

RACHEL

What is the matter with that child? It's — it's heartbreaking to see her.

MRS. LANE

I understand how you feel — I don't feel anything, myself, any more.

(*A pause*).

My husband and I are poor, and we're ugly and we're black. Ethel looks like her father more than she does like me. We live in 55th Street — near the railroad. It's a poor neighborhood, but the rent's cheap. My husband is a porter in a store; and, to help out, I'm a caretaker.

(*Pauses*).

I don't know why I'm telling you all this. We had a nice little home — and the three of us were happy. Now we've got to move.

RACHEL

Move! Why?

MRS. LANE

It's Ethel. I put her in school this September. She stayed two weeks.

(*Pointing to Ethel*)

That's the result.

RACHEL

(*In horror*):

You mean — that just two weeks — in school — did that?

MRS. LANE

Yes. Ethel never had a sick day in her life — before.

(*A brief pause*).

I took her to the doctor at the end of the two weeks. He says she's a nervous wreck.

RACHEL

But what could they have done to her?

MRS. LANE

(*Laughs grimly and mirthlessly*):

I'll tell you what they did the first day. Ethel is naturally sensitive and backward. She's not assertive. The teacher saw that, and, after I had left, told her to sit in a seat in the rear of the class. She was alone there — in a corner. The children, immediately feeling there was something wrong with Ethel because of the teacher's attitude, turned and stared at her. When the teacher's back was turned they whispered about her, pointed their fingers at her and tittered. The teacher divided the class into two parts, divisions, I believe, they are called. She forgot all about Ethel, of course, until the last minute, and then, looking back, said sharply: "That little girl there may join this division," meaning the group of pupils standing around her. Ethel naturally moved slowly. The teacher called her sulky and told her to lose a part of her recess. When

Ethel came up — the children drew away from her in every direction. She was left standing alone. The teacher then proceeded to give a lesson about kindness to animals. Funny, isn't it, *kindness to animals*? The children forgot Ethel in the excitement of talking about their pets. Presently, the teacher turned to Ethel and said disagreeably: "Have you a pet?" Ethel said, "Yes," very low. "Come, speak up, you sulky child, what is it?" Ethel said: "A blind puppy." They all laughed, the teacher and all. Strange, isn't it, but Ethel loves that puppy. She spoke up: "It's mean to laugh at a little blind puppy. I'm glad he's blind." This remark brought forth more laughter. "Why are you glad," the teacher asked curiously. Ethel refused to say.

(*Pauses*).

When I asked her why, do you know what she told me? "If he saw me, he might not love me any more."

(*A pause*).

Did I tell you that Ethel is only seven years old?

RACHEL

(*Drawing her breath sharply*):

Oh! I didn't believe any one could be as cruel as that — to a little child.

MRS. LANE

It isn't very pleasant, is it? When the teacher found out that Ethel wouldn't answer, she said severely: "Take your seat!" At recess, all the children went out. Ethel could hear them playing and laughing and shrieking. Even the teacher went too. She was made to sit there all alone — in that big room — because God made her ugly — and black.

(*Pauses*).

When the recess was half over the teacher came back. "You may go now," she said coldly. Ethel didn't stir. "Did you hear me?" "Yes'm." "Why don't you obey?" "I don't want to go out, please." "You don't, don't you, you stubborn child! Go immediately!" Ethel went. She stood by the school steps. No one spoke to her. The children near her moved away in every direction. They stopped playing, many of them, and watched her. They stared as only children can stare. Some began whispering about her. Presently one child came up and ran her hand roughly over Ethel's face. She looked at her hand and Ethel's face and ran screaming back to the others, "It won't come off! See!" Other children followed the first child's example. Then one boy spoke up loudly: "I know what she is, she's a nigger!" Many took up the cry. God or the devil interfered — the bell rang. The children filed in. One boy boldly called her "Nigger!" before the teacher. She said, "That isn't nice," — but she smiled at the boy. Things went on about the same for the rest of the day. At the end of school, Ethel put on her hat and coat — the teacher made her hang them at a distance from the other pupils' wraps; and started for home. Quite a crowd escorted her. They called her "Nigger!" all the way. I *made* Ethel go the next day. I complained to the authorities. They treated me lightly. I was determined not to let them force my child out of school. At the end of two weeks — I had to take her out.

RACHEL

(*Brokenly*):

Why, — I never — in all my life — heard anything — so — pitiful.

MRS. LANE

Did you ever go to school here?

RACHEL

Yes. I was made to feel my color — but I never had an experience like that.

MRS. LANE

How many years ago were you in the graded schools?

RACHEL

Oh! — around ten.

MRS. LANE

(*Laughs grimly*):

Ten years! Every year things are getting worse. Last year wasn't as bad as this.

(*Pauses.*)

So they treat the children all right in this school?

RACHEL

Yes! Yes! I know that.

MRS. LANE

I can't afford to take this flat here, but I'll take it. I'm going to have Ethel educated. Although, when you think of it, — it's all rather useless — this education! What are our children going to do with it, when they get it? We strive and save and sacrifice to educate them — and the whole time — down underneath, we know — they'll have no chance.

RACHEL

(*Sadly*):

Yes, that's true, all right. — God seems to have forgotten us.

MRS. LANE

God! It's all a lie about God. I know. — This fall I sent Ethel to a white Sunday-school near us. She received the same treatment there she did in the day school. Her being there, nearly broke up the school. At the end, the superintendent called her to him and asked her if she didn't know of some nice colored Sunday-school. He told her she must feel out of place, and uncomfortable there. That's your Church of God!

RACHEL

Oh! how unspeakably brutal.

(*Controls herself with an effort; after a pause*)

Have you any other children?

MRS. LANE

(*Dryly*):

Hardly! If I had another — I'd kill it. It's kinder.

(*Rising presently*)

Well, I must go, now. Thank you, for your information — and for listening.

(*Suddenly*)

You aren't married, are you?

RACHEL

No.

MRS. LANE

Don't marry — that's my advice. Come, Ethel.

(*Ethel gets up and puts down the things in her lap, carefully upon her chair. She goes in a hurried, timid way to her mother and clutches her hand*).

Say good-bye to the lady.