

# *Sketch*

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## Uncle Nigger

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# Uncle Nigger

By Dorothy Bloedel

**T**HE MELLOW, morning sunlight flowed over the small gathering of people in the little basement Sunday School room. Long, quiet breezes blew out the pale mesh curtains at the windows in the back. As their soft folds pulsed steadily in and out, in and out, glimpses of spring jonquils could be seen, their yellow-green stalks and golden blooms at a level with the eyes of the occupants of the room. Time-worn, bow-backed chairs, fulfilling an almost traditional picture, were in order, row back of row, in precise semicircle about a small, pulpit-like brown table which stood between them and the heavy shut doors of the main Sunday School room.

In the front row of chairs, close to the table, sat a small group of the best "old folks" in town. The remaining chairs were vacant. Those present had the attitude of devoutly listening to the mumbling words of the one in front who spasmodically prayed in the dry, thin voice of the aged. The sweet, warm air in the little room made them drowsy, saturated with dreams. They listened absent-mindedly to the bluebird in the pine outside and admired its call. They sleepily scrutinized the flowered carpet under their feet and moved their toes about cautiously to see which way the nap lay. Aunt Mary, the active old lady who at seventy could "sing as good as she ever could", yawned, stifled the yawn, and ended with a sigh. With that as a cue the class leader looked up over his spectacles and droned his prayer to an end. "Amen."

**P**ATIENT HEADS arose and cramped legs moved. A sigh ran down the line, stopping at one chair after another until it touched seven. But it hesitated at the eighth and decided that here it was unwanted, for "Nigger" Thompson was busy. The class looked at him with sleepy expectancy as he rose

stiffly. On the lone chair behind the tinkly, upright piano in the front of the room were piled straggling stacks of worn, red hymnbooks. "Nigger" Thompson walked slowly up to them. Stooping, his bowed shoulders and bent arm making a pathetic, bony angle, he picked up some of the books gently and placed them in the crook of his left arm. His wrinkled, dark fingers grasped their edges with fatherly care and he stopped to smooth bent leaves. Then he straightened as far as his work-worn body would straighten and turned toward the class. They waited patiently and unconcernedly. They were getting old and slow themselves.

His walk as he came toward them was not quite a shuffle,—not a shuffle, but the walk of a tired old man, too proud and well-bred to shuffle no matter how much he felt like it. He handed each a book—each in turn—Aunt Mary; old Martin Jones; Sam Spaulding, the retired banker; "Spec" Long, "the doddering old fool"; Annie White, still teaching school; then Mrs. Bates, a farmer's wife; and finally he handed the next to the last hymnal to Samuel Wells, his pal of the old days, but now a stranger. Success had turned his head.

The leader named the page. Annie went to the piano, and they sang willingly in high pitched voices—"Bringing in the sheaves, bringing in the sheaves, we will come rejoicing—"

"NIGGER" THOMPSON looked down the line. All these worshippers had been classmates and friends of his in the old days. They were white, yes, and he was black, and color had meant nothing. But he had learned its tragedy. Back in those ivy-covered halls of the little Congregational college (look out of the church window now and you can see the old girls' dormitory with its broken window panes) he had learned tragedy.

A little black-haired girl, dark and comely, had walked about the halls with him, her soft, low voice charming him. He had fallen in love; he hadn't been able to help it. But her skin was red. She was an Indian, princess of her tribe and proud of her ancestry. He had lied desperately, saying that he too was an Indian. He had denounced his race, something he had never before dreamed of; but she had known that he lied.

His features, his hair, his gait had given him away. And now people had nicknamed him "Nigger". How he hated it, and how meekly he accepted it.

When he had been graduated from the little college, he had found that he couldn't leave it—it and his memories. So he had bought a small house in town and had worked steadily in his large garden, always thinking and remembering. When the college had found its going harder and harder, he had given it his entire wealth and started raising sweet potatoes to peddle to his old friends. His back ached. He hadn't time to chat on Main Street any more. He barely recognized his old classmates when they came to their back doors. Finally, then, the college had closed and "Nigger" Thompson had cried that day as he plowed his potatoes. But he had to keep on living; so still he carted his potatoes.

"Nigger" Thompson looked down at his book. The hymn was sing-songing its way to the last note. The class droned its solemn "amen" in monotone and then looked expectantly again at "Nigger" Thompson. Again he rose stiffly. Down the line he moved, carefully taking the book from each old hand, nodding humbly to each old person, speaking of the weather to some, merely saying "How do you do" to others. He crossed the room with his armload of books and put them on the chair in a nice, neat pile. Then he turned, half smiled, and said good-bye to those who were not too busy stirring about with their wraps to notice him. Buttoning the top button of his ageless, unpressed sack coat and grasping his crumpled hat, he started up the back stairs—alone.

## Question

By Jean Porter

WHAT IS your plan, O God,  
 When lives are lost  
 And hearts are torn?  
 What is you plan, O God,  
 For us who mourn?

