

To Kill a Mockingbird

by *Harper Lee*

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Chapter 16

Jem heard me. He thrust his head around the connecting door. As he came to my bed Atticus's light flashed on. We stayed where we were until it went off; we heard him turn over, and we waited until he was still again.

Jem took me to his room and put me in bed beside him. "Try to go to sleep," he said, "It'll be all over after tomorrow, maybe."

We had come in quietly, so as not to wake Aunty. Atticus killed the engine in the driveway and coasted to the carhouse; we went in the back door and to our rooms without a word. I was very tired, and was drifting into sleep when the memory of Atticus calmly folding his newspaper and pushing back his hat became Atticus standing in the middle of an empty waiting street, pushing up his glasses. The full meaning of the night's events hit me and I began crying. Jem was awfully nice

about it: for once he didn't remind me that people nearly nine years old didn't do things like that.

Everybody's appetite was delicate this morning, except Jem's: he ate his way through three eggs. Atticus watched in frank admiration; Aunt Alexandra sipped coffee and radiated waves of disapproval. Children who slipped out at night were a disgrace to the family. Atticus said he was right glad his disgraces had come along, but Aunty said, "Nonsense, Mr. Underwood was there all the time."

"You know, it's a funny thing about Braxton," said Atticus. "He despises Negroes, won't have one near him."

Local opinion held Mr. Underwood to be an intense, profane little man, whose father in a fey fit of humor christened Braxton Bragg, a name Mr. Underwood had done his best to live down. Atticus said naming people after Confederate generals made slow steady drinkers.

Calpurnia was serving Aunt Alexandra more coffee, and she shook her head at what I thought was a pleading winning look. "You're still too little," she said. "I'll tell you when you ain't." I said it might help my stomach. "All right," she said, and got a cup from the sideboard. She poured one tablespoonful of coffee into it and filled the cup to the brim with milk. I thanked her by sticking out my tongue at it, and looked up to catch Aunty's warning frown. But she was frowning at Atticus.

She waited until Calpurnia was in the kitchen, then she said, "Don't talk like that in front of them."

"Talk like what in front of whom?" he asked.

"Like that in front of Calpurnia. You said Braxton Underwood despises Negroes right in front of her."

"Well, I'm sure Cal knows it. Everybody in Maycomb knows it."

I was beginning to notice a subtle change in my father these days, that came out when he talked with Aunt Alexandra. It was a quiet digging in, never outright irritation. There was a faint starchiness in his voice when he said, "Anything fit to say at the table's fit to say in front of Calpurnia. She knows what she means to this family."

“I don’t think it’s a good habit, Atticus. It encourages them. You know how they talk among themselves. Every thing that happens in this town’s out to the Quarters before sundown.”

My father put down his knife. “I don’t know of any law that says they can’t talk. Maybe if we didn’t give them so much to talk about they’d be quiet. Why don’t you drink your coffee, Scout?”

I was playing in it with the spoon. “I thought Mr. Cunningham was a friend of ours. You told me a long time ago he was.”

“He still is.”

“But last night he wanted to hurt you.”

Atticus placed his fork beside his knife and pushed his plate aside. “Mr. Cunningham’s basically a good man,” he said, “he just has his blind spots along with the rest of us.”

Jem spoke. “Don’t call that a blind spot. He’d killed you last night when he first went there.

“

“He might have hurt me a little,” Atticus conceded, “but son, you’ll understand folks a little better when you’re older. A mob’s always made up of people, no matter what. Mr. Cunningham was part of a mob last night, but he was still a man. Every mob in every little Southern town is always made up of people you know—doesn’t say much for them, does it?”

“I’ll say not,” said Jem.

“So it took an eight-year-old child to bring ‘em to their senses, didn’t it?” said Atticus. “That proves something—that a gang of wild animals can be stopped, simply because they’re still human. Hmp, maybe we need a police force of children... you children last night made Walter Cunningham stand in my shoes for a minute. That was enough.”

Well, I hoped Jem would understand folks a little better when he was older; I wouldn’t. “First day Walter comes back to school’ll be his last,” I affirmed.

“You will not touch him,” Atticus said flatly. “I don’t want either of you bearing a grudge about this thing, no matter what happens.”

“You see, don’t you,” said Aunt Alexandra, “what comes of things like this. Don’t say I haven’t told you.”

Atticus said he’d never say that, pushed out his chair and got up. “There’s a day ahead, so excuse me. Jem, I don’t want you and Scout downtown today, please.”

As Atticus departed, Dill came bounding down the hall into the diningroom. “It’s all over town this morning,” he announced, “all about how we held off a hundred folks with our bare hands...” Aunt Alexandra stared him to silence. “It was not a hundred folks,” she said, “and nobody held anybody off. It was just a nest of those Cunninghams, drunk and disorderly.”

“Aw, Aunty, that’s just Dill’s way,” said Jem. He signaled us to follow him.

“You all stay in the yard today,” she said, as we made our way to the front porch. It was like Saturday. People from the south end of the county passed our house in a leisurely but steady stream.

Mr. Dolphus Raymond lurched by on his thoroughbred. “Don’t see how he stays in the saddle,” murmured Jem. “How c’n you stand to get drunk ‘fore eight in the morning?”

A wagonload of ladies rattled past us. They wore cotton sunbonnets and dresses with long sleeves. A bearded man in a wool hat drove them. “Yonder’s some Mennonites,” Jem said to Dill. “They don’t have buttons.” They lived deep in the woods, did most of their trading across the river, and rarely came to Maycomb. Dill was interested. “They’ve all got blue eyes,” Jem explained, “and the men can’t shave after they marry. Their wives like for ‘em to tickle ‘em with their beards.”

Mr. X Billups rode by on a mule and waved to us. “He’s a funny man,” said Jem. “X’s his name, not his initial. He was in court one time and they asked him his name. He said X Billups. Clerk asked him to spell it and he said X. Asked him again and he said X. They kept at it till he wrote X on a sheet of paper and held it up for everybody to see. They asked him where he got his name and he said that’s the way his folks signed him up when he was born.”

As the county went by us, Jem gave Dill the histories and general attitudes of the more prominent figures: Mr. Tensaw Jones voted the straight Prohibition ticket;

Miss Emily Davis dipped snuff in private; Mr. Byron Waller could play the violin; Mr. Jake Slade was cutting his third set of teeth.

A wagonload of unusually stern-faced citizens appeared. When they pointed to Miss Maudie Atkinson's yard, ablaze with summer flowers, Miss Maudie herself came out on the porch. There was an odd thing about Miss Maudie—on her porch she was too far away for us to see her features clearly, but we could always catch her mood by the way she stood. She was now standing arms akimbo, her shoulders drooping a little, her head cocked to one side, her glasses winking in the sunlight. We knew she wore a grin of the uttermost wickedness.

The driver of the wagon slowed down his mules, and a shrill-voiced woman called out: "He that cometh in vanity departeth in darkness!"

Miss Maudie answered: "A merry heart maketh a cheerful countenance!"

I guess that the foot-washers thought that the Devil was quoting Scripture for his own purposes, as the driver speeded his mules. Why they objected to Miss Maudie's yard was a mystery, heightened in my mind because for someone who spent all the daylight hours outdoors, Miss Maudie's command of Scripture was formidable.

"You goin' to court this morning?" asked Jem. We had strolled over.

"I am not," she said. "I have no business with the court this morning."

"Aren't you goin' down to watch?" asked Dill.

"I am not. 't's morbid, watching a poor devil on trial for his life. Look at all those folks, it's like a Roman carnival."

"They hafta try him in public, Miss Maudie," I said. "Wouldn't be right if they didn't."

"I'm quite aware of that," she said. "Just because it's public, I don't have to go, do I?"

Miss Stephanie Crawford came by. She wore a hat and gloves. "Um, um, um," she said. "Look at all those folks—you'd think William Jennings Bryan was speakin'."

"And where are you going, Stephanie?" inquired Miss Maudie.

"To the Jitney Jungle."

Miss Maudie said she'd never seen Miss Stephanie go to the Jitney Jungle in a hat in her life.

"Well," said Miss Stephanie, "I thought I might just look in at the courthouse, to see what Atticus's up to."

"Better be careful he doesn't hand you a subpoena."

We asked Miss Maudie to elucidate: she said Miss Stephanie seemed to know so much about the case she might as well be called on to testify.

We held off until noon, when Atticus came home to dinner and said they'd spent the morning picking the jury. After dinner, we stopped by for Dill and went to town.

It was a gala occasion. There was no room at the public hitching rail for another animal, mules and wagons were parked under every available tree. The courthouse square was covered with picnic parties sitting on newspapers, washing down biscuit and syrup with warm milk from fruit jars. Some people were gnawing on cold chicken and cold fried pork chops. The more affluent chased their food with drugstore Coca-Cola in bulb-shaped soda glasses. Greasy-faced children popped-the-whip through the crowd, and babies lunched at their mothers' breasts.

In a far corner of the square, the Negroes sat quietly in the sun, dining on sardines, crackers, and the more vivid flavors of Nehi Cola. Mr. Dolphus Raymond sat with them.

"Jem," said Dill, "he's drinkin' out of a sack."

Mr. Dolphus Raymond seemed to be so doing: two yellow drugstore straws ran from his mouth to the depths of a brown paper bag.

"Ain't ever seen anybody do that," murmured Dill.

"How does he keep what's in it in it?"

Jem giggled. "He's got a Co-Cola bottle full of whiskey in there. That's so's not to upset the ladies. You'll see him sip it all afternoon, he'll step out for a while and fill it back up."

"Why's he sittin' with the colored folks?"

“Always does. He likes ‘em better’n he likes us, I reckon. Lives by himself way down near the county line. He’s got a colored woman and all sorts of mixed chillun. Show you some of ‘em if we see ‘em.”

“He doesn’t look like trash,” said Dill.

“He’s not, he owns all one side of the riverbank down there, and he’s from a real old family to boot.”

“Then why does he do like that?”

“That’s just his way,” said Jem. “They say he never got over his weddin’. He was supposed to marry one of the—the Spencer ladies, I think. They were gonna have a huge weddin’, but they didn’t—after the rehearsal the bride went upstairs and blew her head off. Shotgun. She pulled the trigger with her toes.”

“Did they ever know why?”

“No,” said Jem, “nobody ever knew quite why but Mr. Dolphus. They said it was because she found out about his colored woman, he reckoned he could keep her and get married too. He’s been sorta drunk ever since. You know, though, he’s real good to those chillun—”

“Jem,” I asked, “what’s a mixed child?”

“Half white, half colored. You’ve seen ‘em, Scout. You know that red-kinky-headed one that delivers for the drugstore. He’s half white. They’re real sad.”

“Sad, how come?”

“They don’t belong anywhere. Colored folks won’t have ‘em because they’re half white; white folks won’t have ‘em cause they’re colored, so they’re just in-betweens, don’t belong anywhere. But Mr. Dolphus, now, they say he’s shipped two of his up north. They don’t mind ‘em up north. Yonder’s one of ‘em.”

A small boy clutching a Negro woman’s hand walked toward us. He looked all Negro to me: he was rich chocolate with flaring nostrils and beautiful teeth. Sometimes he would skip happily, and the Negro woman tugged his hand to make him stop.

Jem waited until they passed us. “That’s one of the little ones,” he said.

“How can you tell?” asked Dill. “He looked black to me.”

“You can’t sometimes, not unless you know who they are. But he’s half Raymond, all right.”

“But how can you *tell*?” I asked.

“I told you, Scout, you just hafta know who they are.”

“Well how do you know we ain’t Negroes?”

“Uncle Jack Finch says we really don’t know. He says as far as he can trace back the Finches we ain’t, but for all he knows we mighta come straight out of Ethiopia durin’ the Old Testament.”

“Well if we came out durin’ the Old Testament it’s too long ago to matter.”

“That’s what I thought,” said Jem, “but around here once you have a drop of Negro blood, that makes you all black. Hey, look—”

Some invisible signal had made the lunchers on the square rise and scatter bits of newspaper, cellophane, and wrapping paper. Children came to mothers, babies were cradled on hips as men in sweat-stained hats collected their families and herded them through the courthouse doors. In the far corner of the square the Negroes and Mr. Dolphus Raymond stood up and dusted their breeches. There were few women and children among them, which seemed to dispel the holiday mood. They waited patiently at the doors behind the white families.

“Let’s go in,” said Dill.

“Naw, we better wait till they get in, Atticus might not like it if he sees us,” said Jem.

The Maycomb County courthouse was faintly reminiscent of Arlington in one respect: the concrete pillars supporting its south roof were too heavy for their light burden. The pillars were all that remained standing when the original courthouse burned in 1856. Another courthouse was built around them. It is better to say, built in spite of them. But for the south porch, the Maycomb County courthouse was early Victorian, presenting an unoffensive vista when seen from the north. From the other side, however, Greek revival columns clashed with a big nineteenth-century clock tower housing a rusty unreliable instrument, a view indicating a people determined to preserve every physical scrap of the past.

To reach the courtroom, on the second floor, one passed sundry sunless county

cubbyholes: the tax assessor, the tax collector, the county clerk, the county solicitor, the circuit clerk, the judge of probate lived in cool dim hutches that smelled of decaying record books mingled with old damp cement and stale urine. It was necessary to turn on the lights in the daytime; there was always a film of dust on the rough floorboards. The inhabitants of these offices were creatures of their environment: little gray-faced men, they seemed untouched by wind or sun. We knew there was a crowd, but we had not bargained for the multitudes in the first-floor hallway. I got separated from Jem and Dill, but made my way toward the wall by the stairwell, knowing Jem would come for me eventually. I found myself in the middle of the Idlers' Club and made myself as unobtrusive as possible. This was a group of white-shirted, khaki-trousered, suspended old men who had spent their lives doing nothing and passed their twilight days doing same on pine benches under the live oaks on the square. Attentive critics of courthouse business, Atticus said they knew as much law as the Chief Justice, from long years of observation. Normally, they were the court's only spectators, and today they seemed resentful of the interruption of their comfortable routine. When they spoke, their voices sounded casually important. The conversation was about my father.

"...thinks he knows what he's doing," one said.

"Oh-h now, I wouldn't say that," said another. "Atticus Finch's a deep reader, a mighty deep reader."

"He reads all right, that's all he does." The club snickered.

"Lemme tell you somethin' now, Billy," a third said, "you know the court appointed him to defend this nigger."

"Yeah, but Atticus aims to defend him. That's what I don't like about it."

This was news, news that put a different light on things: Atticus had to, whether he wanted to or not. I thought it odd that he hadn't said anything to us about it—we could have used it many times in defending him and ourselves. He had to, that's why he was doing it, equaled fewer fights and less fussing. But did that explain the town's attitude? The court appointed Atticus to defend him. Atticus aimed to defend him. That's what they didn't like about it. It was confusing.

The Negroes, having waited for the white people to go upstairs, began to come in.

“Whoa now, just a minute,” said a club member, holding up his walking stick.

“Just don’t start up them there stairs yet awhile.”

The club began its stiff-jointed climb and ran into Dill and Jem on their way down looking for me. They squeezed past and Jem called, “Scout, come on, there ain’t a seat left. We’ll hafta stand up.”

“Looka there, now.” he said irritably, as the black people surged upstairs. The old men ahead of them would take most of the standing room. We were out of luck and it was my fault, Jem informed me. We stood miserably by the wall.

“Can’t you all get in?”

Reverend Sykes was looking down at us, black hat in hand.

“Hey, Reverend,” said Jem. “Naw, Scout here messed us up.”

“Well, let’s see what we can do.”

Reverend Sykes edged his way upstairs. In a few moments he was back. “There’s not a seat downstairs. Do you all reckon it’ll be all right if you all came to the balcony with me?”

“Gosh yes,” said Jem. Happily, we sped ahead of Reverend Sykes to the courtroom floor. There, we went up a covered staircase and waited at the door. Reverend Sykes came puffing behind us, and steered us gently through the black people in the balcony. Four Negroes rose and gave us their front-row seats.

The Colored balcony ran along three walls of the courtroom like a second-story veranda, and from it we could see everything.

The jury sat to the left, under long windows. Sunburned, lanky, they seemed to be all farmers, but this was natural: townfolk rarely sat on juries, they were either struck or excused. One or two of the jury looked vaguely like dressed-up Cunninghams. At this stage they sat straight and alert.

The circuit solicitor and another man, Atticus and Tom Robinson sat at tables with their backs to us. There was a brown book and some yellow tablets on the solicitor’s table; Atticus’s was bare. Just inside the railing that divided the spectators from the court, the witnesses sat on cowhide-bottomed chairs. Their backs were to us.

Judge Taylor was on the bench, looking like a sleepy old shark, his pilot fish

writing rapidly below in front of him. Judge Taylor looked like most judges I had ever seen: amiable, white-haired, slightly ruddy-faced, he was a man who ran his court with an alarming informality—he sometimes propped his feet up, he often cleaned his fingernails with his pocket knife. In long equity hearings, especially after dinner, he gave the impression of dozing, an impression dispelled forever when a lawyer once deliberately pushed a pile of books to the floor in a desperate effort to wake him up. Without opening his eyes, Judge Taylor murmured, “Mr. Whitley, do that again and it’ll cost you one hundred dollars.”

He was a man learned in the law, and although he seemed to take his job casually, in reality he kept a firm grip on any proceedings that came before him. Only once was Judge Taylor ever seen at a dead standstill in open court, and the Cunninghams stopped him. Old Sarum, their stamping grounds, was populated by two families separate and apart in the beginning, but unfortunately bearing the same name. The Cunninghams married the Coninghams until the spelling of the names was academic—academic until a Cunningham disputed a Coningham over land titles and took to the law. During a controversy of this character, Jeems Cunningham testified that his mother spelled it Cunningham on deeds and things, but she was really a Coningham, she was an uncertain speller, a seldom reader, and was given to looking far away sometimes when she sat on the front gallery in the evening. After nine hours of listening to the eccentricities of Old Sarum’s inhabitants, Judge Taylor threw the case out of court. When asked upon what grounds, Judge Taylor said, “Champertous connivance,” and declared he hoped to God the litigants were satisfied by each having had their public say. They were. That was all they had wanted in the first place.

Judge Taylor had one interesting habit. He permitted smoking in his courtroom but did not himself indulge: sometimes, if one was lucky, one had the privilege of watching him put a long dry cigar into his mouth and munch it slowly up. Bit by bit the dead cigar would disappear, to reappear some hours later as a flat slick mess, its essence extracted and mingling with Judge Taylor’s digestive juices. I once asked Atticus how Mrs. Taylor stood to kiss him, but Atticus said they didn’t kiss much.

The witness stand was to the right of Judge Taylor, and when we got to our seats

Mr. Heck Tate was already on it.

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Chapter 17

“Jem,” I said, “are those the Ewells sittin’ down yonder?”

“Hush,” said Jem, “Mr. Heck Tate’s testifyin’.”

Mr. Tate had dressed for the occasion. He wore an ordinary business suit, which made him look somehow like every other man: gone were his high boots, lumber jacket, and bullet-studded belt. From that moment he ceased to terrify me. He was sitting forward in the witness chair, his hands clasped between his knees, listening attentively to the circuit solicitor.

The solicitor, a Mr. Gilmer, was not well known to us. He was from Abbottsville; we saw him only when court convened, and that rarely, for court was of no special interest to Jem and me. A balding, smooth-faced man, he could have been anywhere between forty and sixty. Although his back was to us, we knew he had a slight cast in one of his eyes which he used to his advantage: he seemed to be looking at a person when he was actually doing nothing of the kind, thus he was hell on juries and witnesses. The jury, thinking themselves under close scrutiny, paid attention; so did the witnesses, thinking likewise.

“...in your own words, Mr. Tate,” Mr. Gilmer was saying.

“Well,” said Mr. Tate, touching his glasses and speaking to his knees, “I was called—”

“Could you say it to the jury, Mr. Tate? Thank you. Who called you?”

Mr. Tate said, “I was fetched by Bob—by Mr. Bob Ewell yonder, one night—”

“What night, sir?”

Mr. Tate said, “It was the night of November twenty-first. I was just leaving my office to go home when B—Mr. Ewell came in, very excited he was, and said get