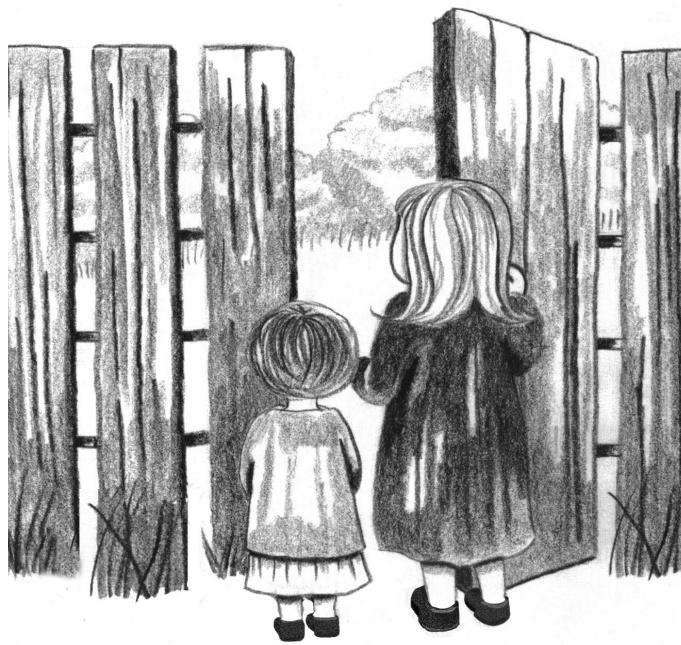


WINSTON, N.C., child?" Mother asked. 1909— A few weeks later, The child stood there with the weather turned cold. her coat too small and her shoes too big. She was wet Winter came in on a wild wind. It had shaken the last leaves from the oak and apple trees and blown them across the yard into a pile against the house. The rain was coming down heavy now as Helen made her way up the back steps, one hand on the rail and the other one tight to a little hand. The child with her was smaller than Moddy's. She was trying to climb the steps in shoes that were unhooked and many sizes too large.

"Well?" Mother waited for Helen to make some explanation.

"Her name is Ruthie. I found her on my way home from Mr. Brown's store. She was outside the mill, crying for her mama. She was so cold that I couldn't leave her there." Helen explained.



Helen and Ruthie

"Come on. Come with me," Helen said as they finally stepped to the top. They crossed the porch and came into the kitchen out of the storm. There they stood. Helen enjoyed the warmth and light of her own kitchen, while the little girl looked around her with wide eyes at the unfamiliar surroundings. "You are welcome here, Ruthie," Helen said as she took off her own coat and hung it on the hook near the door.

Hearing the door slam and footsteps in the kitchen, Mother called from the sitting room, "I'm glad you're home." She began as she walked down the hall. "I was worried when darkness came early. This storm made the day seem later."

She stopped in the doorway. "Who is the

Mother rubbed her hands together the way she did when she couldn't decide what to do. "Let's see," she said as she finally came to the girls and stooped in front of them. Her long skirt and apron bunched out around her. She reached to take the wet coat from the little shoulders. She hung the coat on a chair and gently moved the bewildered child closer to the cook stove. Helen thought that was a sign that Mother might let Ruthie stay.

Opening the oven door a crack, Mother seated the child in a chair and began to pat her hair dry with a kitchen towel. Helen hovered nearby and was the voice for Mother's hand. "You'll be all right, Ruthie. You can stay here with me."

"Now, you know she can't just stay here with you. You

cannot simply take someone off the street." Mother said to Helen, continuing to rub the child's hair. "What will her mother think when she can't find her? Perhaps someone is looking for her now."

"But, Mother, the shift at the mill isn't over until six o'clock, and her mother won't come out until then. If we take her back now, she'll stand there and cry." Helen explained.

Mother put the towel away and reached to the back of the stove where a few biscuits were remaining in the pan. She set a jar of molasses and a plate with the biscuits on the table. "You help her get something to eat while I check on the other children. When Mabel gets home to stay with them, you and I

asleep and took a minute to talk to her daughter.

"I've been thinking," she said. "I was touched by the way you tried to help this child today." Mother stood next to Helen and looked down at her and then at the head resting on the table. "Not at first, mind you! But, when I saw the small worn-out coat, and, while I dried her hair, I realized that you were making a beginning for me." She paused to reflect on the events of the afternoon. "To think, my own little girl helped me to see that changing things can begin with one caring person."

Mother fingered the tiny coat as a way more to gather her thoughts than to see if it had dried. "Somehow I thought that the problems for the mill workers were so great that our family could do nothing, but perhaps we can do something. And I can start by not thinking of the workers as outsiders."

Mother put on her coat and beckoned for Helen to get hers. They woke Ruthie and got her ready to go outside. The rain subsided as the three of them headed

toward the mill. When they arrived, Mother stayed back against the brick wall and watched while Helen and Ruthie waited near the entrance for the six o'clock whistle and for Ruthie's mother to appear.

As Helen and her mother walked home in the night wind, they pulled their collars up and their coats tighter around them. With this cold weather, Helen began to think that Christmas would not be far away. Again she thought of Ruthie. At least that would be one day she knew Ruthie wouldn't have to wait outside of the factory for her mother. Maybe the Sharps could help Ruthie then.

next chapter—The Sharps receive 'best' gifts

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ACTIVITY: Does any child in the news remind you of Ruthie or Helen? Explain why and how.

HISTORY: In 1900, four states had more textile mills than North Carolina. By 1923, only Massachusetts had more.