

# The Believing Child

ZENNA HENDERSON

No one seeing me sitting here, my hands stubbornly relaxed, my face carefully placid, could possibly know that a terrible problem is gnawing at me. In fact, I can't believe it myself. It couldn't possibly be. And yet I've got to solve it. Oh, I have lots of time to find a solution! I have until 2:15. And the hands of my watch are scissoring out the minutes relentlessly. 1:45. What will I do! What will I do if 2:15 comes and I haven't got through to Dismey? She's sitting over there by Donna now, her scraggly hair close to Donna's shining, well-nourished curls.

That hair of Dismey's. I saw it before I saw her face that October morning and knew, with a sigh for the entry of my forty-fifth child, that she was from the campground—a deprived child. Somehow it always shows in their hair. I breathed a brief prayer that she would be clean at least. She was—almost painfully so. Her hands and ankles were rusty with chapping, not with dirt. Her sagging dress, a soft faded blue down the front, with a hint of past pattern along the side seams and at the collar, was clean, but not ironed. Her lank, bleached-burlap hair lifelessly bracketed her thin face and descended in

irregular tags roughly to her shoulders. But its combed-with-water patterns were bisected by a pink-clean parting.

Well, I welcomed her to my first grade classroom, pleased that she was a girl. I was so weary of the continual oversupply of little boys. I was surprised that her mother had come with her. Usually from that area, parents just point the kids toward the bus stop and give them a shove. But there the mother was, long in the wrist and neck and face. She was wearing Levis and a faded plaid shirt that had safety pins for buttons. She was older than I'd expect Dismey's mother to be. Her narrow shoulders were twisted to one side and a deep convex curve bent her spine out against the shirt. I couldn't tell if it was the result of a lifetime of sagging, or was an actual deformity. Her left cheek sucked in against no-teeth, and the sharp lines that crisscrossed her face reminded me of the cracklings of thin mud drying in the sun.

"Dismey?" I asked. "How do you spell it?"

"You're the teacher," said her mother, her voice a little hoarse as though not used much. "Spell it the way you want. Her name's Dismey

Coven. She's six. She ain't been to school none yet. We been with the cabbages in Utah."

"We're supposed to have a birth certificate—" I ventured.

"Never had none," said Mrs. Coven shortly. "She was born anyway. In Utah. When we were there with the cabbage."

So I had her repeat the name and stabbed at the spelling. I put down October for a birthdate, counting backwards far enough to give her a birth-year to match her age—usual procedure, only sometimes they don't even know the month for sure—the crops harvesting at the time, yes, but not the month.

All this time the mother had been clutching Dismey's shoulders with both hands, and Dismey had just stood there, her back pressed against her mother, her face quiet, her pale eyes watching. When I'd got all the necessary information, including the fact that unless we had free lunch for Dismey, she wouldn't eat, the mother shoved Dismey at me abruptly and told her, "Mind the teacher." And said to me, "Teach her true. She's a believin' child."

And she left without another word or a backward glance.

So then, where to seat my forty-fifth child in my forty-four-seat room. I took a quick census. Every child there. Not a vacant chair available. The only unoccupied seat in the room was the old backless chair I used for a

stepstool and for a sin-seat in the Isolation Corner. Well, Bannie could do with a little more distance between him and Michael, and he knew the chair well, so I moved him over to the library table with it and seated Dismey by Donna, putting her in Donna's care for the day.

I gave Dismey a pencil and Crayolas and other necessary supplies and suggested that she get acquainted with the room, but she sat there, rigid and unmoving for so long that it worried me. I went over to her and printed her name for her on a piece of our yellow practice paper.

"Here's your name, Dismey. Maybe you'd like to see if you can write it. I'll help you."

Dismey took the pencil from me, holding it as though it were a dagger. I had to guide every finger to its correct place before she could hold it for writing. We were both sweating when we got through the name. It had been like steering a steel rod through the formation of the letters. Dismey showed no signs of pleasure—shy or overt—that most beginners exhibit when confronted with their first attempt at their names. She looked down at the staggering letters and then up at me.

"It's your name, Dismey," I smiled at her and spelled it to her. She looked down again at the paper, and the pencil wavered and swung until she had it dagger-wise once more. She jabbed the point of the pencil down on the next line. It stabbed through the paper. With a quick, guilty hand, she covered the

tear, her shoulders hunching to hide her face.

I opened the box of crayons and shook them out where she could see the colors, luring her averted face back toward me.

"Maybe you'd rather color. Or go around and see what the other children are doing." And I left her, somewhat cheered. At least she had known that a line is for writing on! *That* is a mark of maturity!

All the rest of the morning she roosted tentatively on the front four inches of her chair, stiff as a poker. At recess, she was hauled bodily by Donna to the bathroom and then to the playground. Donna dutifully stayed by her side, wistfully watching the other children playing, until time to drag Dismey to the line and to point out that there was a girl line and a boy line.

After recess, Dismey unbent—once. Just enough to make two very delicate lines on a paper with her red crayon when she thought I wasn't looking. Then she just sat staring, apparently entranced at the effect. It was most probable that she had never held a crayon before.

Lunchtime came and in the cafeteria she stared at her plate a minute and then ate so fast with spoon and scooping fingers that she nearly choked.

"Would you like some more?" I asked her. She looked at me as though I were crazy for asking. She slowed down midway through her

third helping. There was a quiver along her thin cheek when she looked at me. It could have been the beginning of a smile. Donna showed her where to put her dirty dishes and took her out to the playground.

During that first afternoon, she finally drew a picture—an amazingly mature one—of three wobbly plates full of food and a lopsided milk carton with a huge straw in it. Under Donna's urging she took up her red crayon and, down at the bottom, she carefully copied from her name paper a *Di*, but when the *s* turned backward on her, she covered it with a quick, guilty hand and sat rigid until dismissal time.

I worried about Dismey that afternoon after the children were gone. I was used to frightened, withdrawn children, terrified by coming into a new school, but nothing quite so drastic as Dismey. No talking, no laughing, no smiles, or even tears. And such wariness—and yet her mother had called her a believing child. But then, there's believing and believing. Belief can be a very negative thing, too. Maybe what Dismey believed the most was that you could believe in nothing good—except maybe three platefuls of food and a red crayon. Well, that was a pretty good start!

Next morning I felt a little more cheerful. After all, yesterday had been Dismey's first day at a new school. In fact, it had been her first day at any school. And children adjust wonderfully well—usually.

I looked around for Dismey. I didn't have to look far. She was



backed into the angle of the wall by the door of our room, cornered by Bannie and Michael. I might have known. Bannie and Michael are my thorns-in-the-flesh this year. Separately they are alert, capable children, well above average in practically everything. But together! Together they are like vinegar and soda—erupting each other into the wildest assortment of devilment that two six-year-olds could ever think up. They are flint and steel to the biggest blaze of mischief I've ever encountered. Recently, following a Contradict Everything Phase, they had lapsed into a Baby Phase, complete with thumb-sucking, baby talk, and completely tearless infantile wailing—the noise serving them in the same capacity as other children's jet-zooming or six-gun banging or machine-gun rattling.

The two didn't see me coming and I stood behind them a minute, curious to see just what they had dreamed up so soon to plague Dismey with.

"And it's a 'lectric paddle and it's specially for girls," said Bannie solemnly.

"You stood up in the swing and the 'lectric paddle is specially for girls that stand up in swings," amplified Michael soberly. "And it hurts real bad."

"It might even kill you," said Bannie with relish.

"Dead," said Michael, round of eye that shifted a little to send a glint of enjoyment at Bannie.

Dismey hunched one shoulder and drew a shaking hand across her

stricken cheek. "I didn't know—" she began.

"Of course she didn't know," I said sternly. "Bannie and Michael, indoors!" I unlocked the door and shooed them in. Then I stooped and put my arms around a rigid, unbending Dismey. I could feel her bones under her scant flesh and flimsy dress.

"It isn't so, Dismey," I said. "There isn't any electric paddle. There's no such thing. They were just teasing you. But we do have a rule about standing up in the swings. You might fall out and get hurt. Here comes Donna now. You go play with her and she'll tell you about our rules. And don't believe Bannie and Michael when they tell you bad things. They're just trying to fool you."

In the room I confronted the two completely unrepentant sinners.

"You weren't kind to Dismey," I said. "And she's our new student. Do you want her to think that we're all unkind here at our school?"

They had no answer except Bannie's high-pitched giggle that he uses when he is embarrassed.

"Besides that, what you told her wasn't true."

"We were just playing," said Michael, trading side-glances with Bannie.

"Telling things that aren't true isn't a very good way to have fun," I reminded them.

"We were just playing," said Michael, while Bannie had recourse to his thumb.

"But Dismey didn't know you were only playing," I said. "She



thought you were telling the truth.”

“We were just playing,” said Bannie around his thumb.

After we had gone around and around a couple more times, I sternly sent them outside. The two ran shrieking, holding the seats of their Levis, yelling, “We got a licking! With the ’lectric paddle! A-wah! A-wah!”

And my heart sank. I had a premonition that the Baby Phase was about to give way to a Tease Dismey Phase.

Dismey came slowly to life in the classroom. She began to function with the rest of the class, catching up with ease with the children who had been in school a month before she arrived. She swooped through long and short vowels and caught us in initial consonants. She showed a flare for drawing and painting. Her number work and reading flowed steadily into her—and stayed there instead of ebbing and flowing as it does for so many children. But all the rest of the classroom activities paled to insignificance as far as Dismey was concerned before the wonder of story time. It was after the first few sessions of story time immediately following the afternoon recess that I realized what Dismey’s mother meant by calling her a believin’ child.

Dismey believed without reservation in the absolute truth of every story she heard. She was completely credulous.

It’s hard to explain the difference between the fairy tales for her and for the rest of the class. The others be-

lieved wholeheartedly while the story was in progress and then set it aside without a pang. But there was a feeling of eager acceptance and—and recognition—that fairly exuded from Dismey during story time that sometimes almost made my flesh creep. And this believing carried over to our dramatization of the stories too, to such an extent that when Dismey was the troll under the bridge for The Billy Goats Gruff, even Bannie paled and rushed over the bridge, pell-mell, forgetting the swaggering challenge that he as the Big Billy Goat was supposed to deliver. And he flatly refused to go back and slay the troll.

But this credulity of hers served her a much worse turn by making her completely vulnerable to Bannie and Michael. They had her believing, among other unhappy things, that a lion lived in the housing of the air-raid siren atop the cafeteria. And when the Civilian Defense truck came to check the mechanism and let the siren growl briefly, Dismey fled to the room, white-eyed and gasping, too frightened to scream. She sat, wet-faced and rigid, half the afternoon in spite of all my attempts to reassure her.

Then one day I found her crying out by the sidewalk, when she should have been in class. Tears were falling without a sound as she rubbed with trembling desperation at the sidewalk.

“What’s the matter, Dismey?” I asked, squatting down by her, the

better to see. "What are you doing?"

"My mama," she choked out, "I hurt my mama!"

"What do you mean?" I asked, bewildered.

"I stepped on a crack," she sobbed. "I didn't mean to but Bannie pushed me. And now my mama's back is busted! Can you fix a busted back? Does it cost very much?"

"Oh, Dismey, honey!" I cried, torn between pity and exasperation. "I told you not to believe Bannie. 'Step on a crack and break your mother's back' isn't for true! It's just a singing thing the children like to say. It isn't really so!"

I finally persuaded Dismey to leave the sidewalk, but she visibly worried all the rest of the day and shot out of the door at dismissal time as though she couldn't wait to get home to reassure herself.

Well, school went on and we switched from fairy tales to the Oz books, and at story time every day I sat knee-deep in a sea of wondering faces and experienced again with them my own enchantment when I was first exposed to the stories. And Dismey so firmly believed in every word I read that Michael and Bannie had her terror-stricken and fugitive every time a dust devil whirled across the playground. I finally had to take a decisive hand in the affair when I found Michael struggling with a silently desperate Dismey, trying to pry her frenzied hands loose from the playground fence so the whirlwind could pick *her* up and blow her over the Deadly Desert and into the hands

of the Wicked Witch of the West.

Michael found his Levis not impervious to a Ping-Pong paddle, which was the ultimate in physical punishment in our room. He also found not to his liking the Isolation outside the room, sitting forlornly on the steps by our door for half a day, but the worst was the corporate punishment he and Bannie had visited upon them. They were forbidden to play with each other for three days. The sight of their weebegone, drooping figures cast a blight over the whole playground, and even Dismey forgave them long before the time was up.

But her tender-heartedness left her only more vulnerable to the little devils when they finally slipped back into their old ways.

We finished the first of the Oz books and were racing delightedly into the first part of *The Magic of Oz*, and there it was! Right on page 19! We all looked at it solemnly. We wrote it on the board. We contemplated it with awe. *A real live magic word!* All we had to do now to work real magic was to learn how to pronounce the word.

Therein lay the difficulty. We considered the word. PYRZQXGL. We analyzed it. We knew all the letters in it, but there were no vowels except 'and sometimes Y.' How could you sound out a word with no vowels and no place to divide it into syllables? Surely a word that long would have more than one syllable!

"We'll have to be careful even trying to say it, though," I warned. "Because if you do find the right way to pronounce it, you can—well, here it tells you—'. . . transform anyone into beast, bird or fish, or anything else, and back again, once you knew how to pronounce the mystical word.' "

"You could even change yourself. Wouldn't it be fun to be a bird for a while? But that's what you have to watch carefully. Birds can talk in the Land of Oz, but can they talk here?"

The solemn consensus was no, except for papkeets and myna birds.

"So if you changed yourself into a bird, you couldn't ever change yourself back. You'd have to stay a bird unless someone else said the magic word for you. So you'd better be careful if you learn the way to say it."

"How *do* you say it, teacher?" asked Donna.

"I've never found out," I sighed. "I'll have to spell it every time I come to it in the story because I can't say it. Maybe someday I'll learn it. *Then* when it's Quiet Time, I'll turn you all into Easter Eggs, and we'll have a really quiet Quiet Time!"

Laughing, the children returned to their seats and we prepared for our afternoon work. But first, most of the children bent studiously to the task of copying PYRZQXGL from the board to take the word home to see if anyone could help them with it. It was all as usual, the laughing, half-belief of most of the children in the wonderful possibilities of the word, and the solemn intensity of Dismey, bent over

a piece of paper, carefully copying, her mouth moving to the letters.

The affair of Bannie and Michael versus Dismey went on and on. I consulted with the boys' parents, but we couldn't figure out anything to bring the matter to a halt. There seemed to be an irresistible compulsion that urged the boys on in spite of everything we could do. Sometimes you get things like that, a clash of personalities—or sometimes a meshing of personalities that is inexplicable. I tried to attack it from Dismey's angle, insisting that she check with me on everything the boys tried to put over on her before she believed, but Dismey was too simple a child to recognize the subtlety with which the boys worked on occasion. And I tried ignoring the whole situation, thinking perhaps I was making it a situation by my recognition of it. A sobbing Dismey in my arms a couple of times convinced me of its reality.

Then there came yesterday. It was a raw blustery day, bone-chilling in spite of a cloudless sky, a day that didn't invite much playing outdoors after lunch. We told the children to run and romp for fifteen minutes after we left the cafeteria and then to come back indoors for the rest of the noon period. I shivered in my sweater and coat, blinking against the flood of sunlight that only made the cold, swirling winds across the grounds feel even colder. The children, screaming with excitement and release, swirled



with the winds, to and fro, in a mad game of tag that consisted in whacking anyone handy and running off madly in all directions shrieking, "You're it, had a fit, and can't get over it!"

It didn't take long for the vitality of some of our submarginals to run short, and when I saw Treesa and Hannery huddling in the angle of the building, shaking in their cracked, oversized shoes as they hugged their tattered sweaters about them, I blew the whistle that called the class indoors.

The clamor and noise finally settled down to the happy hum of Quiet Time, and I sighed and relaxed, taking a quick census of the room, automatically deducting the absentees of the day. I straightened and checked again.

"Where's Dismey?" I asked. There was a long silence. "Does anyone know where Dismey is?"

"She went to the restroom with me," said Donna. "She's afraid to go alone. She thinks a dragon lives down in the furnace room and she's scared to go by the steps by herself."

"She wuz play tag weez us," said Hannery, with his perennial sniff.

"Maybe she go'd to beeg playgroun'," suggested Treesa. "We don' s'pose to go to beeg playgroun'," she added virtuously.

Then I heard Bannie's high, embarrassed giggle.

"Bannie and Michael, come here."

They stood before me, a picture of innocence. "Where is Dismey?" I

asked. They exchanged side-glances. Michael's shoulders rose and fell. Bannie looked at his thumb, dry of, lo, these many weeks, and popped it into his mouth.

"Michael," I said, taking hold of his shoulders, my fingers biting. "Where is Dismey?"

"We don't know," he whined, suddenly afraid. "We thought she was in here. We were just playing tag."

"What did you do to Dismey?" I asked, wondering wildly if they had finally killed her.

"We—we—" Michael dissolved into frightened tears before the sternness of my face and the lash of my words.

"We didn't do nothing," cried Bannie, taking his thumb out of his mouth, suddenly brave for Michael. "We just put a rock on her shadow."

"A rock on her shadow?" My hands dropped from Michael's shoulders.

"Yeth." Bannie's courage evaporated and his thumb went back into his mouth. "We told her she couldn't move."

"Sit down," I commanded, shoving the two from me as I stood. "All of you remember the rules for when I'm out of the room," I reminded the class. "I'll be right back."

The playground was empty except for the crumpled papers circling in an eddy around the trash can. I hurried over to the jungle gym. No Dismey. I turned the corner of the Old Building and there she was,

straining and struggling, her feet digging into the ground, the dirt scuffed up over her ragged shoes, her whole self pulling desperately away from the small rock that lay on her shadow. I saw—or thought I saw—the shadow itself curl up around her knobby, chapped ankles.

“Dismey!” I cried. “Dismey!”

“Teacher!” she sobbed. “Oh, teacher!”

I had my arms around her, trying to warm her stiff little hands in mine, trembling to her shivering, wincing to the shriveled blue lips that shook with her crying.

“But, Dismey, honey!” I cried. “It isn’t so! You could have come back to the room anytime! A rock can’t hold your shadow! It isn’t true!”

*But I had to move that rock* before I could pick her up to carry her back to the room.

It was a subdued, worried room the rest of the day. Bannie and Michael lost all interest in working. They sat apprehensively in their chairs, waiting for lightning to strike. I didn’t say anything to them. I had nothing left to say. I had said and re-said everything I could ever think of. I had done what I knew to do, and it hadn’t worked. Not even a trip into the office to interview Mr. Beasley had subdued them more than half a day. I couldn’t even think straight about the matter any more. I had reached the point where I believed that I had felt the tug of a tethered shadow. I had found it necessary to move a rock before I could lift a child.

I was out of my depth—but completely. And I was chilled to realize that not only Dismey but I—an adult—was entrapped in this believing bit. What might happen next? A feeling that must have been psychic indigestion kept me swallowing all afternoon.

In the warmth of the room, Dismey soon stopped shivering and went quietly about her work, but her eyes slid past the boys or looked through them. Donna swished her brief skirts up to the supply table for paper for Dismey, because the boys sat between her and the table. It looked as though the iron had finally entered Dismey’s soul, and I hoped hopelessly that she had finally got wise to the little monsters.

The unnaturally subdued restraint lasted until dismissal time. I had the quietest most industrious room in my experience—but it wasn’t a happy one.

At Put-away Time, Michael and Bannie put their chairs up on the table *quietly*—without being told to. They *walked* to the coat closet. They lingered by the door until they saw that I had no word for them—or smile—or even frown. They scuffled slowly off to the bus gate. Dismey scurried out of the room as if she were the guilty party and had no word or smile for *me*, and I scuffed off slowly to bus duty.

Children bounce back amazingly. The next day—oh, that’s today!—started off normally enough. We worked well all this morning—though



at the tops of our voices. Michael and Bannie had the devilish light flickering in their eyes again. Dismey neither noticed them nor ignored them. She had a small smile that turned up the corners of her mouth a little. She played happily with Donna and I blessed the good night's sleep I'd had for my return to calmness. I hoped—oh, how I hoped this morning—that the boys had finally decided to find something besides Dismey to occupy their energies.

Lunchtime passed and the mild temperatures out-of-doors let us relax into a full-time play period. Afternoon recess came and went. The tide of children flowed across the floor to pool around my feet for story time.

"Bannie," I said automatically, "I don't want you sitting by—" Then I felt a huge sinking inside of me. My eyes flew to Dismey. She returned my look, completely at ease and relaxed, the small smile still bending her mouth.

"Where's Bannie and Michael?" I asked casually, feeling insanely that this was yesterday again.

"They tol' me they wuz go to beeg playgroun'," sniffed Hannery. "They alla time sneak up there."

"Yeh, yeh," said Treesa. "They go'd to beeg playgroun' but they comed back. They go'd to Old Building and slided on steps. Ain' s'posed to slide on steps," she added virtuously.

"Maybe they didn't hear the bell," suggested Donna. "When you play by the Old Building, sometimes you don't."

I looked at Dismey. She looked back. Her small, pointed tongue circled the smile and then disappeared for the automatic swallow. I looked away, uncomfortable.

"Well, they'll miss out on the story, then," I said. "And because they've been late twice this week, they'll have to be in Isolation for twice as long as they are late." I checked my watch to time the boys and began to read. I didn't hear a word I read. I suppose I paraphrased the story as I usually do, bringing it down to first-grade level. I suppose I skipped over discursive passages that had little interest for my children, but I have no way of knowing. I was busy trying to hold down that psychic indigestion again, the feeling that something terribly wrong had to be put to rights.

After the group went back to their seats and became immersed in their work, I called Dismey quietly up to my desk.

"Where are Michael and Bannie?" I asked her.

She flushed and twisted her thin shoulders. "Out on the playground," she said.

"Why didn't they come when the bell rang?" I asked.

"They couldn't hear the bell ring." The little smile lifted the corners of her mouth. I shivered.

"Why not?" Dismey looked at me without expression. She looked down at the desk and followed her



finger as it rubbed back and forth on the edge. "Dismey," I urged. "Why couldn't they hear the bell?"

"Cause I changed them," she said, her chin lifting a little. "I changed them into rocks."

"Changed them?" I asked blankly. "Into rocks?"

"Yes," said Dismey. "They're mean. They're awfully mean. I changed them." The little smile curled briefly again.

"How did you do it?" I asked.

"What did you do?"

"I learned the magic word," she said proudly. "I can say it right. You know, the one you read to us. That PYRZQXGL." Her voice fluttered and hissed through a sound that raised the short hairs on the back of my neck and all down both my arms.

"And it worked!" I cried incredulously.

"Why, sure," she said. "You said it would. It's a magic word. You read it in the book. Mama told me how to say it. She said how come they put words like that in kids' books. They get away with anything nowadays. That's not a word for kids. But she told me how to say it anyway. See?" She picked up the stapler from my desk. "Be a baby rabbit—PYRZQXGL!" She sputtered the word at it.

And there was a tiny gray bunny nosing inquisitively at my blotter!

"Be what you was before," said Dismey. "PYRZQXGL!" The bunny started slightly and the stapler fell over on its side. I picked it up. It felt warm. I dropped it.

"But—but—" I took a deep breath. "Where are the boys, Dismey? Do you know?"

"I guess so," she said, frowning a little. "I guess I remember."

"Go get them," I said. "Bring them to me."

She looked at me quietly for a moment, her jaw muscles tensing, then she said, "Okay, teacher."

So I sent her, heaven help me! And she came back, heaven help us all! She came back and put three little rocks on the corner of my desk.

"I guess these is them," she said. "Two of them are, anyway. I couldn't remember exactly which ones they was, so I brought an extra one."

We looked at the rocks.

"They're scared," she said. "I turned them into *scared* rocks."

"Do rocks know?" I asked. "Can rocks be scared?"

Dismey considered, head tilted.

"I don't know." The small smile came back. "But if they can—they are."

And there they lie, on my green blotter, in the middle of my battered old desk, in front of my crowded room—three rocks, roughly the size of marbles—and two of them are Michael and Bannie.

And time is running out fast—fast! I can't say the magic word. Nobody can say the magic word except Dismey—and her mother.

Of course I could take them to Mr. Beasley in the office and say.

"Here are two of my boys. Remember? They're the ones that kept picking on the little girl in my room. She turned them into rocks because they were mean. What shall we do?"

Or I could take them to the boys' parents and say, "One of these is your boy. Which one resembles Bannie the most? Take your choice."

I've been looking down at my quiet hands for fifteen minutes now, but the rising murmur in the room and the rustle of movement tell me that it's past time to change activities. I've got to do something—and soon.

Looking back over the whole affair, I see only one possible course of action. I'm going to take a page from Dismey's own book. I'm going to be the believingest teacher there ever was. I believe—I believe implicitly that Dismey will mind me—she'll do as she is told. I believe, I believe, I believe—

"Dismey, come here, please." Here comes the obedient child, up to my desk. "It's almost time to go home, Dismey," I tell her. "Here, take the rocks and go outside by the

door. Turn them back into Michael and Bannie again."

"I don't want to." It's not refusal! It's not refusal! It's just a statement.

"I know you don't. But the bell will be ringing soon, and we don't want to make them miss the bus. Mr. Beasley gets very annoyed when we miss the bus."

"But they were awfully mean." Her eyes are hurt and angry.

"Yes, I know they were, and I'm going to use the paddle on them. But they've been rocks a long time—scared rocks. They know now that you can be mean back at them, so they'll probably let you alone and not bother you any more. Go on, take them outside." She's looking at me intently.

"Remember, your mama said mind the teacher." Her jaws tighten.

The three rocks click together in her hand. She is going out the door. It swings shut jerkily behind her.

Now I am waiting for the door-knob to turn again. *I believe, I believe, I believe—*

#### DISCUSSION

1. It is 2:15. Michael and Bannie are still rocks on the teacher's desk. What does the teacher do now?
2. "I'm going to take a page from Dismey's own book. I'm going to be the believingest teacher there ever was," the teacher says on page 103. What does she mean? Why was Dismey called a believing child?
3. Why does Dismey turn Michael and Bannie into rocks? How does she do it?

For further activities, see page 104.