

BEHIND THE HIGH BOARD FENCE

Chapter 11 – What’s in the store?!

WINSTON, N.C., 1909— One Saturday at the end of September, Helen and Alan set off walking to Papa’s store. Helen was eager to visit the town on a day when the tobacco market was open.

New electric wires lined the streets near the textile mill. Alan and Helen turned onto Fourth Street just as the trolley went past. Poindexter’s General Store was near the square.

“I wish we could go in,” Helen begged and tugged at him, “Just for a little while. Maybe you could get me a piece of candy.”

“Don’t act like that,” Alan warned, “or next time I won’t bring you with me.”

Helen reluctantly looked away from the store and down Old Town Street. It was clogged with wagons, covered and open, all piled high with sweet smelling tobacco leaves. One after another, the wagons with the horses and mules were pulled to the side of the road where the tobacco warehouses were located.

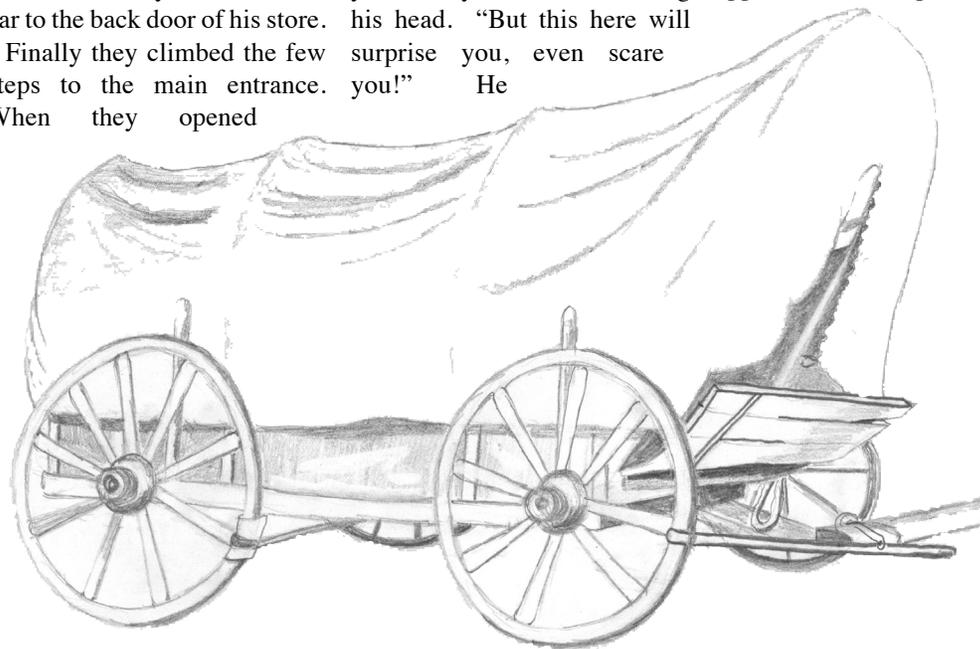
Alan pointed to them. “Most of those farmers will wait in the street until time to move their tobacco into the warehouse for inspection. Then they’ll probably stay inside to find out what they will earn for their year’s work. They’ll listen to the auctioneer to hear whether their tobacco brings a good price.”

“People say that it takes thirteen months to raise a crop of tobacco?” Alan went on, “That’s because growing tobacco is hard work that requires effort by everybody on the farm. Men and women, children and old folks have to work together to get all the different jobs done.”

They walked by the town square, crossed Main Street and

followed the railroad tracks the rest of the way. Papa’s business was located near a railroad siding, so that deliveries could be made directly from the train car to the back door of his store.

Finally they climbed the few steps to the main entrance. When they opened



Covered wagon

the door, a shaft of light cut through the great dark storage room. As her eyes adjusted to the inside, Helen could see rows of bushel baskets holding peas and potatoes and October beans. Beyond them were stacks of pumpkins. Along the wall she could make out the shapes of huge bunches of bananas hanging from hooks.

Helen imagined that the tobacco warehouse was like this, with piles of tobacco on the floor in much the same way the vegetables were here. The warehouse needed to be big, with space for the farmers and auctioneers, and the area would need light, so the tobacco could be seen and felt by the buyers.

Just then Robert came from the back and reached to switch on an electric light hanging near the door. “Thought I heard you come in,” he called.

“Come see what your daddy got you. Maybe it’s something Cal would like. Not me, no sir, not me. And maybe not you, Missy.” He was shaking his head. “But this here will surprise you, even scare you!” He

leaned down and picked up a fruit jar from the floor, and the two moved closer to get a better look.

“See here,” he held out the jar. “Your daddy found him in a bunch of bananas. Tarantula, he called it.”

There in the jar was the biggest spider that Helen and Alan had ever seen. He was dark, almost black, and completely covered with tiny hairs. When Helen looked at him from the front, he looked like a king, with a little head and a crown-like place where his eyes were.

“Alan, are you scared?” Helen whispered.

“No, but I guess you are.” he replied.

“I am not!” she boasted.

“Go ahead then,” he urged her. “Take him home with you.”

Helen finally decided to keep the spider. Robert put the jar into a sack for her, then he got a couple of York apples from the apple barrel and put those in

go all the way to the ceiling. The area had a window that looked onto the street when the shutters were open. The space was brighter here, with two electric lights hanging from the ceiling, one above Papa’s desk and one near Miss May’s.

“Why, hello, Helen,” Miss May greeted her as she stopped her work and looked up from her typewriter. “Your mother rang earlier to say that you and Alan were coming to get some peas to take home.”

“Yes ma’am,” Helen replied, as she put the sack of apples on the bookshelf near Papa’s desk.

Holding tight to the sack that had the spider, she waited for Papa to finish his phone call. He spoke with his courteous, gentle voice, thanking the customer before he said goodbye. He turned to face the room. “Hello, dear,” he said, “Miss May told me that you and Alan were coming to the store.”

“Look what Robert let me have!” Helen said, carefully pulling the jar from the sack and holding it out for her dad and Miss May to see.

The typing stopped. Miss May shot from her desk, knocking over her chair and spilling all her papers onto the floor. “What in the world is that?” she screamed as she stumbled

backwards into the far corner. “Keep it away. Please, just get it out of the office!”

Papa picked up Miss May’s chair and got her a drink of water from the lavatory in the corner. Then he retrieved the bag with the apples, and he and Helen left the room. “Put the jar back in the sack, and don’t get the two mixed up,” Papa said, “I don’t want you to scare Mother or the other children with the spider when you get home.”

next chapter—Ruthie meets one caring person’

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ACTIVITY: Which local businesses advertise in your local newspaper’s print and/or online editions? Locate them on an area map.

Map Helen’s and Alan’s trip to Papa’s store. Name all of the businesses they pass. Map a trip through your neighborhood or town. Name any businesses you pass. Use technology tools to create the maps.

HISTORY: Winston-Salem and other towns in North Carolina have been called “tobacco towns” because of the impact tobacco had on their local economies.

For history about Winston-Salem’s tobacco industry, search for information available through archived news stories and other information provided by the NC Division of Cultural Resources. Use “tobacco” and “RJ Reynolds” as key words.