

from The Human Comedy
by William Saroyan
1952

An excerpt:

[A teacher named Miss Hicks kept two students in after school during their sports practice]

"You [the two boys] were not kept in for punishment, but for education. I watch the growth of spirit in the children who come to my class. You [Homer] apologized to Hubert Ackley. And even though it embarrassed him to do so, because your apology made him unworthy, he graciously accepted your apology. I kept you in after school because I wanted to talk to both of you—one of you from a good well-to-do family, the other from a good poor family. Getting along in this world will be even more difficult for him than for you. I wanted you to know one another a little better. It is very important. I wanted to talk to *both* of you."

"I guess I like Hubert," Homer said, "only he seems to think he's better than the other boys."

"I know how you feel, but every man in the world is better than someone else. And not as good as someone else. Joseph Terranova is brighter than Hubert, but Hubert is just as honest in his own way. In a democratic state every man is the equal of every other man up to the point of exertion, and after that every man is free to exert himself as he chooses. I am eager for my boys and girls to exert themselves about behaving with honor. What my children appear to be on the surface is no matter to me. I am fooled neither by gracious manners nor by bad manners. I am interested in what is truly beneath each kind of manners. Whether one of my children is rich or poor, brilliant or slow, genius or simple-minded, is no matter to me, if there is humanity in him—if he has a heart—if he loves truth and honor—if he respects both his inferiors and his superiors. If the children of my classroom are human, I do not want them to be alike in their *manner* of being human. If they are not corrupt, it does not matter to me how they differ from one another. I want each of my children to be himself. I don't want you to be like somebody else just to please me or to make my work easier. I would soon be weary of a classroom full of perfect little ladies and gentlemen. I want my children to be *people*—each one separate—each one special—each one a pleasant and exciting variation of all the others. I wanted Hubert Ackley here to listen to this with you—to understand with you that if at the present you do not like him and he does not like you, that is perfectly natural. I wanted him to know that each of you will begin to be truly human when, in spite of your natural dislike of one another, you still respect one another. That is what it means to be civilized—that is what we are to learn from a study of ancient history. I'm glad I've spoken to you, rather than to anyone else I know. When you leave this school—long after you have forgotten *me*—I shall be watching for you in the world."

Again Miss Hicks blew her nose and touched her handkerchief to her eyes. "Run along to the athletic field, now."