

WHITE ON BLACK

A STORY

BY TESS SLESINGER

ONE of the private schools attended by the nicest children from the West Eighties and Nineties fifteen years ago followed not only the liberal practice of mixing rich and poor, Gentiles and Jews, but also made a point of including Negroes; not many, but just enough so that when one ran one's eye over the neat rows of pink and white faces collected each morning for assembly, it stumbled here and there — perhaps three or four times in all the auditorium — on an equally scrubbed black one sticking out like a solitary violet in a bed of primroses. For, except in the cases of two sisters, or of a brother and sister, these black children never made friends among themselves, even to the extent of choosing seats side by side in assembly.

As is usually the case where all whites are freely admitted to the same institution, the Jewish children had, long before my time, become the majority. I do not know what policy the school would have adopted had there been enough children of wealthy Negroes in New York for them to follow

the example of their more fortunate minority brethren; but, fortunately for the open-to-all policy of the school, Negro children of means are rare. So, to maintain that policy, the school sent its teachers each year to comb Harlem for half a dozen of its nicest and brightest black pupils, and invited them to be transplanted on scholarships. Thus the school was never without its handful of Negroes.

I suppose that the effect upon the rest of us was, as it was intended to be, on the whole good. It must have taught us well-bred little boys and girls at the least the untruth of the common slander that Negroes have an unpleasant odor; for certainly none of the Johnsons and Whites and Washingtons in our school ever smelt of anything but soap. And we were brought up, through weekly ethics lessons and the influence of the inevitable elderly lady teacher who had never got Harriet Beecher Stowe out of her mind, to the axiom that all men were created equal.

The few scattered colored children in clean clothes, then, contributed

TESS SLESINGER published two books in the thirties, a collection of short stories and a novel, *The Unpossessed*. Later she went to Hollywood as a scenario writer. "*White on Black*" (Copyright, 1935, by Tess Slesinger; reprinted from *Time*: The Present by permission of Simon and Schuster) first appeared in THE AMERICAN MERCURY for December 1930.

practically to our liberal education. But what effect we, in our more than clean, our often luxurious clothes and with our pink and white faces, had in turn upon them, it is impossible for one of us to judge. Although I can tell you today what has happened since to a number of my old school-mates, even to those in whom I have long ceased to be interested, and although I run every year across gossip concerning still others, none of us has any idea what happened to our colored classmates. Some of them left school before the high-school years were over; some of them were graduated and stood at our elbows with their rolled-up diplomas; but all of them have equally dropped out of our common knowledge since. Where are they now? Did they drift back to Harlem, those Johnsons and Washingtons and Whites? How do they now look upon their ten years' interlude with white children? I cannot imagine. But I remember vividly the school careers of the two who were in my class.

II

The Jacksons, brother and sister, joined us in the sixth grade. Solomon was formed like a small bronze god, his face perfectly chiseled and without fault; a pair of delicately dilated nostrils at the end of a short fine nose, and an aureole of dim black curls. Elizabeth was bigger, coarser, more Negroid; darker, her lips were thick, her nose less perfect; but still she was a beautiful child, luxuriously made, and

promising to develop into a refined type of the voluptuous Negro woman at her best. Elizabeth was older than Sol; but her brain, like her nose, was less sharp, and both were put into the same class.

For the first week or two our kind teachers paid them the surplus attention which was always extended to Negro, or crippled, or poverty-stricken children. They suggested that Sol be chosen when the boys were choosing up sides; they asked the girls to take Elizabeth as partner. The children stood off from them no more than they stood off from any newcomers. We were not adultly snobbish; we merely glared at all newcomers in our world until they should prove themselves worthy. But by the end of the month, there was no longer any question of choosing Sol: Sol himself was the chooser and the permanently chosen; likewise Elizabeth was besieged with requests for the seats on either side of her in assembly, and it became an honor to have a seat in the same row; and the teachers turned round, and were given rather to suppressing the colored Jacksons than to bringing them out.

For after a certain natural humility had worn off, Sol and Elizabeth were not merely taken into the group; they took over the group. Including the faculty. They were a smashing success. For one thing, they feared nothing; furthermore, they proved marvelous athletes; and they were born leaders. Electing Sol to the captaincy of the basketball team was a mere formality;

even if he hadn't richly deserved it, he would have permitted no one else to have held it. Elizabeth was as strong as a horse, less skillful, less graceful than he, but easily outshining, by her animal strength and fearlessness, all the white girls in the class. Beside their athletic prowess, which alone would have won them popularity in a class of eleven-year-olds, both of them were gifted with an overpowering jubility and a triumphant bullying wit, which inevitably made them czars.

They ruled the class with a rod of iron, chose their intimates, played with them, dropped them, and patronized the teachers. Their power spread to politics; by the end of the first year Sol was president of the class, and Elizabeth, who could not spell, secretary. Their class-meetings were masterpieces of irreverent wit and bedlam, subtly dominated by the tacitly authoritative Sol. The teachers turned over to them the difficult business of controlling the class after recess, and Sol, in his double capacity of legal president and illegal czar, easily succeeded where they had long failed. Even his sister, who was no small power among the girls, feared and adored him. If her authority was for one moment questioned, she had only to say, "I'll call Sol. . . ."

I remember myself—and probably not a few others of the dazzled little white girls did the same in secret—going home to dream about marrying Sol and taking Elizabeth to live with us. I remember a moment of

certainly unprecedented and of almost unsurpassed voluptuous pleasure on an occasion when Sol, twisting his wiry body into one of those marvelous knots from which he unrolled himself to shoot a basket, stretched so far that his shirt left his trousers and revealed a few inches of coffee-colored skin glistening with sweat, which caused me to gasp with delight. We girls chose to play against the boys of the class rather than among ourselves, and I was surely not the only girl who had voted favorably for the pure delight of being tossed on the ground and swung round the hips by the jubilant Sol, who had, beside his lovely body and fierce little nostrils, not the slightest inhibition.

For two years the noisy Jacksons demoralized the entire class into a raucous group that was never tired of wrestling, playing basketball, shouting jokes, and merrily defying the teachers. Not even the famous Seventh Grade Trouble, which involved the Jacksons as central figures, subdued them. Not even the visit, upon that terrifying occasion, of their mother. All of us made a point of walking past the principal's office to view Mrs. Jackson, who sat there, dressed in black and with her face held low and ashamed as though she were the culprit herself. We whispered afterward, among ourselves, of what a lady Mrs. Jackson was; we had never before seen a colored lady.

The high-school years loomed ahead. We were to be joined by another section of the same grade, and

we were determined to maintain our solidarity with Sol at our head. Our reputation as a champion class had preceded us; but with it, we soon noticed, a reputation for rowdiness. Sol was instantly elected captain of the basketball team. But he was just nosed out of the presidency by a white boy belonging to the other section, who must have gained some treacherous votes from among our own. Although the other boy occupied the chair, Sol managed, for half a year, to bully even the new section into slowly waning submission to the last echoes of his power.

Elizabeth's popularity remained limited to the girls in our own old section. The others adopted her at first as a novelty, but they had not been trained to her loud hearty jokes and her powerful wrestling, and soon tired of her and left her to her old companions. These dwindled slowly, as we girls gained consciousness of our status as girls and wished to dissociate ourselves from anything rowdy. Of course it was our fault — we could have pushed Elizabeth forward and remained loyal to her — but we had so many things to think of in those days. And I think something of the sort was bound to happen to Elizabeth anyway; she did not have the native personality to warrant and sustain the unlimited popularity which had fallen on her partly because of her strength and partly because she was her brother's sister. There was a quiet girl in our class, less mature than the rest of us — who were, in that first year of

high school, more fiercely mature than some of us are today, which is ten years after. This girl, Diana, fastened upon Elizabeth as a chum, and from now on the curious pair were inseparable.

I remember the early days when it became the thing for the boys to take the girls to the corner soda-store after basketball games, and for each boy to treat one girl to a fudge sundae. We couldn't help noticing that the boys, so eager to rough-house with Elizabeth in the classroom, hesitated among themselves as to which should treat her, and that the same one never treated her twice. We noticed too, that the soda-clerk stared at the dark blemish in our small white group. Elizabeth never seemed to notice anything; she developed a habit of kidding the soda-clerk in a loud professional voice, and soon our indignation was shifted to her, and we told her to lower her voice and not fool around with soda-clerks. Toward the end of the year, Diana and Elizabeth dissociated themselves from our group, and began to occupy a little table by themselves in a corner. Here they would sit and pretend to be alone, and we could hear them giggling and whispering happily. Sol, of course, was still too young and too "manly" ever to join these parties.

III

In the course of that first year in high school, many things beside the soda-parties happened to us. Wrestling between boys and girls was outlawed,

the girls began to loop their hair in buns over the ears, and the boys began to appear in navy-blue long trousers.

I remember Sol in his first longies. Instead of navy-blue, he appeared in a sleek suit of light Broadway tan, nicely nipped in at the waist, which harmonized with his clear mocha skin and showed off his dapper little figure to perfection. But it didn't quite fit in our school. I noticed that day, standing in line behind him to buy lunch tickets, that he wore brand new shoes: they were long and very pointed, and polished a brilliant ochre; they were button shoes, with cloth tops; they squeaked like nothing else in the world. I remember staring at them, and wondering where I had seen shoes like those before: was it in the elevator at home?

We were so grown-up that year that instead of shooting baskets in the twenty-minute recess that followed lunch, we got one girl to play the piano and the rest of us danced. Only about half of the boys were bold enough to dance; Sol still belonged to the group which stood in a corner and laughed and imitated their bolder friends, waiting for younger girls to be imported into the high-school department next year. With one boy to every pair of girls, it was not surprising that Elizabeth danced more than half of her dances with her friend Diana. The rest of us paired off with our girl-friends equally often.

But for no reason that anyone could see, Elizabeth's friends still diminished

week by week. She had occasional spurts of her old popularity, but these were chiefly occasioned by reaction against some more stable idol, who would soon be restored to her post. Elizabeth's one permanent friend was Diana, the quiet little blonde girl who had no other friends. As far as I know, Diana was the only girl who ever invited Elizabeth to her house, and it was rumored that Diana was the only one who had seen the inside of the Jackson house, but Diana could be made neither to say whether it was true, nor what it was like if she had seen it. As for the rest of us, we were a little uncomfortable about omitting Elizabeth at afternoon parties at our homes; but somebody's mother settled it for us by saying that she thought it would be an unkindness to the little colored girl to invite her to a home where there would be none of her own people. This conflicted, of course, with the lesson of our ethics classes, but we were thirteen-going-on-fourteen, and we had too much to think about, so we let it go at that.

Meanwhile Sol, who had remained captain all the first year, failed to be elected for the second. Some of his classmates started propaganda to the effect that, while still their best player, he was no good as a captain, and they self-righteously elected the second-best player in his stead. Sol took out his anger in refusing to cooperate with the team, and developed into a poor sport, that worst of anathemas in school, successfully hogging the ball so that no one else had a

chance. The epithet poor sport began to be whispered about the classroom, and when class elections for the second year were held, Sol was not even nominated for an office. Our section had sworn to stand by him when we had suffered defeat at the beginning of the year, but when the time came we simply sat and held our tongues, and elected another boy from the hostile section.

When the Jacksons returned for the second year after vacation, they looked a little different to us. Solomon had turned into something resembling an uptown beau, and Elizabeth's face had grown coarser. Elizabeth joined her friend Diana at once, and their companionship remained unbroken. Sol, however, held in considerably less esteem, remained aloof, making no effort to regain his lost popularity, and pursued his way sullenly and almost defiantly among us. He met our reproaches with indifference.

That year evening dances broke out among us. For the sake of girls who might never be asked, there was a rule that everyone must come unescorted and unescorting. It was easy enough, of course, to break the rule. Most of the girls came regularly attended by boys from the upper classes. Elizabeth came the first few times with her brother, which was as good as coming unattended. Sol stood in a corner with the stags; Elizabeth sat with the other girls who had come unattended or attended by brothers, looking very dark and strange in her short-sleeved light dress, and accepted gratefully

her few opportunities to dance.

There began to be whispers among us of what we would do if Sol asked one of us to come to a dance with him, or offered a treat to a soda. We admitted to feeling uncomfortable at the thought of being seen on the street with him. At the same time we realized that what we were contemplating was horribly unfair. But Evelyn — Evelyn who led our class in social matters because at fourteen she wore a brassière and baby French heels — said, "School is school; it's not the World; it's not our Real Lives," and we let it go at that. As we had tacitly adopted policies toward Elizabeth, we now officially adopted one toward Solomon; we were to be extra nice to him, but not in the way that one treats a boy; and we were to dance with him when he asked us, but to very kindly refuse his invitations to escort us anywhere outside the school walls. Fortunately for our peace of mind, ethics lessons were that year changed to weekly lessons in elocution for the girls, and public speaking for the boys.

But none of us was given the chance to refuse him. So far as I know, he never asked a girl to go anywhere with him, never left the stag-line at our Friday night dances, and after the first half-dozen, he never even came with Elizabeth. He scrupulously avoided even the careless physical contacts in the elevator, of which the other boys took modest advantage. Also, when we followed our policy of being nice to him in school, we found

ourselves politely ignored. Sol grew increasingly sullen, even occasionally rude, and one girl reported that he had passed her on the street and pretended not to see her, neglecting to lift his elegant tan felt hat.

In the middle of that year Elizabeth's friend Diana was withdrawn from the school by her parents and sent to a boarding-school in the South, rumor said to get her away from the black girl and teach her a proper sense of color.

With her friend gone, Elizabeth picked up smaller fry and dazzled them, because, unlike Sol, she seemed never to want to be alone. But even with these she learned to disappear at the school door, or at most to walk no further with a white classmate than the end of the school block. There, making some excuse about having to hurry, or going in another direction, she would dash away with a good-humored smile. I remember watching her running away from us once and wondering to what strange world she disappeared every day after school.

Of course, not one of the nice girls in our school would have dreamed of hurting Elizabeth's feelings by suggesting that she leave them on the street, but there must have been some hesitating on the corner before Elizabeth so effectively learned that her position with her white schoolmates ended with the school door. Or could it have been that dark lady, who had sat in the principal's office with her head lowered as though she were the culprit, that time of the Seventh

Grade Trouble? But no matter, we were in our third year of high school now, and had forgotten the seventh grade as we had forgotten the famous trouble, and were used now to seeing our dark classmate hurry off after school and run down the long block, leaving us standing on the corner, discussing our this and that, which was so awfully important to us. . . .

In the third year of high school, Sol simply did not appear. We were, I suppose, faintly relieved, in so far as we thought about him at all. He removed, after all, such uncomfortable questions as playing other schools with a Negro on our first team. And our own old section, our merry, rowdy section, of which Sol had once been undisputed king, had imperceptibly melted away, the boundary line was wavery, our old loyalty vague, a thing of the past; Sol, so far as he was anything in our minds, was a memory belonging to our lost section. When we asked Elizabeth what had happened to him, she told us he was going to another school because he didn't like girls and considered our private school sissy. She carried it off rather well, I think. One or two of us suggested that he might have been fired, because we all knew that his work had gone off badly in that last year.

Elizabeth herself, in those last two years, toned down considerably. Her prowess in studies had never been great, and she seemed now to be devoting more time to them. Her athletic ability had not lived up to its promise, because she had been after

all primarily interested in rough-neck play, and seemed unable or unwilling to tame her strength and spirits into rules and skill. She abandoned the bright colors she had worn as a child, and came to school in neat and modest dresses. She dropped without reluctance into the common order of students, learned to toady as she had once been toadied to, and managed to keep up a decent sober reputation which ensured her a mild amount of companionship, restricted, of course, to within the school walls. On committees Elizabeth volunteered for unpleasant jobs and carried them out cheerfully and efficiently. She grew generous and sweet-tempered, and a little like a servant; and like a servant, she was thanked for her services and forgotten. But Sol had dropped out of our existence.

IV

The last time I saw either of them was at our graduation dance. Elizabeth had long ago given up coming alone to our dances, but she came, of course, to this one, looking rather too burly and black in the prescribed white dress, with bare arms which hung like bones from her ungainly shoulders. She was the whole of the committee on refreshments, and all during the first part of the evening she stood behind a table with her diploma tucked on a rack over her head — nobody from her family had come to see her be graduated — and cheerfully dispensed sandwiches and ice cream.

Everybody was mingling proudly

in the big assembly room, waiting for the chairs to be removed for dancing; everybody was very nice to Elizabeth and even took down her address as a matter of form, but in the rush of taking addresses that really meant something and comparing notes about future colleges, she was forgotten, and if it hadn't been for a teacher who came to her rescue, she might have been completely alone. When the dancing began, the teacher led her away from the buffet table with her arm around her, to bring her to the row of chairs where girls sat waiting for partners.

Some of us must have had compunctions — I know I did — floating by her in our partners' arms, for on that night the least popular girl had achieved a faithful escort, if only by importing boys from classes below who felt it an honor to be there at all. But none of us felt badly enough to urge our partners to leave us and dance with Elizabeth. Later one or two boys danced a waltz with her, because a waltz was the least difficult to sacrifice. She sat all evening and talked cheerfully to the teacher. She looked uncomplaining, as though she had quietly learned her place. She even seemed to enjoy watching the rest of us dance.

The evening broke up on a high note of "See you again," "Don't forget," and "Oh, the most marvelous time!" and I remember emerging from the dance-room in a fever of happiness, walking on winged feet. I pushed my way through the gay

crowd outside the door. Somebody tapped me on the arm: "Miss!" I turned and saw, for the first time in three years, Solomon Jackson, the king of our old section! I smiled eagerly, delighted to see him again. "Why, Sol!" I exclaimed, holding out my hand.

He was as beautiful as he had been three years before, but his face was different, hardened perhaps, so that the dapper tan clothes he wore made him cheap and flashy. He still wore pointed button shoes with cloth tops. He was standing by the wall with his hat pulled down over his eyes. "Why, Sol!" I said.

He looked up, caught my eye, and shifted his away as though he had failed to recognize me. He looked down at the floor and spoke in a low

voice. "Miss, would you mind finding my sister Elizabeth Jackson inside and say her brother is waiting for her?" He stuck his hands suddenly into his pockets with something of his old sullen gesture.

I remember turning from him with an overpowering sense of guilt to spare him embarrassment, and going back with tears burning my eyes to find Elizabeth. I left him standing there against the wall, with his hat over his eyes, snubbing his former classmates, while they passed their former god and leader, some of them too happy to distinguish his features under that hat, others no doubt turning from him to prevent his embarrassment, and even, on that happy night, to spare themselves. . . . This should have been his graduation.

LOCAL ITEM

BY CHARLES ANGOFF

He wanted to be like Keats.
To make sure, he married one
Who wanted to be like
Elizabeth Barrett Browning.
Season followed season decorously.
He became a solid citizen,
Respected, responsible, reasonable;
And she joined the Progressive Club.
One night, with the radio
Playing Schubert,
They shot each other.
The police investigated carefully
And called it a mystery.