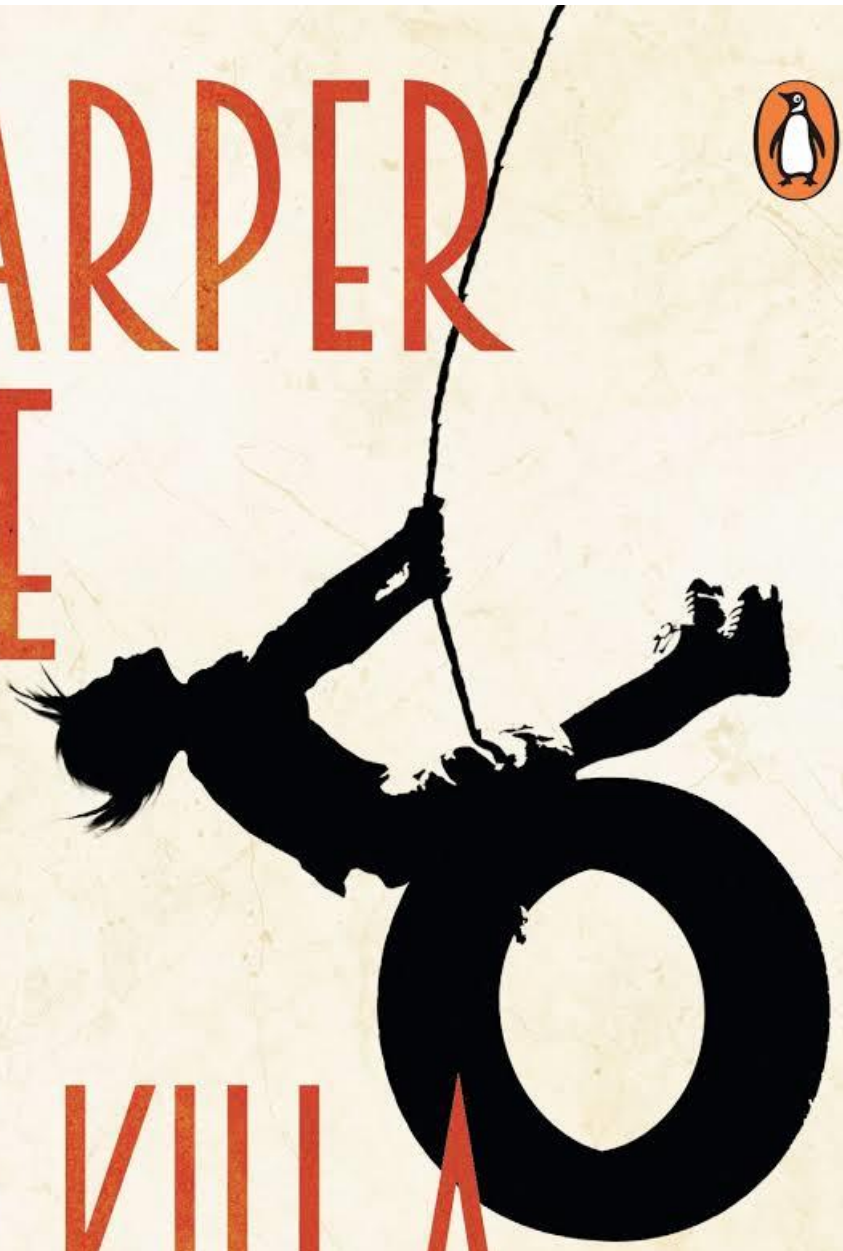
HARPER LEE



TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD

Chapter 3

Catching Walter Cunningham in the schoolyard gave me some pleasure, but when I was rubbing his nose in the dirt Jem came by and told me to stop. “You’re bigger’n he is,” he said. “He’s as old as you, nearly,” I said. “He made me start off on the wrong foot.” “Let him go, Scout. Why?” “He didn’t have any lunch,” I said, and explained my involvement in Walter’s dietary affairs. Walter had picked himself up and was standing quietly listening to Jem and me. His fists were half cocked, as if expecting an onslaught from both of us. I stomped at him to chase him away, but Jem put out his hand and stopped me. He examined Walter with an air of speculation. “Your daddy Mr. Walter Cunningham from Old Sarum?” he asked, and Walter nodded. Walter looked as if he had been raised on fish food: his eyes, as blue as Dill Harris’s, were red-rimmed and watery. There was no color in his face except at the tip of his nose, which was moistly pink. He fingered the straps of his overalls, nervously picking at the metal hooks. Jem suddenly grinned at him. “Come on home to dinner with us, Walter,” he said. “We’d be glad to have you.” Walter’s face brightened, then darkened. Jem said, “Our daddy’s a friend of your daddy’s. Scout here, she’s

crazy—she won't fight you any more." "I wouldn't be too certain of that," I said. Jem's free dispensation of my pledge irked me, but precious noontime minutes were ticking away. "Yeah Walter, I won't jump on you again. Don't you like butterbeans? Our Cal's a real good cook." Walter stood where he was, biting his lip. Jem and I gave up, and we were nearly to the Radley Place when Walter called, "Hey, I'm comin'!" When Walter caught up with us, Jem made pleasant conversation with him. "A hain't lives there," he said cordially, pointing to the Radley house. "Ever hear about him, Walter?" "Reckon I have," said Walter. "Almost died first year I come to school and et them pecans—folks say he pizened 'em and put 'em over on the school side of the fence." Jem seemed to have little fear of Boo Radley now that Walter and I walked beside him. Indeed, Jem grew boastful: "I went all the way up to the house once," he said to Walter. "Anybody who went up to the house once oughta not to still run every time he passes it," I said to the clouds above. "And who's runnin', Miss Priss?" "You are, when ain't anybody with you." By the time we reached our front steps Walter had forgotten he was a Cunningham. Jem ran to the kitchen and asked Calpurnia to set an extra plate, we had company. Atticus greeted Walter and

began a discussion about crops neither Jem nor I could follow. “Reason I can’t pass the first grade, Mr. Finch, is I’ve had to stay out ever‘ spring an’ help Papa with the choppin‘, but there’s another’n at the house now that’s field size.” “Did you pay a bushel of potatoes for him?” I asked, but Atticus shook his head at me. While Walter piled food on his plate, he and Atticus talked together like two men, to the wonderment of Jem and me. Atticus was expounding upon farm problems when Walter interrupted to ask if there was any molasses in the house. Atticus summoned Calpurnia, who returned bearing the syrup pitcher. She stood waiting for Walter to help himself. Walter poured syrup on his vegetables and meat with a generous hand. He would probably have poured it into his milk glass had I not asked what the sam hill he was doing. The silver saucer clattered when he replaced the pitcher, and he quickly put his hands in his lap. Then he ducked his head. Atticus shook his head at me again. “But he’s gone and drowned his dinner in syrup,” I protested. “He’s poured it all over-” It was then that Calpurnia requested my presence in the kitchen. She was furious, and when she was furious Calpurnia’s grammar became erratic. When in tranquility, her grammar was as good as anybody’s in Maycomb. Atticus

said Calpurnia had more education than most colored folks. When she squinted down at me the tiny lines around her eyes deepened. “There’s some folks who don’t eat like us,” she whispered fiercely, “but you ain’t called on to contradict ‘em at the table when they don’t. That boy’s yo’ comp’ny and if he wants to eat up the table cloth you let him, you hear?” “He ain’t company, Cal, he’s just a Cunningham-” “Hush your mouth! Don’t matter who they are, anybody sets foot in this house’s yo‘ comp’ny, and don’t you let me catch you remarkin’ on their ways like you was so high and mighty! Yo‘ folks might be better’n the Cunninghams but it don’t count for nothin’ the way you’re disgracin‘ ’em—if you can’t act fit to eat at the table you can just set here and eat in the kitchen!” Calpurnia sent me through the swinging door to the diningroom with a stinging smack. I retrieved my plate and finished dinner in the kitchen, thankful, though, that I was spared the humiliation of facing them again. I told Calpurnia to just wait, I’d fix her: one of these days when she wasn’t looking I’d go off and drown myself in Barker’s Eddy and then she’d be sorry. Besides, I added, she’d already gotten me in trouble once today: she had taught me to write and it was all her fault. “Hush your fussin‘,” she said. Jem and Walter returned to

school ahead of me: staying behind to advise Atticus of Calpurnia's iniquities was worth a solitary sprint past the Radley Place. "She likes Jem better'n she likes me, anyway," I concluded, and suggested that Atticus lose no time in packing her off. "Have you ever considered that Jem doesn't worry her half as much?" Atticus's voice was flinty. "I've no intention of getting rid of her, now or ever. We couldn't operate a single day without Cal, have you ever thought of that? You think about how much Cal does for you, and you mind her, you hear?" I returned to school and hated Calpurnia steadily until a sudden shriek shattered my resentments. I looked up to see Miss Caroline standing in the middle of the room, sheer horror flooding her face. Apparently she had revived enough to persevere in her profession. "It's alive!" she screamed. The male population of the class rushed as one to her assistance. Lord, I thought, she's scared of a mouse. Little Chuck Little, whose patience with all living things was phenomenal, said, "Which way did he go, Miss Caroline? Tell us where he went, quick! D.C.-" he turned to a boy behind him—"D.C., shut the door and we'll catch him. Quick, ma'am, where'd he go?" Miss Caroline pointed a shaking finger not at the floor nor at a desk, but to a hulking individual unknown to me. Little Chuck's face

contracted and he said gently, “You mean him, ma’am? Yessum, he’s alive. Did he scare you some way?” Miss Caroline said desperately, “I was just walking by when it crawled out of his hair… just crawled out of his hair-” Little Chuck grinned broadly. “There ain’t no need to fear a cootie, ma’am. Ain’t you ever seen one? Now don’t you be afraid, you just go back to your desk and teach us some more.” Little Chuck Little was another member of the population who didn’t know where his next meal was coming from, but he was a born gentleman. He put his hand under her elbow and led Miss Caroline to the front of the room. “Now don’t you fret, ma’am,” he said. “There ain’t no need to fear a cootie. I’ll just fetch you some cool water.” The cootie’s host showed not the faintest interest in the furor he had wrought. He searched the scalp above his forehead, located his guest and pinched it between his thumb and forefinger. Miss Caroline watched the process in horrid fascination. Little Chuck brought water in a paper cup, and she drank it gratefully. Finally she found her voice. “What is your name, son?” she asked softly. The boy blinked. “Who, me?” Miss Caroline nodded. “Burris Ewell.” Miss Caroline inspected her roll-book. “I have a Ewell here, but I don’t have a first name… would you spell your first name for

me?" "Don't know how. They call me Burris't home." "Well, Burris," said Miss Caroline, "I think we'd better excuse you for the rest of the afternoon. I want you to go home and wash your hair." From her desk she produced a thick volume, leafed through its pages and read for a moment. "A good home remedy for—Burris, I want you to go home and wash your hair with lye soap. When you've done that, treat your scalp with kerosene." "What fer, missus?" "To get rid of the—er, cooties. You see, Burris, the other children might catch them, and you wouldn't want that, would you?" The boy stood up. He was the filthiest human I had ever seen. His neck was dark gray, the backs of his hands were rusty, and his fingernails were black deep into the quick. He peered at Miss Caroline from a fist-sized clean space on his face. No one had noticed him, probably, because Miss Caroline and I had entertained the class most of the morning. "And Burris," said Miss Caroline, "please bathe yourself before you come back tomorrow." The boy laughed rudely. "You ain't sendin' me home, missus. I was on the verge of leavin'—I done done my time for this year." Miss Caroline looked puzzled. "What do you mean by that?" The boy did not answer. He gave a short contemptuous snort. One of the elderly members of the

class answered her: “He’s one of the Ewells, ma’am,” and I wondered if this explanation would be as unsuccessful as my attempt. But Miss Caroline seemed willing to listen. “Whole school’s full of ‘em. They come first day every year and then leave. The truant lady gets ’em here ‘cause she threatens ’em with the sheriff, but she’s give up tryin‘ to hold ’em. She reckons she’s carried out the law just gettin‘ their names on the roll and runnin’ ‘em here the first day. You’re supposed to mark ’em absent the rest of the year…” “But what about their parents?” asked Miss Caroline, in genuine concern. “Ain’t got no mother,” was the answer, “and their paw’s right contentious.” Burris Ewell was flattered by the recital. “Been comin‘ to the first day o’ the first grade fer three year now,” he said expansively. “Reckon if I’m smart this year they’ll promote me to the second…” Miss Caroline said, “Sit back down, please, Burris,” and the moment she said it I knew she had made a serious mistake. The boy’s condescension flashed to anger. “You try and make me, missus.” Little Chuck Little got to his feet. “Let him go, ma’am,” he said. “He’s a mean one, a hard-down mean one. He’s liable to start somethin‘, and there’s some little folks here.” He was among the most diminutive of men, but when Burris Ewell turned toward

him, Little Chuck's right hand went to his pocket. "Watch your step, Burris," he said. "I'd soon's kill you as look at you. Now go home." Burris seemed to be afraid of a child half his height, and Miss Caroline took advantage of his indecision: "Burris, go home. If you don't I'll call the principal," she said. "I'll have to report this, anyway." The boy snorted and slouched leisurely to the door. Safely out of range, he turned and shouted: "Report and be damned to ye! Ain't no snot-nosed slut of a schoolteacher ever born c'n make me do nothin'! You ain't makin' me go nowhere, missus. You just remember that, you ain't makin' me go nowhere!" He waited until he was sure she was crying, then he shuffled out of the building. Soon we were clustered around her desk, trying in our various ways to comfort her. He was a real mean one… below the belt… you ain't called on to teach folks like that… them ain't Maycomb's ways, Miss Caroline, not really… now don't you fret, ma'am. Miss Caroline, why don't you read us a story? That cat thing was real fine this mornin'… Miss Caroline smiled, blew her nose, said, "Thank you, darlings," dispersed us, opened a book and mystified the first grade with a long narrative about a toadfrog that lived in a hall. When I passed the Radley Place for the fourth time that day—twice at a full gallop

—my gloom had deepened to match the house. If the remainder of the school year were as fraught with drama as the first day, perhaps it would be mildly entertaining, but the prospect of spending nine months refraining from reading and writing made me think of running away. By late afternoon most of my traveling plans were complete; when Jem and I raced each other up the sidewalk to meet Atticus coming home from work, I didn't give him much of a race. It was our habit to run meet Atticus the moment we saw him round the post office corner in the distance. Atticus seemed to have forgotten my noontime fall from grace; he was full of questions about school. My replies were monosyllabic and he did not press me. Perhaps Calpurnia sensed that my day had been a grim one: she let me watch her fix supper. "Shut your eyes and open your mouth and I'll give you a surprise," she said. It was not often that she made crackling bread, she said she never had time, but with both of us at school today had been an easy one for her. She knew I loved crackling bread. "I missed you today," she said. "The house got so lonesome 'long about two o'clock I had to turn on the radio." "Why? Jem'n me ain't ever in the house unless it's rainin'." "I know," she said, "But one of you's always in callin' distance. I

wonder how much of the day I spend just callin' after you. Well," she said, getting up from the kitchen chair, "it's enough time to make a pan of cracklin' bread, I reckon. You run along now and let me get supper on the table." Calpurnia bent down and kissed me. I ran along, wondering what had come over her. She had wanted to make up with me, that was it. She had always been too hard on me, she had at last seen the error of her fractious ways, she was sorry and too stubborn to say so. I was weary from the day's crimes. After supper, Atticus sat down with the paper and called, "Scout, ready to read?" The Lord sent me more than I could bear, and I went to the front porch. Atticus followed me. "Something wrong, Scout?" I told Atticus I didn't feel very well and didn't think I'd go to school any more if it was all right with him. Atticus sat down in the swing and crossed his legs. His fingers wandered to his watchpocket; he said that was the only way he could think. He waited in amiable silence, and I sought to reinforce my position: "You never went to school and you do all right, so I'll just stay home too. You can teach me like Granddaddy taught you 'n' Uncle Jack." "No I can't," said Atticus. "I have to make a living. Besides, they'd put me in jail if I kept you at home—dose of

magnesia for you tonight and school tomorrow." "I'm feeling all right, really." "Thought so. Now what's the matter?" Bit by bit, I told him the day's misfortunes. "- and she said you taught me all wrong, so we can't ever read any more, ever. Please don't send me back, please sir." Atticus stood up and walked to the end of the porch. When he completed his examination of the wisteria vine he strolled back to me. "First of all," he said, "if you can learn a simple trick, Scout, you'll get along a lot better with all kinds of folks. You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view-" "Sir?" "-until you climb into his skin and walk around in it." Atticus said I had learned many things today, and Miss Caroline had learned several things herself. She had learned not to hand something to a Cunningham, for one thing, but if Walter and I had put ourselves in her shoes we'd have seen it was an honest mistake on her part. We could not expect her to learn all Maycomb's ways in one day, and we could not hold her responsible when she knew no better. "I'll be dogged," I said. "I didn't know no better than not to read to her, and she held me responsible—listen Atticus, I don't have to go to school!" I was bursting with a sudden thought. "Burris Ewell, remember? He just goes to school the first day. The

truant lady reckons she's carried out the law when she gets his name on the roll-" "You can't do that, Scout," Atticus said. "Sometimes it's better to bend the law a little in special cases. In your case, the law remains rigid. So to school you must go." "I don't see why I have to when he doesn't." "Then listen." Atticus said the Ewells had been the disgrace of Maycomb for three generations. None of them had done an honest day's work in his recollection. He said that some Christmas, when he was getting rid of the tree, he would take me with him and show me where and how they lived. They were people, but they lived like animals. "They can go to school any time they want to, when they show the faintest symptom of wanting an education," said Atticus. "There are ways of keeping them in school by force, but it's silly to force people like the Ewells into a new environment-" "If I didn't go to school tomorrow, you'd force me to." "Let us leave it at this," said Atticus dryly. "You, Miss Scout Finch, are of the common folk. You must obey the law." He said that the Ewells were members of an exclusive society made up of Ewells. In certain circumstances the common folk judiciously allowed them certain privileges by the simple method of becoming blind to some of the Ewells' activities. They

didn’t have to go to school, for one thing. Another thing, Mr. Bob Ewell, Burris’s father, was permitted to hunt and trap out of season. “Atticus, that’s bad,” I said. In Maycomb County, hunting out of season was a misdemeanor at law, a capital felony in the eyes of the populace. “It’s against the law, all right,” said my father, “and it’s certainly bad, but when a man spends his relief checks on green whiskey his children have a way of crying from hunger pains. I don’t know of any landowner around here who begrudges those children any game their father can hit.” “Mr. Ewell shouldn’t do that-” “Of course he shouldn’t, but he’ll never change his ways. Are you going to take out your disapproval on his children?” “No sir,” I murmured, and made a final stand: “But if I keep on goin‘ to school, we can’t ever read any more…” “That’s really bothering you, isn’t it?” “Yes sir.” When Atticus looked down at me I saw the expression on his face that always made me expect something. “Do you know what a compromise is?” he asked. “Bending the law?” “No, an agreement reached by mutual concessions. It works this way,” he said. “If you’ll concede the necessity of going to school, we’ll go on reading every night just as we always have. Is it a bargain?” “Yes sir!” “We’ll consider it sealed without the

usual formality," Atticus said, when he saw me preparing to spit. As I opened the front screen door Atticus said, "By the way, Scout, you'd better not say anything at school about our agreement." "Why not?" "I'm afraid our activities would be received with considerable disapprobation by the more learned authorities." Jem and I were accustomed to our father's last-will-and-testament diction, and we were at all times free to interrupt Atticus for a translation when it was beyond our understanding. "Huh, sir?" "I never went to school," he said, "but I have a feeling that if you tell Miss Caroline we read every night she'll get after me, and I wouldn't want her after me." Atticus kept us in fits that evening, gravely reading columns of print about a man who sat on a flagpole for no discernible reason, which was reason enough for Jem to spend the following Saturday aloft in the treehouse. Jem sat from after breakfast until sunset and would have remained overnight had not Atticus severed his supply lines. I had spent most of the day climbing up and down, running errands for him, providing him with literature, nourishment and water, and was carrying him blankets for the night when Atticus said if I paid no attention to him, Jem would come down. Atticus was right. Contents - Prev / Next Chapter 4