

To Kill a Mockingbird Chapter 11

When Scout was well into second grade, she and Jem had moved beyond harassing Boo Radley and had grown more interested in the actual town of Maycomb. The only problem was that to get to town, they had to pass the home of Mrs. Henry Lafayette Dubose, who lived two doors down. She was a mean old woman who always yelled terrible things at Scout and Jem. She lived alone with only a colored girl who took care of her, and the part of the day that she didn't spend in bed, she spent wrapped in shawls in a wheelchair on her front porch. It was rumored among the town that she kept a Confederate pistol hidden under those shawls, but no one knew for certain. No matter how they tried to handle Mrs. Dubose, she was always cross and mean to them, and Atticus told them to ignore it because she was just a sick, old lady. Because they were older then, Jem insisted that they meet Atticus at the post office on his way home from work, and that meant passing Mrs. Dubose every day. And every day Atticus would stop at her house, take his hat off, and wish her a cheerful good day. Then he would swing Scout up onto his shoulders and they would continue home. Scout said, "It was times like these when I thought my father, who hated guns and had never been to any wars, was the bravest man who ever lived." Chapter 11, Pg. 105

The day after Jem turned twelve, he and Scout set out for town to spend his birthday money. Jem planned to buy himself a miniature steam engine and with the money left over, he was going to buy Scout the baton she'd been eyeballing for a while. As they walked past Mrs. Dubose's house, she began with her barrage of insults and barbs, and Jem warned Scout to just ignore her like Atticus said, but then Mrs. Dubose made a comment that hit home. She began ranting about Atticus defending Tom Robinson and then went on to say that he was no better than the trash he represented in court. Jem's face turned red and Scout pulled him down the sidewalk toward town with Mrs. Dubose yelling after them about the degeneration of their family. They went on to town and Jem bought the steam engine and the baton, but he took no joy in his new possession. Mrs. Dubose wasn't on the porch when Scout and Jem approached her house this time. Suddenly Jem took Scout's baton and ran into Mrs. Dubose's yard. Using the baton as a machete, he snapped the tops off of every camellia bush in her front yard and then, when he was finished, he bent the baton over his knee and left it amidst the litter of leaves and blossoms that covered the yard. Scout was screaming by that time and he grabbed her by the hair and told her to hush or he'd pull every hair out of her head. She kept screaming over her lost baton, and he kicked her. Then she lost her balance and fell on her face, and although he roughly helped her up, he seemed sorry.

They didn't meet Atticus at the corner of the post office that day. When he came home, he had Scout's broken baton and some camellia buds in his hand. He sent Jem back to Mrs. Dubose's house to have a talk with her. While Jem was gone, Atticus talked to Scout about the case. He explained that he realized that it was hard on them, but defending Tom

Robinson is something he had to do or he couldn't live with himself. When Scout asked how he could be right if everyone else thought he was wrong, he told her that "'The one thing that doesn't abide by majority rule is a person's conscience.'" Chapter 11, Pg. 109

Jem came back and told them that among the other things he had to do for her, Mrs. Dubose had also asked him to come every day for a month and read to her for two hours. He didn't want to, but Atticus insisted that he do it, and so the next day he and Scout went to Mrs. Dubose's house to read. She handed out her usual verbal abuse for a while, but then she seemed to go off into her own little world, and her mouth worked and her head moved as if she was having some sort of fit. She didn't seem to hear a word Jem read, and then an alarm clock went off. The girl who lived with Mrs. Dubose sent them away because it was time for the old woman's medicine.

A month later, Scout and Jem were at Mrs. Dubose's house reading when Atticus came to the door. He had come home and the children weren't there, so he wanted to see if they were with Mrs. Dubose. It was then that Scout noticed that they'd been staying a little bit longer every day. The alarm clock was set for a few minutes later each day, and usually when it rang, Mrs. Dubose was in the middle of one of her fits, but she hadn't had a fit yet that day and it had been almost two hours. Mrs. Dubose said that Jem would read to her for one more week just to be certain -- certain of what was left up in the air because Jem started to protest, but Atticus shushed him with a hand gesture. On the way home Jem said that he'd been reading for a month and that was the deal. Atticus insisted that he read for one more week. So for another week, Jem and Scout listened to the abusive Mrs. Dubose, who didn't have any more fits. She sent them home every afternoon instead of the alarm clock, and then after a week was up, she sent them home for good. They were ecstatic to be free to enjoy the spring without the daily burden of Mrs. Dubose.

More than a month passed and then Mrs. Dubose died. Atticus explained to Jem that Mrs. Dubose had been a morphine addict. Her fits were withdrawals, and although she only had a few months to live, she suffered through the fits because she wanted to break her addiction before she died, and she had. He told Jem that before she died, Mrs. Dubose had her servant girl prepare the box for Jem. When he opened it, he looked down at a perfect camellia blossom just like the ones he'd destroyed. Atticus explained that the camellia was her way of telling Jem that everything was okay. He said that Mrs. Dubose was truly courageous. Atticus was glad that Jem had been able to see what real courage was -- "'It's when you know you're licked before you begin but you begin anyway and you see it through no matter what. You rarely win, but sometimes you do.'" Chapter 11, Pg. 116 Mrs. Dubose had won.