. McBee. "But I need Mrs. Flemming. She's quitting because of Mr. Flemming." Her heart was beating so rapidly any appetite she might have had had completely vanished. She carefully watched John Bedford as he buttered a half piece of toast as unconcerned as could be.

"Mr. Flemming is a terrible man," she continued. "They're all terrible--every last one of them."

"A victim of the system," said John Bedford. "Just a victim of a ___."

"You don't know them, John Bedford. You don't know what terrible things Mrs. Flemming told me yesterday."

"Everyone's terrible to that woman." He glanced up again. "Aren't you going to eat your breakfast?"

Mrs. McBee turned toward the window and with her elbow resting on the table began to tap her cheek with her finger. As she gazed she saw a thin dark shadow stealthily move from behind the tool shed and weave in and out between the pecan trees. She looked closer. "There he is! There he is!" She stood up. "There's the rascal," she shouted.

John Bedford looked up at her startled.

"That man!" She threw down her napkin. "He hasn't got any business..."

She walked out the back door, slamming it. "Mr. Flemming," she called, her voice almost breaking with rage.

He was swinging one leg over the stile of the wire fence which separated Mrs. McBee's property from the Flemming's. Mrs. McBee had put up the fence at considerable expense, and Mr. Flemming had built the stile so that Mrs. Flemming wouldn't have to walk all the way to the front gate to get to the greenhouse.

When he heard Mrs. McBee he paused on the stile, grinning, his legs straddling the fence. He was all dressed up with a new straw hat, a powder blue suit, yellow shirt and a maroon tie decorated with what looked from Mrs. McBee's distance like shimmering mermaids. Or were they fish?

Mrs. McBee strode toward him, rage filling her body as if some giant machinery were pumping it there. He can just take his ways and his dumb daughter elsewhere, that's what. That's what, she kept saying to

herself. He climbed down off the stile and sauntered toward her. They were mermaids all right, and there was something red and puckered about his lips. As Mrs. McBee came nearer she saw his eyelids were swollen. Whisky, no doubt.

11|13
x24
Bask.

1½ px "Mizz Tisha, you got a gait on you like a young gull," said Mr. Flemming grinning and tipping his hat.

The mermaids shimmered in the morning sun. Mrs. McBee crossed her arms and looked away. "Mr. Flemming," she said.

"You ~~re~~ lookin very well this mornin."

"Well, I'm not! I'm not feeling well at all."

"Don't say? You feelin low, Mizz Tisha?"

"Mr. Flemming, I don't like to say this to you. But I see no reason for you to be on my property at this time. I have hundreds of daffodil bulbs planted right there where you're standing. They're just beginning to come up, and you're trampling them." Her voice was trembling.

1½ px "Don't say? Lawdy, lawdy." And his thin legs began dancing up and down. The gesture reminded Mrs. McBee of her dream. "I wouldna hurt your bulbs for

nothin. Lemme git off here'n." He danced back up the stile again.

He stood on the stile grinning. Mrs. McBee looked up at him. He looked like a king standing there, his straw hat blazing gold in the sun.

"You aint seen Noccalula Black Beauty nowhars, have you?" he asked. "That dawg got outta the pin last night and run off, ~~somewhars~~. I was just gone ast either you or John Beford if you'd happened on her somewhars."

Mrs. McBee still did not look at him. "If you have anything to ask anybody around here, you may ask me, Mr. Flemming. My son is a writer, and he can not be disturbed--by anybody," she added bluntly.

"Know what you mean. I got this here first cousin, and he writes thangs."

Unlikely story, thought Mrs. McBee.

"He's in the army, and some the thangs he writes about from over thar'd curl your head. You know ~~them~~ German wimmen marries niggers? Germans is white."

"I am fully aware of that. Now, Mr. Flemming, I must tell you again."

He began to frown. "Mizz Tisha?" He narrowed his eyes as if he were trying to see straight through her.

Mrs. McBee looked at him frankly. "Yes." She took a deep breath. If she had the strength she would have knocked him off the stile. She closed her eyes, her breath ~~then~~ coming in angry jerks.

His eyes were still narrowed as he leaned forward. "Mizz Tisha," he repeated seriously, then he delicately touched the side of his chin. "You've got a little crumb right thar on your chin."

Mrs. McBee stared at him wide-eyed. Automatically she brushed her chin. Then in blind fury she turned from him and strode back to the house.

"Don't worry 'bout ~~them~~ them bulbs none," called Mr. Flemming. "You caint hurt jon-quills. ~~Them~~ them thangs is stronger'n you or me. They won't git hurt none."

Mrs. McBee did not look back. She sailed toward the house. "A little crumb." She had never been so furious in all her life. She went into the front parlor and sat down. Her whole body was shaking. She lifted her hands. Even they were trembling. I'm going to sell this place, she was thinking. If it's the last

thing I do, I'm going to sell this place, move into town, find a little apartment. There won't be any leaking gutters, bad plumbing, greenhouse, or Flemmings.

11/13

She knew she would not, of course. There was too much sentiment, and, besides, she could never bear to be locked up in some apartment where there was no earth, no trees, no sky. She would die surely.

"Nine-thirty," drawled John Bedford from the hallway. "If you want to make church on time."

Mrs. McBee rose from the chair. The bus for town left at ten minutes after ten. There was only one bus that went into Ashton and if she missed that... ~~"Oh, mercy."~~ It seemed she had been hurrying all her life. Hurrying to get here, hurrying to get there. Now it looked as if even God wanted her to hurry.

She stood on the highway dressed up in her new dark blue suit and white gloves. Instead of the red geranium she ~~had exchanged it for~~ wore a white one to match her hat, a dark straw with tiny daisies scattered on the ribbon band.

Mrs. McBee did not like to stand on the highway. There was no sign to indicate a bus stop or if there

ever had been it was missing now, no doubt some prank played by the cracker teen-age boys who roared up and down the highway full of beer and the devil in their dilapidated cars, strewing cans and knocking down mailboxes.

11/13

18 pts One Sunday when she was standing on the highway, a fine chauffeur-driven automobile with an Illinois license tag had stopped, and a gentleman with graying hair got out of the car and asked her if she were in distress of some sort. It was embarrassing, and she told him no, that she was merely waiting for her ride to church. He asked if they couldn't drive her in. But she graciously declined, thinking the man might be a gangster. Gangsters had become respectable nowadays, she had read, just like normal people except they were rich.

It was embarrassing, standing there like a waif. The passengers in every car that passed stared at her, sometimes even looking back. That was why she always tried to look her very best, so they wouldn't think she was just some sort of hitch-hiking trash. She tried to look as nonchalant as possible, sometimes looking

down and pointing with her foot as if she were trying to discover berries or maybe even a four-leaf clover.

11/13 Occasionally there were others who waited with her. But they weren't the church-going type. Girls wearing shorts with their hair done up in pink curlers. And people from the Parade of Homes. That sort. Sometimes Negroes who farmed up the road in the backwoods joined her. It was the only bus stop two miles either way. Once the train had stopped there. It was called McBee's Station. But that was years ago, and now there was only the bus and its ragged band of travelers. Mrs. McBee always stood a little away from the rest of the gathering.

She was not to be alone this day either. Slowly coming toward her she saw a small parade of Negroes walking alongside the highway. It was a family: the father first, a huge man dressed in overalls; the mother followed in a bright flowered cotton dress and bonnet; and behind them, three girls and two boys. The girls were dressed in blue and pink, immaculately pressed with large pink and white ribbons tied on top of their braided hair; the boys wore blue and tan suits, white shirts and their shoes fairly shone with polish.

Mrs. McBee considered her relationships with the Negro families who farmed out this way very favorable. They were sweet people, enterprising and hard workers. She would read in the newspapers what some of those Northern Negroes said from time to time and she was aghast; they were nothing like the sweet families she knew, and had known for most of her life.

The family came stealthily and stood timidly in a cluster some feet away from Mrs. McBee.

"Good morning," she called cheerfully.

The children smiled timidly, and the mother grinned under her bonnet. The father removed his hat somberly.

"The bus is late again," said Mrs. McBee.

"Is?" said the mother.

"It gets later and later every Sunday."

"Sho do." The mother frowned in disgust.

"Aren't the children pretty this morning," said Mrs. McBee. "They must be dressed for church."

"Yes'm," said the mother shyly.

The children's black eyes flashed with pleasure, and the youngest bent low to examine his shoes.

"And new shoes, too. My, my." Mrs. McBee thought,

as she had always thought, how much cuter little colored children were than white children. Her sentiments in such matters just went to show how really unprejudiced she was, no matter what John Bedford had to say about it.

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"You lookin fine," said the mother.

Sunday after Sunday, year after year, the mother said the same thing as if she expected something dire to have happened during the week and that, in spite of it, Mrs. McBee had emerged totally whole.

"I haven't been feeling too well. I had to go to the doctor last week," said Mrs. McBee.

"Sho nuff?" said the mother. "You been ailin?"

"Not really. Just a little spring fever, I think."

"I knows what you mean. Sprang'll make you feel low." She pouted as if to indicate she, too, suffered.

One of the little girls began to giggle.

"Hush yo fuss, Freedonia," said the mother, her sweet flower-like face distorting into a dark frown.

"Here it comes. Here it comes!" shrilled the children.

On the rise of the hill in the distance the bus showed itself like a tattered but happy friend. The

little group stood smiling, waiting for its approach.

The family stood back while Mrs. McBee got on first. 11/13 The bus was crowded, and Mrs. McBee looked about for a place to sit.

1½ pg There were a few seats next to the driver, one long seat and another beside it. Mrs. McBee sat in the seat across from the long seat, leaving it for the children. She had long since accustomed herself to the colored people no longer sitting in the back, and the present arrangement bothered her not at all. She had just as soon sit by some neatly dressed Negro woman as to sit by a lot of white people she had seen.

She wasn't like some of the other passengers on the bus. White people. Women mostly, who if a Negro sat beside them would instantly rise as if they had been pricked by a pin and move elsewhere. Mrs. McBee's own attitude in contrast just went to show she could afford to be Christian about such things; she was so far removed, so up and above the Negro that there was no threat whatsoever. Nice people were all like that, she reasoned.

~~She smiled gently as the darling little Negro children lined up on the long seat, their thin little~~

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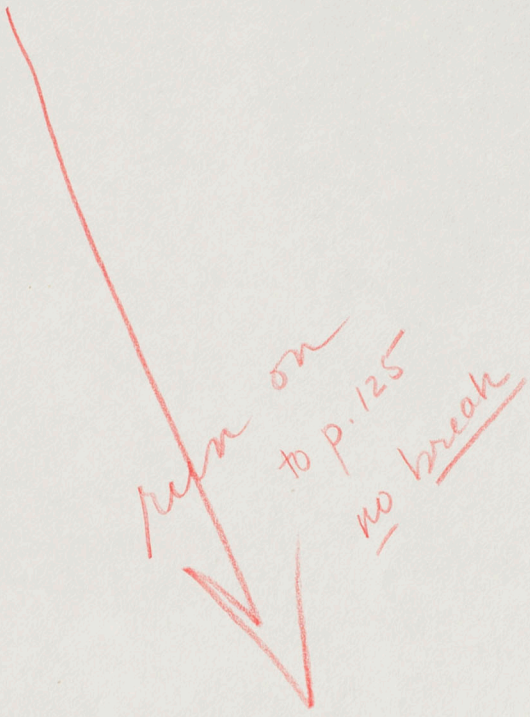

1½ px When the bus reached the corner of Seventh and Carpenter Streets and stopped, Mrs. McBee remained seated while the Negro father guided his family off the bus. As the mother was about to alight she ~~was~~ turned and smiled sweetly at Mrs. McBee. Mrs. McBee returned the smile, trying to indicate to the mother her congratulations for having such well ~~behaved~~ behaved children. In her way she was congratulating herself, too. For just what she had no time to discern. She got off the bus and strode up the street on her familiar way to Palm Sunday. She walked with an air.

11|13
x24
Barksville

1 ¶ #

1½ pr Mrs. McBee had two pulls which warred within her whenever she went to church. Irritation and reverence. The former usually occurred before the actual service began. For one thing she ~~was~~ did not like it when she was not able to sit in her own pew. The church officially did not observe the use of private pews; there was no rent. But the older families Sunday after Sunday sat in the same pews as had their parents and grandparents

before them. Mrs. McBee's pew was next to her grandfather's window, and she kept her prayer book and hymnal with her name in gold letters there, and anyone with any sense should have known, seeing the books, that that was her pew.

But within the year the Childs family had taken to sitting in her pew. The Childs, a middle-aged couple, had four children ranging in ages from twenty to eleven, and they had been Baptists all their lives until last year when they became angry with the Baptist minister over politics and entered the Episcopal Church. (~~They themselves spoke of "joining the church"; just like a Baptist.~~)

They were ardent workers in the church, bringing to the inner workings all the zeal and energy most often reserved for Baptists. Mary Childs was active in the woman's auxiliary, almost single-handedly putting on the church bazaar. In the past year she had arranged and supervised most of the church suppers. Bob Childs, her husband, was just as active. His name was always in the bulletin heading this committee or that. He had taken over the upkeep of the church grounds. And one

Saturday when there was no yard man to be found there was Bob Childs out there mowing the lawn himself with a hand lawn mower. Everyone saw him, commented on it, and that, no doubt, was the intent.

11/13

18 pts. Inside themselves the Childs were still Baptists. But, as most new converts, they seemed out to prove something. Once at Mrs. McBee's bridge foursome Virginia Lockhart said as much. But Margaret Ewing had taken up for the Childs. "Episcopalians have a lot to learn from the Baptists, I think."

Still, the Childs had not learned the little fine points ~~fineries~~ of the church, like sitting in other people's pews. And it infuriated Mrs. McBee. She knew what they were doing. They were waiting for her to die. She wouldn't be five minutes in her grave before the Childs would claim the pew for themselves. She wanted to think of John Bedford sitting there after she was gone.

She wondered if the Childs actually believed in God; good works weren't everything. And they were "good works" people, the Episcopal Church just being another stepping stone on their path to society. Mrs.

McBee was convinced of this. She remembered old man Childs, a fat, big-bellied merchant who murdered the king's English. And here was his son now, Mr. Respectability sitting in the McBee pew. Too much was changing.

11/13

When she entered the church there they were, all six of them taking up the entire pew. Mrs. McBee sat in the pew behind them. She thought of getting up, making a point of reaching for her Prayer Book and Hymnal. The thought of them actually using her Prayer Book was intolerable. But the bus had made her late and the choir was ready to enter. She knelt to pray but she was so angry she couldn't think of very much to say. "Please let John Bedford marry somebody nice," she prayed quickly and sat up, the gesture having soothed her in part at least.

Another source of irritation to Mrs. McBee, though milder, was the bulk of the congregation itself. Years ago, when she was confirmed, St. Peter's had not numbered more than forty communicants. The remaining population of Ashton was made up of Baptists, Methodists and a few Presbyterians. Mrs. McBee liked the church better when it was smaller. In a sense one felt one owned the church.

There was a special quality to the congregation then. All the faces one saw were distinguished faces, men and women with tall, proud looks, Anglo-Saxon faces. And it was pleasant to hear the ringing voice of the minister:

"From lightning and tempest; from earthquake, fire and flood; from plague, pestilence and famine; from battle and murder, and from sudden death..."

And the congregation's strong response:

"...Good Lord, deliver us."

Each month her mother and five other ladies met at the Whitfield's house. They comprised the woman's auxiliary. It did not seem necessary to ask the other women communicants to join them. For the five had taste and propriety; they were well-equipped to make decisions as to just what should be done and when. The meetings were secret. They ruled.

Now the congregation numbered almost three hundred and the woman's auxiliary included everyone, though on a normal eleven o'clock service no more than sixty-five people, if that many, were seen in the congregation. There were many workers; few worshippers.

There were so many distractions. Sometimes Mrs. McBee thought one should go to a church where you did not know anyone. Here one knew too much about too many. Mrs. McBee settled in her pew and furtively took in the morning's scene. There was Agatha Johnson, overweight and overdressed as usual, never wore the same outfit twice (new money); over there must be young Philip Crawley's fiancée (common-looking; no sleeves and no hat). And there was Austin Rathers ushering. He had made money stealing lumber off other people's property and now he had his own paper company. Mrs. McBee wondered what Rathers thought when the commandment "thou shalt not commit adultery" was read. The commandment placed an uneasiness over the congregation anyway; nothing one could identify, just a slight difference in tone, a sort of muffled tone.

Most of these people saw each other regularly: at cocktail parties, on the golf course, at small dinners and behind bridge tables. They had servants to wait on them and two or three cars to drive wherever they wanted to go. Family didn't mean much anymore. It was all money. Mrs. McBee seethed with these thoughts

as she stared at the back of Bob Childs's Baptist head.

"...I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and earth. And of all things visible and invisible..."

Mrs. McBee stopped reciting the Creed. Behind her Elizabeth Wells was being dramatic again. A woman in her late fifties, Elizabeth Wells was the only person in the entire church who genuflected. Just like a Catholic, Mrs. McBee always thought. Just trying to show off, nothing but ~~her clothes--skirts that were too short and too young for her~~.

Overly dramatic in most things, she recited the Creed as if she and she alone were reciting it and everyone was listening: "Ah be-lieve in one Go-od, the Fah-tha Awl-mitey..." She was one word behind everyone else, and the self-conscious piety of her tone irritated Mrs. McBee so that she stopped reciting altogether.

But, as always, these irritants finally vanished, and Mrs. McBee soon became lost in the service itself. The music and the final "Amen" sung by the choir lifted her up beyond the secular until at last she felt a ~~peace and~~ oneness that even Agatha Johnson couldn't

take away when she did not speak as they were leaving the church.

"I've never regretted going to church," Mrs. McBee always told her friends. "Never once."

Outside people were unusually nice. At one point she found herself surrounded by people, and she regretted her lack of charity at the beginning of the service. She was really fond of all these people, many of them customers, though that had nothing to do with anything. ~~She rationalized that it had been the unfortunate ride on the bus that had set her nerves on edge earlier.~~ Her normal spirit was charity, love and grace.

Margaret Ewing came up to her and asked her to take Janice Walker's place at her bridge foursome Thursday. This delighted Mrs. McBee. It just went to show that sometimes one got so caught up in one's own affairs that you got to thinking no one cared whether you lived or died. But they did. She felt beloved.

A delightful day, and she rode back home on the bus ~~in~~ beside an empty seat with joy in her heart and thanksgiving for all mankind. God, too, had worked His mystery. For when she got home John Bedford was there

having his martinis, and he announced the most startling thing:

"It will no doubt please you to know that I have a job" -- he lowered his glass - "as you say, a real job."

11/13

Mrs. McBee caught her breath. Cast your bread upon the waters. Praise be. For the first time in his life he had listened to her. Then seeing the smile on his lips, she asked doubtfully, "What is it?"

"You are now looking at a teacher, a teacher of English."

Mrs. McBee closed her eyes to keep back the tears that wanted to gather there. "Just like your father," she managed.

"Well," he mused. "Not exactly. It's at the college, all right, that famed institution, Ashton State Teacher's College."

Mrs. McBee gathered herself together. "Why, that's fine, son. It's grown so you wouldn't even know it."

"One night a week," said John Bedford.

She looked at him. "Is that all? Just one night a week?"

"Rome wasn't built in a day, you know," he said, repeated, flourishing his glass.

11/13 Mrs. McBee continued to gaze at him. "Well, I declare. One night a week." She couldn't conceal her disappointment.

"And I," said John Bedford, "I've met a little chippy." He grinned.

"A what?"

"Commonly known as a young lady."

"Why..." The full realization came to Mrs. McBee. "Why, John Bed-ford." She shrunk back and her eyes teased. "Well, well, well."

Then she remembered Bertha Mae Flemming. "Who is it?" Her eyes flashed.

"Nobody you would know."

Her relief was so great she dropped her purse to the floor and sat slumped in the chair beside John Bedford.

"Of course, you may not approve my taste."

She looked up. "Why not? What's wrong with her? She's not anybody funny or anything, not anybody with funny ideas. A communist or anything?" It just came out.

John Bedford laughed, rolling his head on the back of the chair and finally wiping his eyes.

"Are you drunk, John Bedford?" she asked, studying him.

"No, I'm not drunk." His voice was high.

"Where did you meet the young woman?"

"At the college."

"Well," sighed Mrs. McBee. "That's different." Then she smiled shyly at him. "I told you, didn't I? I told you, you might meet somebody there. Why... A college girl. Well, well, well."

How stupid she had been to even entertain the thought that her brilliant, refined John Bedford would ever really look at someone like that Flemming girl. The incident on the highway could have happened to anybody, any red-blooded American boy. The rascal.

"A college girl," she said again. "A nice Southern girl."

"She's Southern all right."

"The things you boys will do behind our backs. Dear me." She clasped her hands delightedly. "You must bring her for dinner, dear."

And she laughed like a young girl.

11/13 Beautiful day. Beautiful golden day.

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