

THE HARDINGS - 015

I wanted to be like Neil, tall, so that I had to stoop through doors, with a little, close-clipped arrowhead of a moustache and a smile always hitching up the right side of my mouth.

The Hardings lived in Chapel Alley, one of the marl roads that went off the asphalt main on which we lived. You went fifty yards up the street from our house, turned left and crossed over into Chapel Alley, then walked another fifty yards or so and you came to the Hardings.

The houses in Chapel Alley were much of a type. Poky little hunched-up houses with their sides bleached white like mildew and black, rotting shingles for roofs. Some had two diminutive garden plots, one on each side of the front steps. Three or four, more pretentious than the rest, boasted coats of paint, mostly brown, and had little porticoes and wooden palisade fencing in their tiny gardens as though they were precious.

The Hardings' house had neither portico nor palisade. No gardens either. But it had an old coat of paint, cracked and beaded. Grey. There were three one-by-one stone blocks at the front door, one placed upon another to make the first step.

There were three Harding children. Neil, the oldest, who drove the garbage truck that scavenged our street. After him came Madge, a girl with long, oily limbs and a long sad face that never seemed to be pleased. Lastly there was Ned, about five years older than I, about thirteen, who had spent three years in a reformatory and from whom I

learnt how to bring down birds with a catapult made of two strands of India-rubber and a tiny tree fork, how to drive crabs from their holes with a mixture of fetid slush, how to land jacks and sprats with a pin, and how to step aside and slam my fist on the tip of a charging dog's nose so that he ran howling away. And marbles, too. In fact, Ned taught me everything which my people didn't think it at all necessary for me to know.

Mr. Harding was tall, too. Taller than Neil, but hunch-backed and caved-in. He had grey whiskers that hung limply down from his upper lip. He never seemed to do anything but sit all day upon a bench under the big breadfruit tree before their door playing draughts with one of the men from about. There was always a big white clay pipe clenched between his lips, and I used to try squirting saliva as he did.

Mrs. Harding took in washing. A fat, slow-moving woman with a dirty apron tied tightly around her middle and hands akimbo when she wasn't washing. Sometimes, when Ned and I were playing marbles in their back yard, she would leave her tub and watch us for a minute or two, her round, owlish face creased in a smile. Once or twice she invited me inside the house and gave me muffins to eat with a silver fork.

Then there was Chloe. A full-limbed, bowlegged girl who rolled her hips as she walked, and who used to lift me on to her lap and smooth the hair down around my head. But she wasn't a Harding. I knew that then at least. Now I know that she must have concerned Neil.

One morning, during a summer vacation, I heard the scavengers' shovels on the pavement, and ran to our front window to shake hands at Neil. But there wasn't any Neil. There was another man driving who had something wrong with his lip. Mother said it was a hare-lip.

Later In the day I went over at the Hardings. Ned was in the shedroof pasting a kite. Madge was ironing upon a table, while Chloe was sitting in a chair picking at her foot with a needle. Mrs. Harding came from outside, the soap suds up to her elbows, and whispered to Madge. Chloe went over and the three stood whispering. Now and again I caught them throwing secret glances in our direction. Then they called Ned and whispered to him too. When he came back I asked him where was Neil. Madge and Chloe and Mrs. Harding stopped whispering and looked at me sharply. Ned darted a funny glance at me and didn't answer. I didn't like their looks and the silence.

Some days after I came home late in the evening, after seven. Ned and I had got on to a white bird, about the size of an ordinary blackbird, which Ned told me was an albino. Sometimes we saw it flying among the blackbirds in the wood. We had got to know where it nested. In an old tamarind tree that bore seeds in the shape of a man's head. That evening we waited until the birds had nested, after dark, and then Ned sent me up in the tree with his torch, because he said I was smaller. The nest was in the fork of two slender limbs where a small boy could easily venture, but when I flashed on the light and looked in there was nothing in the nest but the broken husks of two eggs.

When I reached home I ran up the front steps and entered the drawing-room. My mother was sitting in a chair reading, while Jean, my sister, was doing her practice at the piano. My mother looked up from her book and Jean spurt round on the stool to look at me as I came in.

My mother was blonde, with straw-coloured hair clipped short and combed up on her head. She never spoiled me, but I wasn't afraid of her. I went over and propped against the arm of her chair. She had gone back reading, but Jean was still watching me.

I said: "Mum can I have my dinner?"

My mother said: "Where've you been?"

Jean said: "He's been with those jailbirds in Chapel Alley. He ain't any good. He'll end in reform school."

"Where've you been?" said my mother.

I didn't answer. I leaned closer to her, until I could smell the things she used with her skin.

Jean said: "Oh Mum, he's struck dumb. He's a dumb boy. Isn't he a sweet little dumb boy! He wants a good—"

"Get on practising Jean," cut in my mother quietly. "Where've you been Peter?"

After a time she said "Go to your Dad. He's in his room, He's been asking for you."

I said: "But can't I have some dinner first?"

My mother said: "Go to your Dad."

I didn't expect my father was in. My father was a Colonel of Police. Sometimes he'd only be home once or twice a week.

Jean followed me into the passage. "He's a dumb boy, and he's hungry, and he won't get any supper 'cause he's a dumb boy. Isn't he a sweet little dumb boy!" she chanted.

"JEAN!" called my mother from the drawing-room.

My father did his writing in a small room adjoining the large bedroom that was his and my mother's. He was in there writing at his desk under the orange-shaded reading lamp. He didn't look such a big man in his khaki shorts and shirt. He was high-coloured with blue eyes that puckered shrewdly at the corners when he looked at you.

He put down his pen as I came in and leaned back in his chair looking at me. I stopped with the desk between us, my eyes down, playing with my fingers before me.

My father said: "We've just come in, haven't we?"

I had to answer. I had to answer when my father spoke.

'Yes Dad,' I said under my breath.

My father said: 'We're big. Grown up. Go out when we please. Come in when we please. Nobody to ask any questions, We're big, big, men, aren't we?'

I didn't answer to that.

My father said: "Oh, we don't trouble to answer when we're spoken to now, do we?" getting up from his chair.

I lifted my head and stiffened. "No Dad," I said quickly, "I ain't men."

"Oh!" said my father, sitting down again. "Thought we were."

He took his pen and doodled for a few moments on the blotting paper in his pad. Then he said:

"Now listen. We aren't fools, are we?"

"No Dad," I said, pressing my belly against the front of his desk.

"Well listen," he went on; "Someone's broken in at the Smithsons and stolen their money and silver and jewellery. We know that, don't we?"

"I heard the gardener telling Mum." I said.

"Right. And we see Ned and Madge and Mrs. Harding and Mr. Harding. But we don't see Neil Harding nowadays, do we?"

"No Dad."

"And we've never asked Ned why we don't ever see Neil now, have we?"

"He says he's away in the city,"

"Oh, away in the city, are we? And we've never asked Ned what part of the city or what Neil's doing in the city, have we?"

"He never says."

"Oh! Now listen. We want a new Raleigh, now don't we?"

"Yes Dad."

"Right. Now listen. Neil's one of the chaps who've broken in and carried away the Smithson's things. But we aren't letting anybody know

that, understand? But we've got to find where Neil's hiding out. We want him, see? To ask a few questions. Like as not Ned knows where his brother's hiding. We've got to be smart and get Ned to tell us where his brother's lying low. But we've got to be smart or Ned'll guess what we're after and be tight as a clam. And there's a Raleigh. Now, we aren't fools, are we?"

"No Dad."

"Right. And we understand what we've got to do, don't we?"

'Yes Dad,' I said under my breath.

I think I loathed him.

About a week after I was in the woods with Ned.

You continued about half mile up the road beyond Chapel Alley and you came to Sandy Lane Woods.

A wood-dove cooed, then came winging its way at an angle from a calabash, and settled in a mahogany a few yards from us. Ned nodded to me and I fitted a stone and raised my catapult. It was an easy shot, for the bird stood broadside to us on a branch preening itself and plucking fluffs of down from its feathers, but somehow I missed, the stone biting into the branch at the bird's feet. At once the bird was away, and I through the woods behind it, tracking it down from tree to tree, waiting, manoeuvring for a good shot. At last it settled on the broom of a palm tree about sixty feet from me. I could see the claws at the ends of its pink toes. I stretched the rubber strands taut, aiming carefully, and planted the stone in the bird's breast. Then I ran forward and picked it up.

I went running back through the woods to where Ned stood. He took the bird, turning it over in his hand. He didn't say anything, but I could see he had forgiven me my first shot. He rested the bird carefully down in the cup of a root.

Ned was a thick-set ugly boy with teeth decaying and missing and red eyes unblinking as an animal's.

I said: "Let's go home and cook him."

Ned said: "No. Let's wait till the sun cools. We'll get more. I've got something."

He took something folded in brown paper from each of his side pockets and gave me one. A loaf of bread cut in two and between two fish-cakes fried brown and crisp.

We lay down under a tree, between the roots, eating, our bellies to the warm ground.

He said through the matter in his mouth: "Chloe's gone."

'Where's she gone?' I asked.

"Martinique." said Ned.

"What's she gone to Martinique for?" I asked.

Ned didn't answer. He just turned his head in his slow, surly way and looked at me. But I didn't need for him to answer. I knew. Somehow I knew. Chloe had gone to Neil. Neil was in Martinique.

In later years Ned told me how the captain who had stolen away Neil on his schooner had also taken Chloe.

But then he just looked at me with his red, unblinking eyes.

When we came later in the evening to Chapel Alley, I didn't worry to go home with Ned. I continued straight down the road home.

That same evening my father came home. I was in my room dissecting a train when Jean came in and planted her back against the lock of the door. She watched me for a long time on the floor, now and again tossing back the strand of her hair that always annoyed her. I didn't mind her.

"Dad wants you," she said at last, turning abruptly and flouncing from the room.

I went slowly to my father's study. He wasn't there. I crossed the room and knocked on the other door that gave onto his and my mother's room and I heard his voice call out to come in. He was lying in bed with a book when I entered. He started baiting me right away.

"Oh, Peter. We've been making enquiries about those Raleighs. Sixty bucks down. A lot of money, isn't it. But we'll manage. We'll manage if we've managed another bit of business, won't we?"

For once I didn't answer him. There just wasn't anything I could have said.

He went on: "We've been seeing plenty of the Hardings recently and Ned, haven't we?"

I muttered something under my breath. I didn't intend to help him.

"And Ned," he went on, "what about Ned? When last have we seen Ned?"

"Day," I muttered.

"Oh, we've seen Ned today, did we?"

"Yes Dad."

"And Ned's not yet given us anything to go on' Ned's not told us where Neil's in hiding, has he?"

For a moment I lifted my eyes. Our eyes met, and the truth flooded my face.

"Where's Neil. Peter?" said my father, swinging his feet down to the floor and sitting up beside me. "Where's Neil?"

I edged a little away from him, plaiting my fingers before me and rubbing my feet against each other.

"Where's Neil Harding. Peter?" repeated my father, raising his voice.

"I'd rather not, Dad." I said timidly.

"Oh, we'd rather not," said my father. "Now listen Peter. We're men, big grown men, see?"

"No Dad," I muttered.

"Yes we are. Say 'yes'. We're big grown men. Say 'yes'." "Yes Dad."

'Right. We're big grown men and we've worked hard for our money see?"

“Yes Dad.”

“And with the money we’ve got we buy plate and jewellery and silver for ourselves and our family, see?”

“Yes Dad.”

“And then somebody we don’t know anything about comes and breaks our house and steals away all the plate and silver and jewellery we’ve worked so hard for, see?”

“Yes Dad.”

“Now would we like that for ourselves Peter? Just answer that.”

“No Dad.”

“Right. And we won’t like it for anybody else, would we?”

“No Dad.”

“And we won’t hide anybody who’d stolen from the police, would we?”

“No Dad.”

“Right. Now where’s Neil Harding Peter?”

“I ain’t telling, Dad,” I said.

“Oh, we ain’t telling, aren’t we?”

“No Dad.”

There was silence for a long time. Only the shifting and rubbing of my feet.

My father, after a time: “Righto Peter. Just tell Mum when you go out to ring Princes House that we’ll only be needing one of the Raleighs I ordered this morning. The girl’s. see?”

“Yes Dad,” I said through the thing in my throat.

“And we arnen’t ever going to be seen in Chapel Alley or with Ned Harding again, see?” he added, calling after me, the bed springs creaking under his weight.

I went out and gave my mother the message.

But he gave me my Raleigh just the same.