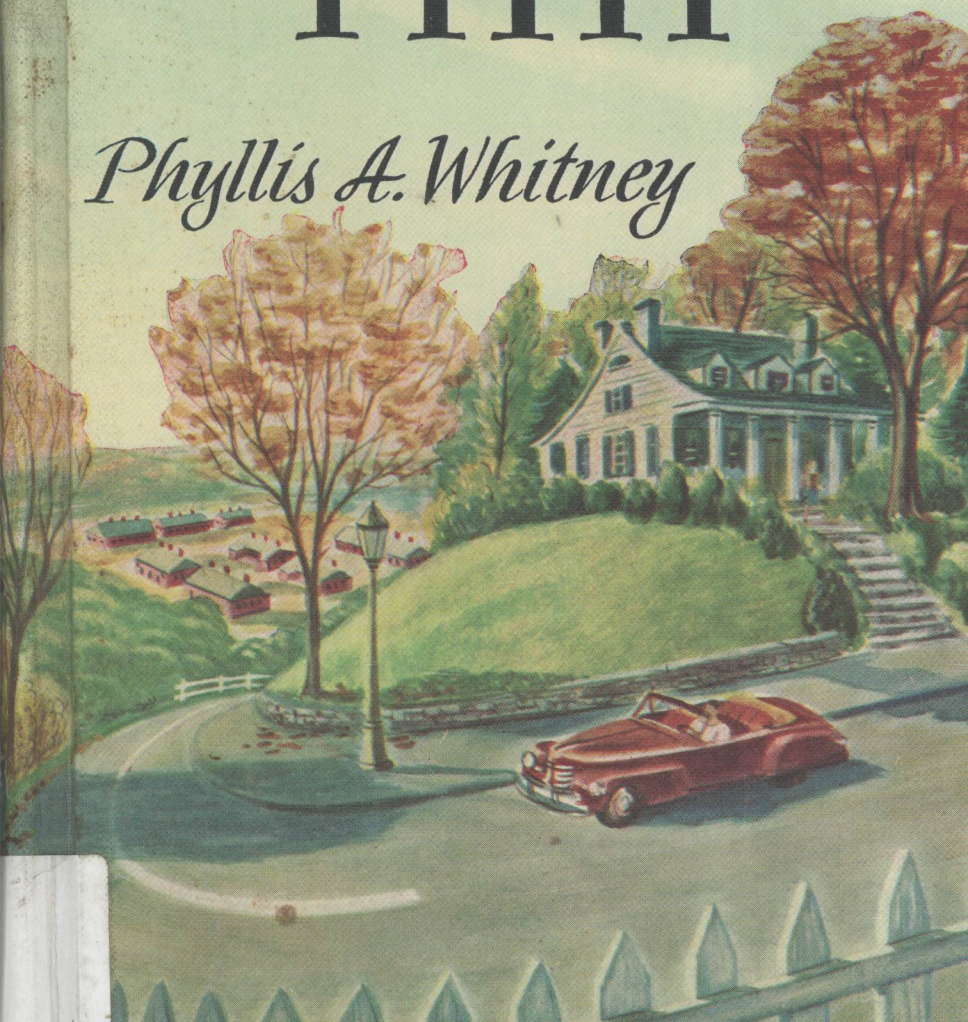


Willow Hill

Phyllis A. Whitney



PHYLLIS A. WHITNEY

Willow
Hill

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WILLOW HILL

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WILLOW HILL

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NEWCOMER TO WILLOW HILL

Whenever there was a pause in dinner table conversation, Val glanced anxiously at the clock on the dining room wall. Plenty of time. The train from California wouldn't reach Willow Hill till after seven-thirty. More than an hour away and the minutes were dragging.

She tried to focus her attention on her mother's words and caught the familiar phrase, "Mrs. Manning says—" Across the table her father's eyes met hers and he winked in amusement. They had a private joke about Mrs. Manning.

Mrs. Coleman missed the wink because she was busy filling coffee cups as she talked. "Mrs. Manning says the meeting this evening is *so* important." Her neat small head with its softly waved brown hair nodded emphasis to that "so." "The Junior Auxiliary of young-marrieds is getting together and Mrs. Manning—"

"Well, let 'em get together without you," Mr. Coleman broke in. "You belong to the senior club—isn't that enough? All this committee stuff eats up your time as it is."

Val hooked her heels over the rungs of her chair. It was a habit forbidden since she'd been a little girl, but she had to hold onto something or explode. Junior Auxiliaries, senior clubs, meetings—when in just a little while that train would

make the whistle stop at Willow Hill before going on to Chicago, and Stephen Reid would get off the train!

“Do you suppose he writes, too, like his father and mother?” The question popped out before Val could stop it.

“Who writes? Val, what *are* you talking about?” Mrs. Coleman asked.

“She’s doing some hero-worshipping before the hero shows up,” her father said.

Val sat up indignantly. “Why shouldn’t I? All my life I’ve heard you talk about Douglas Reid and about what friends you were in college. Everybody says that before he died he was one of the best of all the foreign correspondents. And Margaret Reid has written real best-sellers. Even Mrs. Manning reads them. So why shouldn’t I be excited when their son is coming to live in this house?”

“Of course, dear,” Mrs. Coleman agreed absently, and Val suspected that her mother had not heard a word she’d said. She went on as if there had been no interruption from an excited daughter. “Mrs. Manning feels that this matter concerns the future of Willow Hill. If this housing project is allowed to open right on the edge of town, it’s going to affect all of us unpleasantly.”

Val sighed. When her pretty little mother really took the bit between her teeth, there was no managing her or distracting her attention. You might just as well settle down to admiring the way she looked and accept her current project.

Tonight she was especially attractive. She had skimped so long to buy that moss-green dress, but the result, Val had to admit, was worth it. She looked very smart and trim, and the new hair-do she’d tried was just right. It was too bad her daughter had not been able to follow a little more in her

pattern, instead of being all angles and legs and hair that just hung.

Val glanced across the table at her father and was struck again by the contrast between her parents. Nick Coleman was no movie hero for looks. Mostly he was on the square side. Square shoulders, square jaw, gray eyes that as often as not had a twinkle in them. And he was a square-shooter, too. Clear through. But you wouldn't have expected anyone with Carolyn Coleman's neat, precise, tidy ways to have married a man who liked best to wear old slacks and a sloppy shirt, and who never managed to keep his hair smooth because he was forever running a hand through it the wrong way. But he was a good athletic coach and the kids at school were crazy about him.

Val looked at the clock again. Barely three minutes had passed. She tried to listen to what her father was saying.

"I don't see how your Mrs. Manning is going to stop that project from opening, Carrie," he said. "The houses are up and the first families will be moving in any day. The Hubbard Plant needs the men. It's a pretty big industrial proposition."

Mrs. Coleman looked vaguely troubled, but she clung to the words of her Woman's Club prophet. "Mrs. Manning says it isn't necessary for Hubbard to employ Negroes. And then to have this project at the foot of the hill—practically at the end of our own street! If you'd just take a little more interest in civic welfare—"

Nick Coleman passed his cup for more coffee. "One civic leader in a family is enough. Don't you think so, Val?"

Val nodded, but her attention had been caught by a sound outside. A car had pulled up to the curb before the house

next door. There were voices, the slam of a car door, the sound of running feet.

"The Pipers are home!" Val cried. "Oh, mother—"

Mrs. Coleman shook her head gently. "Judy can wait, dear. Mrs. Piper won't want you underfoot right away. Do finish your dessert."

Bread pudding, Val thought disgustedly. When her best friend was home from vacation and there was this wonderful news about Stephen Reid to tell her! She took a mouthful of pudding and choked it down.

She could hear the two little Pipers, Binx and Debby, racing around the yard, while inside the house Mrs. Piper moved from room to room, flinging windows open with a businesslike bang. Mr. Piper could, as usual, be heard roaring objections to what all the other Pipers were doing. The family was behaving thoroughly in character and it was pleasant to have the long summer calm broken this first day of September in the familiar Piper manner.

There—that was Judy now, scolding Binx. If she could just get away from this table and over next door through the hole in the hedge. . . .

"Dishes first." Sometimes her mother seemed to read her mind. "Some of the senior group are meeting early and I'll have to leave in a few minutes. See that your father gets off in time to meet the train and be sure he puts on a tie. And tell Stephen Reid how sorry I am that I couldn't be home this evening."

Val nodded. "Yes, mother." Dishes! She simply *had* to get hold of Judy.

"And Val, honey," there was open distress in her mother's eyes, "do let's try to do something about your hair. It looks

so—so limp. You really should take more interest in your appearance, now that you're a graduating senior."

Val wound a soft brown strand around one finger and gave it a tug. She had tried everything she could think of with her hair and it always finished up in ends that just hung, so most of the time she tossed it out of her eyes and forgot about it. She hadn't been blessed with the sort of hair her mother had; hair that waved and fell into place attractively no matter what she did to it.

That she had managed one outstanding thing this summer in winning first place in a junior essay contest perhaps was some compensation for not being as beautiful as her mother. The Chicago newspaper which had sponsored the contest had printed her piece one Sunday in the literary section. Nick had practically burst off all his buttons and her mother had been truly proud and pleased. Perhaps they'd be equally proud if she could land the editorship of the *Willow Wand* this year.

Mrs. Coleman folded her napkin with a neat, quick gesture. "I'll have to dash. Val, will you run upstairs and get my club book and my white gloves? And don't forget, dear—dishes first. And everything in place before I come home."

Val ran upstairs to her mother's room. Even in her hurry she reacted with a mingled sense of admiration for this room and despair at her own inability to keep her possessions in such apple-pie order. The color scheme was cool blue and gray, with dashes of peach for warmth, and it was as feminine a room as Mrs. Coleman herself. The club book lay on its accustomed shelf, the gloves were in a drawer that breathed a flowery sachet when it was opened.

Imagine finding everything just where you'd expect it to

be, Val thought, and put the last glimpse she'd had of her own room out of her mind.

Her father had gone out to the rear terrace to smoke his pipe, and when Mrs. Coleman had left, Val rushed the dishes off the table and into sudsy water. She was half through washing them when she heard a familiar call.

"Oh, Va-all! Oh, Valerie-ee!"

Val put her nose against the kitchen window screen and hallooed a response. A moment later she heard Judy hailing Nick on the terrace. Mr. Coleman was "Nick" to the whole town, and even Val had picked up the habit of calling him by his first name as soon as she'd been able to talk. It seemed to fit him somehow.

Judy bounced into the kitchen, every red curl a gleam, and enveloped Val in an unrestrained hug.

"Oh, Judy, it's good to have you home!" Val cried. "Look out for my soapy hands. Do I ever have news to tell you!"

Judy reached for a dry dishcloth and picked up a plate from the sink. "I know. Nick sent us the clipping. 'Willow Hill girl wins first place in essay contest entitled *What America Means to Me.*' May I congratulate the next editor of the *Willow Wand*?"

"Shush, Judy!" Val waved her friend into silence. "I *hope* it helps get me the editorship. But both Mary Evans and Sue Peters have worked awfully hard, and I fell down on some of those assignments Miss Kay gave me last term. I wouldn't blame her much if—"

"Don't be silly!" Judy was indignant. "After that America thing you've earned the right to top place."

"Anyway," Val said, "that wasn't what I meant by news.

This is *really* exciting. You know who Douglas Reid was, don't you? Nick's always talking about him."

"I guess so," Judy said.

"And his wife's a writer, too. She's the novelist, Margaret Reid. Mother had a letter from her."

Judy caught one of Mrs. Coleman's cups just in time as it teetered on the edge of the sink. Having rescued it, her quick-silver attention darted elsewhere. She went over to the rear window of the kitchen and looked out through the gathering dusk.

"What in the world? What are all those buildings at the foot of the hill? They weren't here when we went away at the beginning of summer."

"The foundations were in," Val said. "You just didn't notice. It's going to be a government housing project and the president of mother's club is trying to stir up the town about it. So Nick and I have been getting it served up at every meal. Judy, you're not listening."

Judy looked up from her investigation of a dish of peanuts. "Of course I'm listening. I'm fascinated."

"I doubt it. But anyway Mrs. Reid wrote us a letter. She wants to keep the Reid name in the newspaper field, so she's going abroad as a correspondent in Germany. And because Nick knew her husband so well, she's asked if we'd take their son Stephen until she comes home in six months or a year."

Judy looked mildly interested. "I hope he's older than Binx. I couldn't stand two at that age."

"He's going to graduate with us," Val told her. "He's just our age. Oh, Judy, I could shake you! Why do you have to be illiterate right now? Douglas and Margaret Reid are

famous. Stephen belongs to a real writing family. And he's going to live *here*. He's coming tonight."

She glanced at the kitchen clock and began to dry her hands hastily. "I've been watching that thing all day, but the minute I turn my back it skips ahead. The train will be here in fifteen minutes. I'll have to get Nick off for the station."

She hurried out to the terrace with Judy in tow and then paused with her finger on her lips. In the hammock stretched between two posts lay Nick Coleman, his evening paper and his pipe on the ground beside him.

"He's asleep," Val whispered. "I hate to wake him up. He looked tired at dinner tonight. And school starts day after tomorrow. Coach Nick will have to be back on the job."

"Then don't wake him." Even in the dusk Val could see the conspirator's twinkle in Judy's eyes.

The two tiptoed back to the kitchen.

"Let's meet the train ourselves," Judy said. "We'd tag along anyway and your father'd probably be glad to have us take over."

Val hesitated. "I ought to powder my nose and do something about my hair."

"No time," Judy said. "We've lost five minutes already. Come on. We'll meet this Stephen Reid in person."

A few moments later they were walking briskly downhill. It had grown darker and street lamps were blinking on. The project houses looked empty and ghostly as they went by.

"If Stephen looks anything like the pictures I've seen of his father, he'll be super," Val said, putting into words the hope she couldn't express to anyone but Judy.