To Kill a Mockingbird

Chapter 22

It was Jem’s turn to cry. His face was streaked with angry tears as we made our way through the cheerful crowd. “It ain’t right,” he muttered, all the way to the corner of the square where we found Atticus waiting. Atticus was standing under the street light looking as though nothing had happened: his vest was buttoned, his collar and tie were neatly in place, his watch-chain glistened, he was his impassive self again.

“It ain’t right, Atticus,” said Jem.

“No son, it’s not right.”

We walked home.

Aunt Alexandra was waiting up. She was in her dressing gown, and I could have sworn she had on her corset underneath it. “I’m sorry, brother,” she murmured. Having never heard her call Atticus “brother” before, I stole a glance at Jem, but he was not listening. He would look up at Atticus, then down at the floor, and I wondered if he thought Atticus somehow responsible for Tom Robinson’s conviction.

“Is he all right?” Aunty asked, indicating Jem.

“He’ll be so presently,” said Atticus. “It was a little too strong for him.” Our father sighed. “I’m going to bed,” he said. “If I don’t wake up in the morning, don’t call me.”

“I didn’t think it wise in the first place to let them—”

“This is their home, sister,” said Atticus. “We’ve made it this way for them, they might as well learn to cope with it.”

“But they don’t have to go to the courthouse and wallow in it—”
“It’s just as much Maycomb County as missionary teas.”

“Atticus—” Aunt Alexandra’s eyes were anxious. “You are the last person I thought would turn bitter over this.”

“I’m not bitter, just tired. I’m going to bed.”

“Atticus—” said Jem bleakly.

He turned in the doorway. “What, son?”

“How could they do it, how could they?”

“I don’t know, but they did it. They’ve done it before and they did it tonight and they’ll do it again and when they do it—seems that only children weep. Good night.”

But things are always better in the morning. Atticus rose at his usual ungodly hour and was in the living room behind the Mobile Register when we stumbled in.

Jem’s morning face posed the question his sleepy lips struggled to ask.

“It’s not time to worry yet,” Atticus reassured him, as we went to the dining room.

“We’re not through yet. There’ll be an appeal, you can count on that. Gracious alive, Cal, what’s all this?” He was staring at his breakfast plate.

Calpurnia said, “Tom Robinson’s daddy sent you along this chicken this morning. I fixed it.”

“You tell him I’m proud to get it—bet they don’t have chicken for breakfast at the White House. What are these?”

“Rolls,” said Calpurnia. “Estelle down at the hotel sent ‘em.”

Atticus looked up at her, puzzled, and she said, “You better step out here and see what’s in the kitchen, Mr. Finch.”

We followed him. The kitchen table was loaded with enough food to bury the family: hunks of salt pork, tomatoes, beans, even scuppernongs. Atticus grinned
when he found a jar of pickled pigs’ knuckles. “Reckon Aunty’ll let me eat these in the dining room?”

Calpurnia said, “This was all ’round the back steps when I got here this morning. They—they ’preciate what you did, Mr. Finch. They—they aren’t oversteppin’ themselves, are they?”

Atticus’s eyes filled with tears. He did not speak for a moment. “Tell them I’m very grateful,” he said. “Tell them—tell them they must never do this again. Times are too hard…”

He left the kitchen, went in the dining room and excused himself to Aunt Alexandra, put on his hat and went to town.

We heard Dill’s step in the hall, so Calpurnia left Atticus’s uneaten breakfast on the table. Between rabbit-bites Dill told us of Miss Rachel’s reaction to last night, which was: if a man like Atticus Finch wants to butt his head against a stone wall it’s his head.

“I’d’a got her told,” growled Dill, gnawing a chicken leg, “but she didn’t look much like tellin’ this morning. Said she was up half the night wonderin’ where I was, said she’d’a had the sheriff after me but he was at the hearing.”

“Dill, you’ve got to stop goin’ off without tellin’ her,” said Jem. “It just aggravates her.”

Dill sighed patiently. “I told her till I was blue in the face where I was goin’—she’s just seein’ too many snakes in the closet. Bet that woman drinks a pint for breakfast every morning—know she drinks two glasses full. Seen her.”

“Don’t talk like that, Dill,” said Aunt Alexandra. “It’s not becoming to a child. It’s—cynical.”

“I ain’t cynical, Miss Alexandra. Tellin’ the truth’s not cynical, is it?”
“The way you tell it, it is.”

Jem’s eyes flashed at her, but he said to Dill, “Let’s go. You can take that runner with you.”

When we went to the front porch, Miss Stephanie Crawford was busy telling it to Miss Maudie Atkinson and Mr. Avery. They looked around at us and went on talking. Jem made a feral noise in his throat. I wished for a weapon.

“I hate grown folks lookin’ at you,” said Dill. “Makes you feel like you’ve done something.”

Miss Maudie yelled for Jem Finch to come there.

Jem groaned and heaved himself up from the swing. “We’ll go with you,” Dill said.

Miss Stephanie’s nose quivered with curiosity. She wanted to know who all gave us permission to go to court—she didn’t see us but it was all over town this morning that we were in the Colored balcony. Did Atticus put us up there as a sort of—? Wasn’t it right close up there with all those—? Did Scout understand all the—? Didn’t it make us mad to see our daddy beat?

“Hush, Stephanie.” Miss Maudie’s diction was deadly. “I’ve not got all the morning to pass on the porch—Jem Finch, I called to find out if you and your colleagues can eat some cake. Got up at five to make it, so you better say yes. Excuse us, Stephanie. Good morning, Mr. Avery.”

There was a big cake and two little ones on Miss Maudie’s kitchen table. There should have been three little ones. It was not like Miss Maudie to forget Dill, and we must have shown it. But we understood when she cut from the big cake and gave the slice to Jem.

As we ate, we sensed that this was Miss Maudie’s way of saying that as far as she
was concerned, nothing had changed. She sat quietly in a kitchen chair, watching us.

Suddenly she spoke: “Don’t fret, Jem. Things are never as bad as they seem.” Indoors, when Miss Maudie wanted to say something lengthy she spread her fingers on her knees and settled her bridgework. This she did, and we waited.

“I simply want to tell you that there are some men in this world who were born to do our unpleasant jobs for us. Your father’s one of them.”


“Don’t you oh well me, sir,” Miss Maudie replied, recognizing Jem’s fatalistic noises, “you are not old enough to appreciate what I said.”

Jem was staring at his half-eaten cake. “It’s like bein’ a caterpillar in a cocoon, that’s what it is,” he said. “Like somethin’ asleep wrapped up in a warm place. I always thought Maycomb folks were the best folks in the world, least that’s what they seemed like.”

“We’re the safest folks in the world,” said Miss Maudie. “We’re so rarely called on to be Christians, but when we are, we’ve got men like Atticus to go for us.”

Jem grinned ruefully. “Wish the rest of the county thought that.”

“You’d be surprised how many of us do.”

“Who?” Jem’s voice rose. “Who in this town did one thing to help Tom Robinson, just who?”

“His colored friends for one thing, and people like us. People like Judge Taylor. People like Mr. Heck Tate. Stop eating and start thinking, Jem. Did it ever strike you that Judge Taylor naming Atticus to defend that boy was no accident? That Judge Taylor might have had his reasons for naming him?”

This was a thought. Court-appointed defenses were usually given to Maxwell
Green, Maycomb’s latest addition to the bar, who needed the experience.

Maxwell Green should have had Tom Robinson’s case.

“You think about that,” Miss Maudie was saying. “It was no accident. I was sittin’ there on the porch last night, waiting. I waited and waited to see you all come down the sidewalk, and as I waited I thought, Atticus Finch won’t win, he can’t win, but he’s the only man in these parts who can keep a jury out so long in a case like that. And I thought to myself, well, we’re making a step—it’s just a babystep, but it’s a step.”

“‘t’s all right to talk like that—can’t any Christian judges an’ lawyers make up for heathen juries,” Jem muttered. “Soon’s I get grown—”

“That’s something you’ll have to take up with your father,” Miss Maudie said.

We went down Miss Maudie’s cool new steps into the sunshine and found Mr. Avery and Miss Stephanie Crawford still at it. They had moved down the sidewalk and were standing in front of Miss Stephanie’s house. Miss Rachel was walking toward them.

“I think I’ll be a clown when I get grown,” said Dill.

Jem and I stopped in our tracks.

“Yes sir, a clown,” he said. “There ain’t one thing in this world I can do about folks except laugh, so I’m gonna join the circus and laugh my head off.”

“You got it backwards, Dill,” said Jem. “Clowns are sad, it’s folks that laugh at them.”

“Well I’m gonna be a new kind of clown. I’m gonna stand in the middle of the ring and laugh at the folks. Just looka yonder,” he pointed. “Every one of ‘em oughta be ridin’ broomsticks. Aunt Rachel already does.”

Miss Stephanie and Miss Rachel were waving wildly at us, in a way that did not give the lie to Dill’s observation.
“Oh gosh,” breathed Jem. “I reckon it’d be ugly not to see ‘em.”

Something was wrong. Mr. Avery was red in the face from a sneezing spell and nearly blew us off the sidewalk when we came up. Miss Stephanie was trembling with excitement, and Miss Rachel caught Dill’s shoulder. “You get on in the back yard and stay there,” she said. “There’s danger a’comin’.”

“’s matter?” I asked.

“Ain’t you heard yet? It’s all over town—”

At that moment Aunt Alexandra came to the door and called us, but she was too late. It was Miss Stephanie’s pleasure to tell us: this morning Mr. Bob Ewell stopped Atticus on the post office corner, spat in his face, and told him he’d get him if it took the rest of his life.