RAMONA LOWE

The Woman in the Window

The employment agency sent her to a place that wanted a cook. Fifteen a week, they paid. Twelve hours a day, but after all fifteen's good wages.

When the proprietor, Mr. Parsons, saw her he was delighted. He rubbed his hands and showed her the kitchen. There was no need for a prolonged interview. He could see that she was just the thing. And the rest of the establishment was invited to take a peep to see what a treasure had been found.

Mrs. Jackson went right to work frying chicken with a lofty unconcern for the curious faces peeping in at the door and the proprietor's nervously evident pleasure. The tenth time the proprietor appeared in the kitchen he was accompanied by a stout man with an appraising eye, apparently a partner in the restaurant.

"Mr. Kraft," Parsons said loudly by way of introduction, "this is our new cook."

Mrs. Jackson turned her broad back indifferently on the two men. This was not the expected reaction. Parsons cleared his throat for attention. "I didn't get your name."

"You never asked it," Mrs. Jackson corrected him brusquely. "My name's Mrs. Jackson."

"What's your first name?" asked Kraft, surveying her with the brazen air of a master.

"Where I works," Mrs. Jackson replied with finality, "I'm known as Mrs. Jackson."

Kraft, trying to overlook this show of dignity, simply remarked, "She'll be a beaut in the window, Mike. A beaut!"

The proprietor rubbed his hands and addressed Mrs. Jackson. "You look straight from the South," he said.

Mrs. Jackson, suspicious of the compliment, was noncommittal.

"I'll bet your home's in Georgia," continued Parsons chaffingly. Without waiting for this conjecture to be confirmed, he turned to his partner. "How soon can you get the equipment up?"

"Couple of weeks for everything," Kraft replied.

"Good. Good. Mrs. Jackson, we're going to make a few alterations, but business will go on just the same. When the alterations are complete, you will be cooking in the window!"

Shock ran through Mrs. Jackson. Her mind had not followed the trend of their remarks to this conclusion.

"Yes, ma'am," Kraft rocked on his heels. You'll be displayed just like the pancakes and the waffles."

Mrs. Jackson was verbally not quite equal to the unexpected. She knew where she stood, but she didn't know how to express it. "The 'ployment agency jus' tol' me cookin'," she floundered.

"That's all it is," said Kraft. "Cookin'."

"What you talkin' 'bout a winda?" she wanted to know.

"We're gonna let you do your cookin' in the winda," Kraft explained.

"I doan like nobody watchin' me cook," she protested.

The proprietor sensed the need of tact. "It should be a privilege," he assured her, clipping his words and using his hands for emphasis.

"Humph!" was Mrs. Jackson's wordless comment. Signs of anger were becoming evident.

Kraft selected a piece of chicken from the freshly cooked pile.

"I ain' one for a show, Mr. Parsons," Mrs. Jackson explained; "so if it's a show you want I reckon you'll have t' get somebody else."

But the proprietor's zeal could not recognize lack of enthusiasm in anyone else. "We're gonna have all new equipment," he announced. "Everything new. You can see everything that's going on in the street. Our customers will see how clean and tempting everything is. We'll run the frauds that advertise Southern cooking out of business."

Mrs. Jackson was not interested.

But Kraft, eating his piece of chicken, knew a formula for compulsion to his will. "We'll make it eighteen a week—give you a vegetable preparer and a dishwasher," he offered.

Mrs. Jackson did not take long to consider. A family that had to be supported, when jobs were scarce and poor-paying, made duty triumph over pride.

Parsons beamed. "Then it's eighteen a week. All settled."

Kraft wiped his greasy fingers on a dish towel with the satisfied and confident air of a man who always knows how to settle all things. "Anybody who can cook chicken like that is worth a million," he said.

When the alterations were complete, Mrs. Jackson was moved into the window. She was wearing her neat blue cover-all apron. But she hadn't reckoned with enterprise.

Parsons hovered about, rubbing his hands.

"Mrs. Jackson, that's fine. Now. I wonder if you have a skirt. Green or purple. And a big white apron. Then we'll have to have a bandanna."

Mrs. Jackson was appalled. She drew herself up indignantly. "No, sir!" she said. "I ain' got none of them things."

Parsons was not discouraged. "Well, we'll have to get them, Mrs. Jackson. We'll have to get them."

And he did. . . . He got a voluminous dark purple skirt, a big white apron, a loose snowy blouse, a green shaw and a red bandanna. "Now," he cautioned, "no corsets, Mrs. Jackson, and we're made."

Mrs. Jackson, who had always minimized her bulk with the soberest of colors, was stubborn. "I'm cookin' in this here winda, but I ain' gonna look like no circus freak."

"This is Southern," said Parsons brightly.

"The South ain' never had nothin' looked like that," averred Mrs. Jackson.

Parsons, convinced of his infallibility, was heedless of criticism. "Now I'm just going to make you a present of this," he said.

But Mrs. Jackson would have none of his generosity. "What I want with that stuff?" she snapped.

Parsons, baffled by this ingratitude, was reduced to one word, "Please."

"Why, folks'd laugh," argued the offended woman.

Parsons was exultant again. "That's just it! That's just what we want! We want people to laugh."

Mrs. Jackson put down her cooking fork with a look that predicted resignation from a distasteful occupation.

"Twenty dollars a week," offered the resolute Parsons, remembering how Kraft had achieved his success.

Mrs. Jackson had a conscience quickened by four little children who had to be clothed and fed and who belonged to her. She grumbled, "Ain' *nobody* ever wore no such foolishness!" But she accepted.

Parsons was jubilant. There was his bright spot to attract, his mass of color to display, his invitation to new volumes of business. He arranged the bandanna-ends to stand up like two-impudent ears. His caricature lacked but one detail.

"Now if you could just smile, Mrs. Jackson."

But Mrs. Jackson couldn't. "I spose you think smiles is put on like cloes," she said. "I ain' no actress, Mr. Parsons."

So she set to work in the window. Children trooped past, just out of school. One of the white youngsters, sighting her, cried out gleefully, "Oooh lookee, Aunt Jemima!"

"That Aunt Jemima?" queried another.

"Sure that's Aunt Jemima. Hey, you, Aunt Jemima!"

One of the colored youngsters, flattening his dusky face against the pane, saw his mother.

The blood ran molten from her throat to the pit of her stomach.

"Oh black mammy! Oh Aunt Jemima!" shouted the white children. And one broke out in song.

"Nigger, nigger in the pot.
Stew him till his bones all rot."

The dark youngster ran on, his companions following with their tormenting ditty.

Mrs. Jackson wondered if her other children would pass by. The perspiration stood out on her forehead. She had no strength to wipe it away. She leaned against the table and looked out, and the world looked in curiously at the embodiment of a fiction it had created. But then three round, dark faces appeared at the pane who had never imagined this fantasy before them. They gazed with wonder. With an almost imperceptible movement of her head, she ordered them away. They started to run, but the youngest looked back and asked, "What's Mama doing there?"

Coming out of the alley-way, her day's work done, Mrs. Jackson was confronted by a huge new neon sign in front of the restaurant. It bore the legend: *Mammy's.*

What could she say to the children? Should she take advantage of her superior position and force them to an unquestioning subservience to the indignities of human life, or should she make them comrades in her battle for a livelihood? When she reached the door of her flat, she paused. She was so ashamed. Four pairs of eyes were wide open as she tiptoed into the room. "You wake?" she asked.

"Yes'm," replied the eldest.

Mrs. Jackson took off her coat and hat busily, wishing vaguely that they had been asleep and she might defer explanation till morning at least. But her young son allowed her no leeway. "Mama, that wasn't you in the winda, was it?" He asked the question with a downward inflection, as though convinced that it couldn't have been she.

"Yes, honey, that was me. Why ain' you children sleep?" There was silence for a moment. Then another question.

"What you in the winda for?"

"I got t' work. Tha's my job."

"I thought you did cookin', Mama," remarked one of the girls.

"Tha's cookin'."

Her son thought. Then he spoke. "I don't like that kind of cookin'."

"Now you children jus lissen t' me. There's some things you got t'

unnerstan'. Some work's dignified 'n' some ain' so dignified. But it all got t' be done. My work's cookin' 'n' there ain' nothin' wrong with that. If I didn' cook you wouldn' have no shoes 'n' I wouldn' have no shoes 'n' we wouldn' have nothin' t' eat 'n' I 'speck we'd jus' lay up here 'n' die." She paused for breath, then went on:

"The owner man where I works thinks he gonna dress me up t' look like a ol' Southern mammy 'n' get a lotta business—"

"What's a ol' Southern mammy, Mama?"

"A Southern mammy's a ol' colored woman who had the nursin' of all the little white children t' do in the South doin slavery times. Sometimes you hears folks talkin' big 'bout their ol' mammy 'n' how powerful much they loved her 'n' all."

"Is that good, Mama?" asked her son, doubting that a mammy was to be approved."

"Well, when you hears such talk you jus' say 'uh, huh,' 'n' let whoever's talkin' talk on."

"Then what happened after you was a Southern mammy, Mama?" The little girls were impatient.

"Then I had t' do my cookin' in the winda. 'N' when you go pas', you can speak, but doan you linger. 'N' if your little fren's asks questions, you tell'm that's your mama all right. She's got t' work for a livin'." She paused. *" 'N' son, doan you never let me see you run no more when a body say nigger. You turn roun' 'n' give'm such a thrashin' they woan never forget. Unnerstan'?"*

The youngster remonstrated. "They said in Sunday school we wasn't to fight—"

"You got t' use a little horse sense bout some things, son," his mother replied tersely. "Now you all go t' sleep."

The little boy went back to his cot and the little girls snuggled against each other under the thin blanket. Mrs. Jackson was about to lift her weary self from the edge of the bed when the smallest girl, as if divining the trouble stirring in her mother's soul, crept up to her and whispered, "Mama, I thought you looked pretty in the winda. Real pretty."