

A WORD FOR MARA

by Ken Bradbury



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CAST OF CHARACTERS

Mrs. Roate, the shelter manager

Emma, a frail young mother of 25

Mara, her mute 10-year-old daughter

MRS. ROATE: Come. No, don't dawdle there. Wipe your shoes and come in. Come in here, child. This is your girl? What's the matter? Can't she speak? Can she even hear? You're not sure? Good Lord, what sort of mother are you?

NARRATOR: St. Louis, Missouri, 1929. The Good Shepherd Mission was the only salvation for thousands during the Depression and the only hope for hundreds of children, including Mara. The Catholic Church shuffled whatever funds they could to this storefront shelter, and through these doors came the city's helpless and hopeless, the bitter refuse of bad times. Tonight, Emma Willard, a young mother stricken with consumption, and her 10-year-old daughter Mara appear on the doorstep. From *A Word for Mara*, by Ken Bradbury.

MRS. ROATE: *(a rough matron and manager of the shelter, overworked and therefore often lacking in social graces)* Give me that coat. *(pulling it away from Emma)* Give it to me. *(looking at Emma in disgust)* Lord girl, you need a bath ... and your child ... Do you ever wash her?

EMMA: *(a very frail woman of twenty-five, sick and exhausted to the point of collapse)* I ... we've come upon hard times, ma'am.

MRS. ROATE: Ain't no excuse for dirt, girl. God, what's all over the girl's face? *(grabbing Mara by the chin)* Scabbies?

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Can't you see this is what comes of wallowin' in filth? Can she hear or not? (*shouting into Mara's face*) Can you hear me, girl? God. Dumb as a post, ain't she?

EMMA: Mara's never been able to speak but she reads your lips.

MRS. ROATE: She can? (*grabbing Mara and shouting*) Can you read this, girl? We're gonna wash your deaf and dumb little face! You're a mess!

EMMA: This is church mission?

MRS. ROATE: The Sisters of Saint Michael. (*laughing*) Oh, don't look at me, I ain't one. The holy sisters don't even show their face down here at street level. While they pray downtown at the Cathedral, it's me, Mrs. Roate what does the dirty work of God. (*grabbing Mara again*) Now give me a shot at that face, honey.

MARA: (*though mute, protests*)

EMMA: Please don't touch her so roughly, Mrs. Roate. Let me wash her. (*as she reaches for Mara, Emma begins to cough deeply*)

MRS. ROATE: Good Lord girl, you ain't in any condition to do nothin'. Sit down there while I fill out the form.

EMMA: (*still trying to catch her breath*) Form? What form, Mrs. Roate?

MRS. ROATE: Indigent report. How old is she?

EMMA: Mara's ten. Please, if we could just have some food. It's been days since ...

MRS. ROATE: Ten ... that's under the legal, you know.

EMMA: What are you talking about?

MRS. ROATE: And she's deaf and dumb?

EMMA: She can't hear. But I can tell everything she wants to say.

MRS. ROATE: (*writing*) Deaf and dumb. I got one cot for you, ma'am, and there's the floor upstairs for the deafy.

EMMA: We ... we can't stay apart, Mrs. Roate.

MRS. ROATE: Parish rules, miss. You're sick ... consumption if I guess it right. And the deafy ... she's under the legal age and retarded. The parish takes legal control of her.

EMMA: She's not retarded! She's deaf!

MRS. ROATE: Same story.

EMMA: No! (*begins to choke again*) That can't be! Please!
We'll go elsewhere. Mara, come here!

MRS. ROATE: (*taking hold of Mara*) She ain't goin' nowhere, miss ... not with the condition your in. The law says if the mother's in a bad way and the child's not able to communicate, we got the legal authority to take care of her. It's the Depression, ma'am. I got thirty-seven kids upstairs. All 'em with mothers who swear they could take care of 'em but they can't. Some don't live through the night and like as not, that's the future you're lookin' at.

EMMA: Mara! Come here, sweetheart! (*the excitement again brings her to a stop with a fit of coughing*) We can't be separated. Please, Mrs. Roate.

MRS. ROATE: Go ahead. Starve her. You look all over St. Louis and you come tell me a place that'll feed you and give you bed for tonight. Go ahead! These are hard times, missy. Calls for hard measures. I can feed you and the girl. I can wash her filthy face and give you a place to stay, but there's certain measures in return. You understand me, missy?

EMMA: (*beaten, slowly relaxes her grip on the child*) I ... I'm sorry. I'm just so very tired and ... and I don't feel well. My church ... I came to my church to ... (*she collapses*)

MRS. ROATE: Good God a-mighty! Get outa the way girl, your mama's gone down. (*pulling Emma to a cot*) Here ... rest here, missy. Lord, you ain't gonna last the night. I told it true. There. Lord, what a mess. (*to Mara*) Look close, child. Your mama ain't long for the world. I recognize the look ... diggin' down deep for one last breath and hoarse and raspin' ... (*shouting in Mara's face again*) She's gonna die, child! Get upstairs and I'll tend to her.

EMMA: (*in semi-consciousness, weakly*) Mara ...

MARA: (*reaches for her mother and whines*)

MRS. ROATE: I'll take care of her, Missy.

EMMA: No. Mara ... Don't leave me ...

MARA: (*in tears, reaching for her mother*)



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