

Dr. Joseph leaned back in the chair, and still his large stomach nearly touched the edge of the table. He looked over the classes from one side of the aisle to the other, as though he was trying to catch someone doing something improper.

"Primer, on your feet," he said.

They stood up, seven or eight of them. Dr. Joseph looked them over for a moment, then he told the little girl at the end to come forward. She took a deep breath and looked at the girl standing beside her before coming up to the desk. She was afraid, but she came up quickly and stood before the table with her little arms tight to her sides. She would not look up.

"Nothing to be afraid of, child," Dr. Joseph said to her. "What is your name?"

"Gloria Hebert," she said.

"I can't hear you if you keep your head down," Dr. Joseph told her.

She looked up, timidly. "Gloria Hebert."

"That's a pretty name," Dr. Joseph said. "Hold out your hands."

She must have thought she had said or done something wrong, because as she held her hands out across the table, palms up, I could see them trembling.

"Turn them over," Dr. Joseph told her.

She did.

"Uh-huh," he said. "Relax."

She did not know what he wanted her to do.

"Lower your arms, child," Dr. Joseph said.

She brought her arms back to her sides and lowered her eyes as well.

"Did you say your Bible verse this morning, Gloria?"

"Yes, sir, Dr. Joseph."

"Well, what did you say?" he asked her.

"I said, 'Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want,' Dr. Joseph."

"Hummm," Dr. Joseph said. "Seems I've heard that one

before. But you're a bright little girl. You tell your folks Dr. Joseph said they ought to be proud of you. Go back to your seat."

"Thank you, Dr. Joseph," she said, bowing and turning away quickly. She smiled as she faced forward again. But no one else was smiling.

"Primers, take your seats," Dr. Joseph said. "First graders, on your feet."

And he called on the one boy in class who I wished had stayed home today. He was without doubt the worst child in the school. He came from a large family—thirteen, fourteen, fifteen: I don't know how many—and he had to fight for every crumb of food he got. At school he did the same. He fought if he played marbles, he fought if he played ball, he fought if he played hide-and-go-seek, he fought if he played hide-the-switch. In class he fought with those who sat in front of him, beside him, behind him. I had punished him as much during the last month as I had all the other children put together.

Dr. Joseph asked his name, and he ran together three words even I couldn't understand. His name was Louis Washington, Jr., but what he said didn't sound anything like that.

"Your hands," Dr. Joseph told him.

The hands had been cleaned an hour before, I was sure, because I had checked each pair when the students came in from dinner. But now the palms of those same hands were as black and grimy as if he had been pitching coal all day.

"Did you pledge allegiance to the flag this morning?" Dr. Joseph asked him.

"Yazir," he said. Not "Yes, sir," as I had told him a hundred times to say. "Yazir."

"Well?" Dr. Joseph said.

"Want me go stand outside and s'lute flag?" the boy asked.

"You don't have to go outside," Dr. Joseph said. "You can show me in here."

The boy raised his hand to his chest.

"Plege legen toda flag. Ninety state. 'Merica. Er—er—yeah, which it stand. Visibly. Amen."

Dr. Joseph grunted. Several students giggled. Dr. Joseph seemed quite satisfied. I would have to do a lot more work.

For the next half hour it continued. Dr. Joseph would call on someone who looked half bright, then he would call on someone whom he felt was just the opposite. In the upper grades—fourth, fifth, and sixth—he asked grammatical, mathematical, and geographical questions. And besides looking at hands, now he began inspecting teeth. Open wide, say "Ahhh"—and he would have the poor children spreading out their lips as far as they could while he peered into their mouths. At the university I had read about slave masters who had done the same when buying new slaves, and I had read of cattlemen doing it when purchasing horses and cattle. At least Dr. Joseph had graduated to the level where he let the children spread out their own lips, rather than using some kind of crude metal instrument. I appreciated his humanitarianism.

Finally, when he felt that he had inspected enough mouths and hands, he gave the school a ten-minute lecture on nutrition. Beans were good, he said. Not only just good, but very, very good. Beans, beans, beans—he must have said beans a hundred times. Then he said fish and greens were good. And exercise was good. In other words, hard work was good for the young body. Picking cotton, gathering potatoes, pulling onions, working in the garden—all of that was good exercise for a growing boy or girl.

"Higgins, I must compliment you. You have an excellent crop of students, an excellent crop, Higgins. You ought to be proud."

He had said the same thing the year before, and he had called me Higgins then too. And the year before that he had said the same thing, but he had called me Washington then. At least he was getting closer to my real name.

"Rise," Irene called to the class.