



Across Five Aprils

FICTION
Irene Hunt
1964

Introduction

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Irene Hunt (1907–2001) was the author of many popular books for young adults. *Across Five Aprils*, one of her best-known works, tells the story of nine-year-old Jethro Creighton, who has two older brothers fighting in the Civil War for the North—and another fighting for the South. Following the war through newspaper articles and weathering the conflicts at home on the family farm in Illinois, Jethro takes his first steps into manhood as the only son remaining in a household that's as divided as the country. In this excerpt from Chapter 2, war is on the horizon as a dinner among Jethro, his older brothers, and a cousin, Wilse Graham, turns to a heated discussion of the impending conflict.

“Slowly and inevitably the troubles of the nation began to move into the crowded little kitchen.”

NOTES

Skill:
Media

I can visualize this scene when I read it, but the film really helps me see the setting in detail, the family's home, and the way people at that time dressed, acted, and spoke.

from Chapter 2

- The two older brothers and Wilse Graham talked as they splashed in the cold water, and Jethro could sense the pleasure they felt in seeing one another again after the **lapse** of several years.
- In the kitchen, Jenny and Nancy hurried about getting the “comp’ny supper” ready. A couple of chickens had been dressed¹ hastily and thrown into the pot; sweet potatoes were set to bake in the hot ashes, and dried apples were cooked in a syrup of wild honey and then topped with thick cream from one of the crocks in the springhouse². Nancy made a flat cake of white flour with a sprinkling of sugar on top, and Jenny pulled tender radishes and onions from her garden to give the taste of spring to their meal.
- A coal-oil lamp was lighted and placed in the middle of the table when supper was at last ready; gold light filled the kitchen, pouring from the open fireplace and from the sparkling lamp chimney. Black shadows hung in the adjoining room where the bed had been spread with Ellen’s newest quilt and the pillows dressed in fresh covers in honor of the guest. Jethro was sensitive to color and contrast; the memory of the golden kitchen and the velvet shadows of the room beyond was firmly stamped in his mind.
- At the table, the talk for a while was of family affairs; there had been a death of someone in Kentucky who was only a name to Jethro, but a name that brought a shadow to his mother’s face; there were reports of weddings and births, of tragedies, and now and then a happy note of good fortune. Then the conversation began to turn. Slowly and inevitably the troubles of the nation began to move into the crowded little kitchen.

1. **dressed:** to prepare for cooking or eating, usually animal meat

2. **springhouse:** a simple building constructed around where a spring surfaces from underground



NOTES

Skill:
Point of View

Missouri and Kaintuck, or Kentucky, did not join the Confederacy. However, in 1861, slavery had not been abolished in these states. For this reason, Wilse thinks they may yet secede from the Union. I already know that they will not.

“Will Kaintuck³ go secesh⁴, Wilse?” Matthew Creighton asked finally, his eyes on his plate.

“Maybe, Uncle Matt, maybe it will. And how will southern Illinois feel about it in case that happens?”

No one answered. Wilse took a drink of water, and then setting the glass down, twirled it a few times between his thumb and fingers.

“It will come hard fer the river states if Missouri and Kaintuck join up with the Confederacy. Ol’ Mississippi’ won’t be the safest place fer north shippin’ down to the Gulf.”

“That’s true, Wilse. That’s in the minds of a lot of us,” Matthew said quietly. Bill’s eyes were fixed on the yellow light around the lamp chimney; John was studying his cousin’s face.

“As fer southern Illinois,” Wilse continued, “you folks air closer by a lot to the folks in Missouri and Kaintuck than you are to the bigwigs up in Chicago and northern Illinois. You’re southern folks down here.”

“We’re from Kaintuck as you well know, Wilse; our roots air in that state. I’d say that eighty per cent of the folks in this part of the country count Missouri or Kaintuck or Tennessee as somehow bein’ their own. But this separation, Wilse, it won’t do. We’re a union; separate, we’re jest two weakened, puny pieces, each needin’ the other.”

“We was a weak and puny country eighty odd years ago when the great-granddaddy of us young uns got mixed up in a rebel’s fight. Since then we’ve growed like weeds in the spring, and what’s happened? Well, I’ll tell you: a half of the country has growed rich, favored by Providence, but still jealous and fearful that the other half is apt to find good fortune too. Face it, Uncle Matt; the North has become arrogant toward the South. The high-tariff industrialists would sooner hev the South starve than give an inch that might cost them a penny.”

Then Ellen’s voice was heard, timid and a little **tremulous**; farm women didn’t enter often into man-talk of politics or national affairs.

“But what about the downtrodden people, Wilse? Ain’t slavery becomin’ more of a festerin’ hurt each year? Don’t we hev to make a move against it?”

3. **Kaintuck:** archaic and colloquial pronunciation of the name of the state of Kentucky

4. **secesh:** colloquial for secession



- 15 “Yore own Ol’ Abe from this fair state of Illinois is talkin’ out of both sides of his mouth—fer the time bein’ anyway.” Wilse brought his hand down sharply on the table. “What the South wants is the right to live as it sees fit to live without interference. And it kin live! Do you think England won’t come breakin’ her neck to help the South in case of war? She ain’t goin’ to see her looms starve fer cotton because the northern industrialists see fit to butt in on a way of life that the South has found good. Believe me, Uncle Matt; the South kin fight fer years if need be—till this boy here is a man growed with boys of his own.”
- 16 Young Tom’s face was red with anger, but a warning look from his mother kept him quiet. From the far end of the table, however, John’s voice came, strained and a little unnatural.
- 17 “You hev hedged Ma’s question, Cousin Wilse. What about the right and wrong of one man ownin’ the body—and sometimes it looks as if the soul, too—of another man?”
- 18 Wilse hesitated a moment, his eyes on the plate of food, which he had barely touched during the last few minutes. “I’ll say this to you, Cousin John,” he said finally. “I own a few slaves, and if I stood before my Maker alongside one of em, I’d hev no way to justify the fact that I was master and he was slave. But leavin’ that final **reckonin’** fer the time, let me ask you this: ain’t there been slavery from the beginnin’ of history? Didn’t the men that we give honor to, the men that shaped up the Constitution of our country, didn’t they recognize slavery? Did they see it as a festerin’ hurt?”
- 19 “Some of em did, I reckon,” John answered gravely. “I can’t help but believe that some of em must not ha’ been comftable with them words ‘a peculiar institution.’”
- 20 “Well then, I’ll ask you this: if tomorrow every slave in the South had his freedom and come up North, would yore **abolitionists** git the crocodile tears sloshed out of their eyes so they could take the black man by the hand? Would they say, ‘We’ll see that you git good-payin’ work fitted to what you’re able to do—we’ll see that you’re well housed and clothed—we want you to come to our churches and yore children to come to our schools, why, we danged near fergit the difference in the colors of our skins because we air so almighty full of brotherly love!’ Would it be like that in yore northern cities, Cousin John?”
- 21 “It ain’t like that fer the masses of white people in our northern cities—nor in the southern cities either. And yet, there ain’t a white man, lean-bellied and hopeless as so many of them are, that would change lots with a slave belongin’ to the kindest master in the South.”

Then Bill spoke for the first time, his eyes still on the yellow light of the lamp.

“Slavery, I hate. But it is with us, and them that should suffer fer the evil they brought to our shores air long dead. What I want us to answer in this year of 1861 is this, John: does the trouble over slavery come because men’s hearts is purer above the Mason-Dixon line⁵? Or does slavery throw a shadder over greed and keep that greed from showin’ up quite so bare and ugly?”

4 Wilse Graham seemed to leap at Bill’s question. “You’re right, Cousin Bill. It’s greed, not slavery, that’s stirrin’ up this trouble. And as fer human goodness—men’s hearts is jest as black today as in the Roman times when they nailed slaves to crosses by the hunderd and left them there to point up a lesson.

5 Matt Creighton shook his head. “Human nature ain’t any better one side of a political line than on the other—we all know that—but human nature, the all-over picture of it, *is* better than it was a thousand—five hundred—even a hundred years ago. There is an awakenin’ inside us of human decency and responsibility. If I didn’t believe that, I wouldn’t grieve fer the children I’ve buried; I wouldn’t look for’ard to the manhood of this youngest one.”

Excerpted from *Across Five Aprils* by Irene Hunt, published by The Berkley Publishing Group.

5. **Mason-Dixon line:** the boundary drawn by astronomer Charles Mason and surveyor Jeremiah Dixon in the 1760s to settle a border dispute between Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Delaware; the northern limit of slavery in the U.S. until the 1820 Missouri Compromise

