

HARPER  
LEE



TO KILL A  
MOCKINGBIRD

## Chapter 5

My nagging got the better of Jem eventually, as I knew it would, and to my relief we slowed down the game for a while. He still maintained, however, that Atticus hadn't said we couldn't, therefore we could; and if Atticus ever said we couldn't, Jem had thought of a way around it: he would simply change the names of the characters and then we couldn't be accused of playing anything. Dill was in hearty agreement with this plan of action. Dill was becoming something of a trial anyway, following Jem about. He had asked me earlier in the summer to marry him, then he promptly forgot about it. He staked me out, marked as his property, said I was the only girl he would ever love, then he neglected me. I beat him up twice but it did no good, he only grew closer to Jem. They spent days together in the treehouse plotting and planning, calling me only when they needed a third party. But I kept aloof from their more foolhardy schemes for a while, and on pain of being called a girl, I spent most of the remaining twilights that summer sitting with Miss Maudie Atkinson on her front porch. Jem and I had always enjoyed the free run of Miss Maudie's yard if we kept out of her azaleas, but our contact with her was not

clearly defined. Until Jem and Dill excluded me from their plans, she was only another lady in the neighborhood, but a relatively benign presence. Our tacit treaty with Miss Maudie was that we could play on her lawn, eat her scuppernongs if we didn't jump on the arbor, and explore her vast back lot, terms so generous we seldom spoke to her, so careful were we to preserve the delicate balance of our relationship, but Jem and Dill drove me closer to her with their behavior. Miss Maudie hated her house: time spent indoors was time wasted. She was a widow, a chameleon lady who worked in her flower beds in an old straw hat and men's coveralls, but after her five o'clock bath she would appear on the porch and reign over the street in magisterial beauty. She loved everything that grew in God's earth, even the weeds. With one exception. If she found a blade of nut grass in her yard it was like the Second Battle of the Marne: she swooped down upon it with a tin tub and subjected it to blasts from beneath with a poisonous substance she said was so powerful it'd kill us all if we didn't stand out of the way. "Why can't you just pull it up?" I asked, after witnessing a prolonged campaign against a blade not three inches high. "Pull it up, child, pull it up?" She picked up the limp sprout and squeezed her thumb up its tiny

stalk. Microscopic grains oozed out. "Why, one sprig of nut grass can ruin a whole yard. Look here. When it comes fall this dries up and the wind blows it all over Maycomb County!" Miss Maudie's face likened such an occurrence unto an Old Testament pestilence. Her speech was crisp for a Maycomb County inhabitant. She called us by all our names, and when she grinned she revealed two minute gold prongs clipped to her eyeteeth. When I admired them and hoped I would have some eventually, she said, "Look here." With a click of her tongue she thrust out her bridgework, a gesture of cordiality that cemented our friendship. Miss Maudie's benevolence extended to Jem and Dill, whenever they paused in their pursuits: we reaped the benefits of a talent Miss Maudie had hitherto kept hidden from us. She made the best cakes in the neighborhood. When she was admitted into our confidence, every time she baked she made a big cake and three little ones, and she would call across the street: "Jem Finch, Scout Finch, Charles Baker Harris, come here!" Our promptness was always rewarded. In summertime, twilights are long and peaceful. Often as not, Miss Maudie and I would sit silently on her porch, watching the sky go from yellow to pink as the sun went down, watching flights of martins

sweep low over the neighborhood and disappear behind the schoolhouse rooftops. "Miss Maudie," I said one evening, "do you think Boo Radley's still alive?" "His name's Arthur and he's alive," she said. She was rocking slowly in her big oak chair. "Do you smell my mimosa? It's like angels' breath this evening." "Yessum. How do you know?" "Know what, child?" "That B—Mr. Arthur's still alive?" "What a morbid question. But I suppose it's a morbid subject. I know he's alive, Jean Louise, because I haven't seen him carried out yet." "Maybe he died and they stuffed him up the chimney." "Where did you get such a notion?" "That's what Jem said he thought they did." "S-ss-ss. He gets more like Jack Finch every day."

Miss Maudie had known Uncle Jack Finch, Atticus's brother, since they were children. Nearly the same age, they had grown up together at Finch's Landing. Miss Maudie was the daughter of a neighboring landowner, Dr. Frank Buford. Dr. Buford's profession was medicine and his obsession was anything that grew in the ground, so he stayed poor. Uncle Jack Finch confined his passion for digging to his window boxes in Nashville and stayed rich. We saw Uncle Jack every Christmas, and every Christmas he yelled across the street for Miss Maudie to come marry him. Miss Maudie would yell back, "Call a

little louder, Jack Finch, and they'll hear you at the post office, I haven't heard you yet!" Jem and I thought this a strange way to ask for a lady's hand in marriage, but then Uncle Jack was rather strange. He said he was trying to get Miss Maudie's goat, that he had been trying unsuccessfully for forty years, that he was the last person in the world Miss Maudie would think about marrying but the first person she thought about teasing, and the best defense to her was spirited offense, all of which we understood clearly. "Arthur Radley just stays in the house, that's all," said Miss Maudie. "Wouldn't you stay in the house if you didn't want to come out?" "Yessum, but I'd wanta come out. Why doesn't he?" Miss Maudie's eyes narrowed. "You know that story as well as I do." "I never heard why, though. Nobody ever told me why." Miss Maudie settled her bridgework. "You know old Mr. Radley was a footwashing Baptist-" "That's what you are, ain't it?" "My shell's not that hard, child. I'm just a Baptist." "Don't you all believe in foot-washing?" "We do. At home in the bathtub." "But we can't have communion with you all-" Apparently deciding that it was easier to define primitive baptistry than closed communion, Miss Maudie said: "Foot-washers believe anything that's pleasure is a sin. Did you know some of

‘em came out of the woods one Saturday and passed by this place and told me me and my flowers were going to hell?” “Your flowers, too?” “Yes ma’am. They’d burn right with me. They thought I spent too much time in God’s outdoors and not enough time inside the house reading the Bible.” My confidence in pulpit Gospel lessened at the vision of Miss Maudie stewing forever in various Protestant hells. True enough, she had an acid tongue in her head, and she did not go about the neighborhood doing good, as did Miss Stephanie Crawford. But while no one with a grain of sense trusted Miss Stephanie, Jem and I had considerable faith in Miss Maudie. She had never told on us, had never played cat-and-mouse with us, she was not at all interested in our private lives. She was our friend. How so reasonable a creature could live in peril of everlasting torment was incomprehensible. “That ain’t right, Miss Maudie. You’re the best lady I know.” Miss Maudie grinned. “Thank you ma’am. Thing is, foot-washers think women are a sin by definition. They take the Bible literally, you know.” “Is that why Mr. Arthur stays in the house, to keep away from women?” “I’ve no idea.” “It doesn’t make sense to me. Looks like if Mr. Arthur was hankerin’ after heaven he’d come out on the porch at least. Atticus says God’s

loving folks like you love yourself—" Miss Maudie stopped rocking, and her voice hardened. "You are too young to understand it," she said, "but sometimes the Bible in the hand of one man is worse than a whiskey bottle in the hand of—oh, of your father." I was shocked. "Atticus doesn't drink whiskey," I said. "He never drunk a drop in his life—nome, yes he did. He said he drank some one time and didn't like it." Miss Maudie laughed. "Wasn't talking about your father," she said. "What I meant was, if Atticus Finch drank until he was drunk he wouldn't be as hard as some men are at their best. There are just some kind of men who—who're so busy worrying about the next world they've never learned to live in this one, and you can look down the street and see the results."

"Do you think they're true, all those things they say about B—Mr. Arthur?" "What things?" I told her. "That is three-fourths colored folks and one-fourth Stephanie Crawford," said Miss Maudie grimly. "Stephanie Crawford even told me once she woke up in the middle of the night and found him looking in the window at her. I said what did you do, Stephanie, move over in the bed and make room for him? That shut her up a while." I was sure it did. Miss Maudie's voice was enough to shut anybody up. "No, child," she said, "that is a sad house. I



remember Arthur Radley when he was a boy. He always spoke nicely to me, no matter what folks said he did.

Spoke as nicely as he knew how.” “You reckon he’s crazy?” Miss Maudie shook her head. “If he’s not he should be by now. The things that happen to people we never really know. What happens in houses behind closed doors, what secrets-” “Atticus don’t ever do anything to Jem and me in the house that he don’t do in the yard,” I said, feeling it my duty to defend my parent.

“Gracious child, I was raveling a thread, wasn’t even thinking about your father, but now that I am I’ll say this:

Atticus Finch is the same in his house as he is on the public streets. How’d you like some fresh poundcake to take home?” I liked it very much. Next morning when I awakened I found Jem and Dill in the back yard deep in conversation. When I joined them, as usual they said go away. “Will not. This yard’s as much mine as it is yours, Jem Finch. I got just as much right to play in it as you have.” Dill and Jem emerged from a brief huddle: “If you stay you’ve got to do what we tell you,” Dill warned.

“We-ll,” I said, “who’s so high and mighty all of a sudden?” “If you don’t say you’ll do what we tell you, we ain’t gonna tell you anything,” Dill continued. “You act like you grew ten inches in the night! All right, what is

it?" Jem said placidly, "We are going to give a note to Boo Radley." "Just how?" I was trying to fight down the automatic terror rising in me. It was all right for Miss Maudie to talk—she was old and snug on her porch. It was different for us. Jem was merely going to put the note on the end of a fishing pole and stick it through the shutters. If anyone came along, Dill would ring the bell.

Dill raised his right hand. In it was my mother's silver dinner-bell. "I'm goin' around to the side of the house," said Jem. "We looked yesterday from across the street, and there's a shutter loose. Think maybe I can make it stick on the window sill, at least." "Jem—" "Now you're in it and you can't get out of it, you'll just stay in it, Miss

Priss!" "Okay, okay, but I don't wanta watch. Jem, somebody was—" "Yes you will, you'll watch the back end of the lot and Dill's gonna watch the front of the house an' up the street, an' if anybody comes he'll ring the bell. That clear?" "All right then. What'd you write him?" Dill

said, "We're askin' him real politely to come out sometimes, and tell us what he does in there—we said we wouldn't hurt him and we'd buy him an ice cream."

"You all've gone crazy, he'll kill us!" Dill said, "It's my idea. I figure if he'd come out and sit a spell with us he might feel better." "How do you know he don't feel

good?" "Well how'd you feel if you'd been shut up for a hundred years with nothin' but cats to eat? I bet he's got a beard down to here—" "Like your daddy's?" "He ain't got a beard, he—" Dill stopped, as if trying to remember. "Uh huh, caughtcha," I said. "You said 'fore you were off the train good your daddy had a black beard—" "If it's all the same to you he shaved it off last summer! Yeah, an' I've got the letter to prove it—he sent me two dollars, too!" "Keep on—I reckon he even sent you a mounted police uniform! That'n never showed up, did it? You just keep on tellin' 'em, son—" Dill Harris could tell the biggest ones I ever heard. Among other things, he had been up in a mail plane seventeen times, he had been to Nova Scotia, he had seen an elephant, and his granddaddy was Brigadier General Joe Wheeler and left him his sword. "You all hush," said Jem. He scuttled beneath the house and came out with a yellow bamboo pole. "Reckon this is long enough to reach from the sidewalk?" "Anybody who's brave enough to go up and touch the house hadn't oughta use a fishin' pole," I said. "Why don't you just knock the front door down?" "This—is—different," said Jem, "how many times do I have to tell you that?" Dill took a piece of paper from his pocket and gave it to Jem. The three of us walked cautiously toward the old house.

Dill remained at the light-pole on the front corner of the lot, and Jem and I edged down the sidewalk parallel to the side of the house. I walked beyond Jem and stood where I could see around the curve. "All clear," I said. "Not a soul in sight." Jem looked up the sidewalk to Dill, who nodded. Jem attached the note to the end of the fishing pole, let the pole out across the yard and pushed it toward the window he had selected. The pole lacked several inches of being long enough, and Jem leaned over as far as he could. I watched him making jabbing motions for so long, I abandoned my post and went to him. "Can't get it off the pole," he muttered, "or if I got it off I can't make it stay. G'on back down the street, Scout." I returned and gazed around the curve at the empty road. Occasionally I looked back at Jem, who was patiently trying to place the note on the window sill. It would flutter to the ground and Jem would jab it up, until I thought if Boo Radley ever received it he wouldn't be able to read it. I was looking down the street when the dinner-bell rang. Shoulder up, I reeled around to face Boo Radley and his bloody fangs; instead, I saw Dill ringing the bell with all his might in Atticus's face. Jem looked so awful I didn't have the heart to tell him I told him so. He trudged along, dragging the pole behind him

on the sidewalk. Atticus said, "Stop ringing that bell." Dill grabbed the clapper; in the silence that followed, I wished he'd start ringing it again. Atticus pushed his hat to the back of his head and put his hands on his hips. "Jem," he said, "what were you doing?" "Nothin', sir." "I don't want any of that. Tell me." "I was—we were just tryin' to give somethin' to Mr. Radley." "What were you trying to give him?" "Just a letter." "Let me see it." Jem held out a filthy piece of paper. Atticus took it and tried to read it. "Why do you want Mr. Radley to come out?" Dill said, "We thought he might enjoy us..." and dried up when Atticus looked at him. "Son," he said to Jem, "I'm going to tell you something and tell you one time: stop tormenting that man. That goes for the other two of you." What Mr. Radley did was his own business. If he wanted to come out, he would. If he wanted to stay inside his own house he had the right to stay inside free from the attentions of inquisitive children, which was a mild term for the likes of us. How would we like it if Atticus barged in on us without knocking, when we were in our rooms at night? We were, in effect, doing the same thing to Mr. Radley. What Mr. Radley did might seem peculiar to us, but it did not seem peculiar to him. Furthermore, had it never occurred to us that the civil

way to communicate with another being was by the front door instead of a side window? Lastly, we were to stay away from that house until we were invited there, we were not to play an asinine game he had seen us playing or make fun of anybody on this street or in this town- “We weren’t makin’ fun of him, we weren’t laughin’ at him,” said Jem, “we were just-” “So that was what you were doing, wasn’t it?” “Makin’ fun of him?” “No,” said Atticus, “putting his life’s history on display for the edification of the neighborhood.” Jem seemed to swell a little. “I didn’t say we were doin’ that, I didn’t say it!” Atticus grinned dryly. “You just told me,” he said. “You stop this nonsense right now, every one of you.” Jem gaped at him. “You want to be a lawyer, don’t you?” Our father’s mouth was suspiciously firm, as if he were trying to hold it in line. Jem decided there was no point in quibbling, and was silent. When Atticus went inside the house to retrieve a file he had forgotten to take to work that morning, Jem finally realized that he had been done in by the oldest lawyer’s trick on record. He waited a respectful distance from the front steps, watched Atticus leave the house and walk toward town. When Atticus was out of earshot Jem yelled after him: “I thought I wanted to be a lawyer but I ain’t so sure now!”