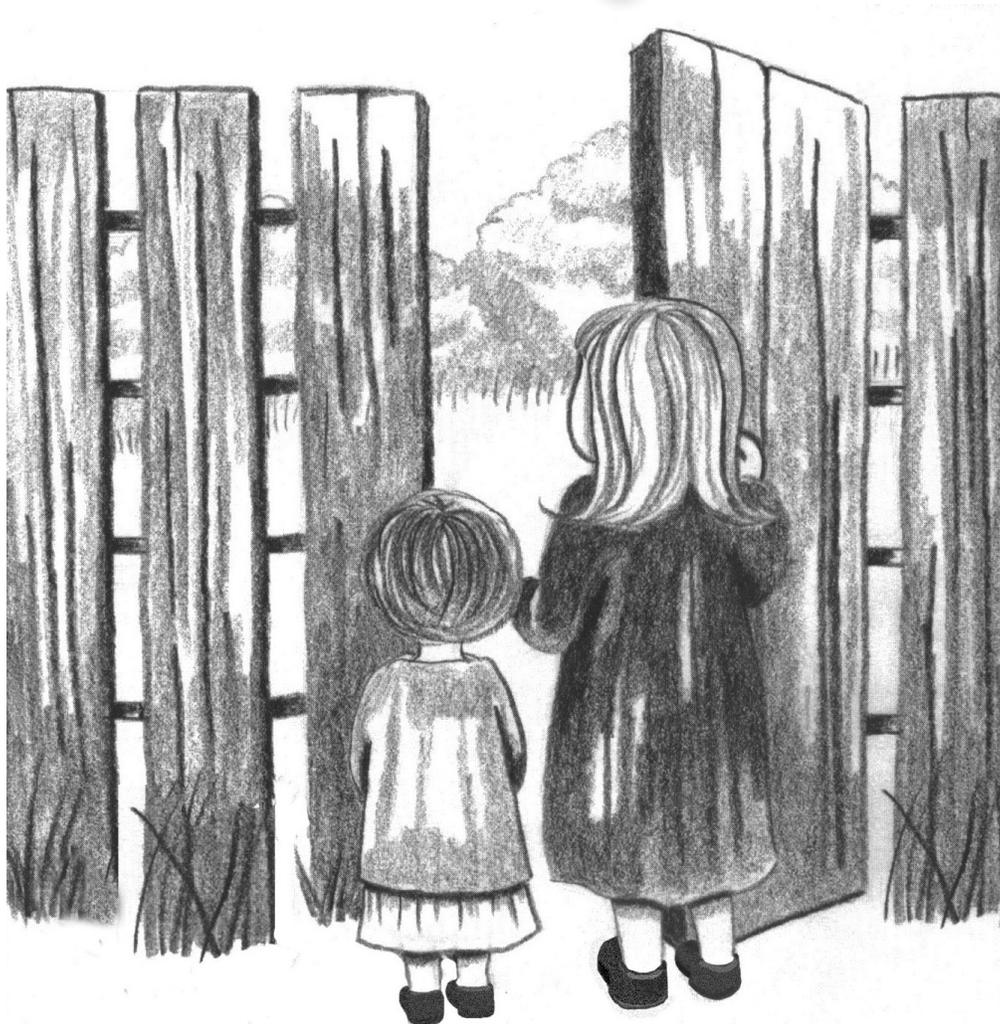


# *Behind the* **HIGH BOARD FENCE**



*The story of a young girl and her family  
who lived during the economic upheaval that  
North Carolina faced 100 years ago.*



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## Chapter One

# The Sharps earn their way

WINSTON, N.C., 1909—No going without your shoes until the first of May. That was the rule at the Sharps' house. However, nine-year-old Helen thought the idea of walking home from school on this hot April afternoon with long stockings and high top shoes made no sense at all. She lagged behind some school friends hoping to find a time and place to take off her shoes and stockings.

Only Libby, her sister, walked with her. Libby was in her first year at school and was two years younger than Helen. Since the pace was slow, Libby did not have to run to keep up as she usually did.

"We can't be late today!" Cal shouted back over his shoulder as he ran past them down the middle of the road.

Their older brother, Cal, was the high-spirited member of the family. He was mischievous at home and at school. He won at marbles and would have had a huge collection if Mother had let him play for keeps. Sometimes he walked with Helen and Libby, bringing along the friends and excitement that accompanied him wherever he went. But today he was off without them.

Helen and Libby continued on the small dirt road that cut through a wooded area with no houses. Horses and wagons seldom passed this way, so the place was perfect for Helen to hide behind a tree, unbutton her stockings from her shirtwaist, roll them down to her ankles and unhook the tops of her shoes.

Libby tagged along with Helen who skipped down the road in her new freedom, blonde curls bouncing and shoe tops flapping like birds rising from the ground. They paid no attention to Cal's reminder to hurry.

On Holly Street, Helen spotted and sat on the steps to a neighbor's yard. Hiding behind Libby's dress, she rolled up her stockings and struggled with the buttons on her shoes. Never mind that she was a mess. Now she would have to



### ***School in Winston-Salem***

hurry before both Mother and Cal were angry with her.

When the girls came through the gate to the high board fence, they faced Cal sitting astride the railing of the porch, kicking his feet in disgust and beating an impatient rhythm on the rails. His rebuke made Helen long to escape to her secret tree.

“Hurry up, Helen. I’ve been waiting on you!” he shouted. What took you so long? You knew I had something special planned for today.”

Helen was hurt that she was left out of his plans. She could see that now she would be left to clean the dinner dishes alone, so she grumbled at him.

“Libby and I had something to do on our way home from school.”

Cal looked at her. “I was going to help, but, now, you’ll be by yourself.”

Cal’s buddy, Joe, whistled from the corner, and Cal bounded off the porch, his newspaper delivery bag flying behind him.

Usually Helen and Cal shared the job of washing the dishes left by the

boarders who ate their noon meal at the Sharps' house. Since their house on Spruce Street was ideally located, three blocks from town, boarders could walk the distance from many businesses. Taking a few extra people for dinner helped to supplement what Papa earned at his new grocery business and Mother made as a tailor.

Harry and Mabel, their grown brother and sister, ate with the boarders. Harry worked at the downtown YMCA, and Mabel, at a department store. The Early sisters came with her. The sisters worked in town as secretaries. The Sharp children sometimes called them the "Early Birds" because they chirped and clucked as they talked.

As Helen stood on the porch, Mother tapped on the inside of the window with her thimble and beckoned her into the sitting room. Libby and Moddy, a younger sister, were already inside playing with a box of buttons. Mother was hand stitching the collar onto a new dress while little Jack sat on the floor under the Singer sewing machine. He pushed and pulled on the treadle that turned the wheel high on the machine, making a click each time the needle went up and down.

"Helen," Mother said to her, "Get Jack away from the machine and set him here, closer to me. And, then, tell me why that big frown is on your face."

Helen answered reluctantly, her frown deepening, "Cal has gone with Joe and left me here to wash the dishes by myself."

"He knows that his chore is to help you before he leaves to do anything else. Did he tell you where he was going?" Mother answered.

"They are planning to go to the train station tomorrow." Helen said. She said no more and headed for the kitchen, not wanting to get Cal in trouble.

The fire was low in the big cook stove. She added a stick or two of wood to it and then ran water from the spigot on the wall into a kettle. Placing the kettle on the stove, she turned to face the dishes that were stacked on the table in the center of the room. Helen worked with two dishpans, washing in one, rinsing in the other and making neat towers of wet and dripping dishes and glasses on the table.

Eventually Mother came in to help. She asked, "Did you say that Cal is planning something for tomorrow?"

“Yes, he and Joe are going to talk about their plans while they sell Joe’s newspapers this afternoon.” Helen replied.

“Maybe,” Mother said, “If they are going to see the Saturday train come in, he’ll take you with them. Then you won’t feel as bad about his leaving you with his work today. ”

Mother didn’t know that Cal’s plans would make trouble for him and Joe.

**ACTIVITY:** List the members of the Sharp family introduced in this chapter and all the work they do. Which jobs earn money? Which are chores to help the family?

Consult the newspaper and select ways that the family members might earn their way, if they lived today.

**HISTORY:** The hyphenated name, Winston-Salem became official in 1913.

## Chapter Two

# Cal and Joe sell newspapers

WINSTON, N.C., 1909—Early the next morning Cal crept quietly into the girls' room and gently nudged Helen. "Get dressed, and meet me in the kitchen," he whispered.

When she came downstairs, she found him alone in the kitchen, cutting thick slices of bread. He had set out the butter and a jar of blackberry jam. Missing from the table this morning was the dishpan of soapy water that Mother used to wash the hands, faces and ears of the children before they left for school. Saturday was different, and they could skip the regular routine.

Helen got the milk from the icebox, poured some in two glasses and finished spreading the bread with butter and jam while Cal went to get a newspaper bag. When he returned, Cal hurried to explain their plan while he and Helen ate. Then they slipped out of the house before the others woke up.

At the corner, Joe was waiting with a stack of local newspapers beside him and more in his newspaper bag. He and Cal loaded the ones on the ground into Cal's bag. Together the three of them turned east toward the train station and the morning sun.

"Why is Helen with you?" Joe asked as they made a single line along the edge of the street.

"She's going with us but just to the station. Mother told me to take her, and I had to promise that we wouldn't go off and leave her." Cal looked at her as she tagged along at the back of their line. Turning to Joe, he continued, "Besides, you know she won't be any trouble because she doesn't want to be left behind."

Helen knew he was right. She'd do almost anything to get him to include her in his adventures.

As they neared the square, the red streaks of sunrise began to vanish, leav-



### ***Train station***

ing the clouds white and the sky a hazy blue. Horses and wagons seemed to be everywhere as farmers drove into town for market day.

The children made their way across the granite pavers of Main Street and headed down the hill to the station. They dodged the horses and carriages bringing passengers and those coming to meet the train. They went inside to the waiting room where a few people were at the window purchasing tickets but hurried out onto the long wooden platform.

There Helen felt the excitement as everything seemed to focus on the incoming train. The mail and baggage carts rattled by as the porters rolled them across the boards of the platform, and the station door slammed as the last passengers joined those already there.

The shrill whistle called from down the tracks and alerted the crowd. Men reached for members of their families, guarding them from the blast of the locomotive. Though they held back, all in the crowd turned to see the ar-

iving train.

Over the noise of the engine and the brakes, Cal yelled to Helen, “Stay right here and wait for us! The train won’t be here long, and we have to hurry.” The boys left her standing on the platform alone. She saw them get on the first coach as soon as the conductor set down the step to take on new passengers.

As the steam disappeared and the soot settled, Helen moved closer to the train. Behind the engine and the coal car were five coaches and a dining car. Helen supposed that beyond those were the Pullman cars with sleeping compartments where travelers from places like New York would be getting up to start a new day on the train. Some would be having breakfast, and maybe they would be buying a newspaper from Cal or Joe.

Little time passed before she saw Cal squeeze by a family that was getting off the train. Helen could see that he was avoiding the conductor. “Let’s go!” he said as he came near her. He headed for the station.

Cal and Helen ran as quickly as they could. Joe was not far behind as they made their way through the station again and back into town. They were at the square before they stopped to talk.

Joe was panting. “The conductor saw that I wasn’t the regular newsman and ran me off the train. I do have permission to sell the papers on the street corner but not on the train. The train’s not my area. I was thinking that we wouldn’t get caught, but we did. Besides, all I really wanted was to see the train.”

“You know,” he added, “the one who will be madder than the conductor is the newsman who is supposed to sell there.”

“And Papa!” Cal cried. “He will be furious with me if he hears that we tried to cheat a man out of the money he should have earned. He will never let me forget it. I probably won’t forget it anyway.”

On the way home Helen practiced telling her mother about the train without any mention of the boys going on board. She would let Cal decide what to say about that.

**ACTIVITY:** What does this chapter tell you about Helen and Cal and their relationship? What do you learn about their Papa? Cite evidence from text.

Read a comic strip or other news story or column that involves a family and explain what you learn about the family members and their relationships.

**HISTORY:** Winston-Salem's major daily is over 100 years old. What local newspaper serves your area? When did it begin publication? Today, does your newspaper deliver news on several platforms—in print, on the Web and/or in replica or e-editions?

## Chapter Three

# Helen steps out

WINSTON, N.C., 1909—One evening during the following week, Mother asked Helen to step into the kitchen where she was cutting cabbage on the slaw cutter. “I want you to run out to the barn to get Alan and Cal. They should be up in the loft checking the squab. Now is time for them to come to the house and wash up for supper.”

Her brothers raised squab to sell to the Francis Hotel. Papa had made the arrangements through his grocery business, but the boys were responsible for the care of the young pigeons until they were fat enough to be sold. They had built cages for them among the rafters of the barn.

Since her hands were occupied making the slaw, Mother nodded her head toward the hook near the back door where the umbrella hung. “Don’t forget to take that,” she reminded Helen. “I’m not certain that the rain has stopped. It may be drizzling still, and I don’t want you to get wet.”

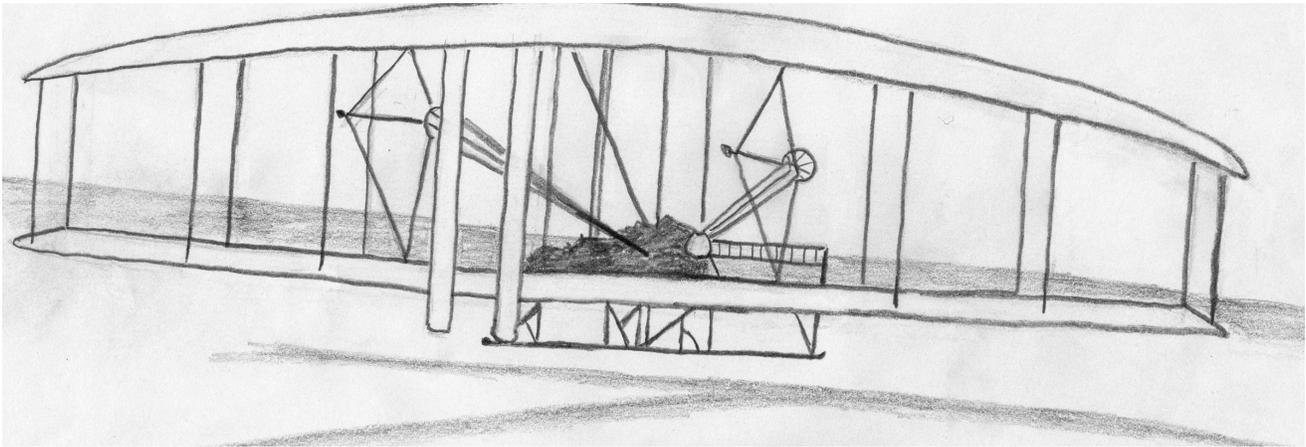
Helen took the umbrella and walked to the back porch. She picked her way down the wet steps, through the soggy yard and under the dripping apple tree and grape arbor to the barn. There she stopped to peer from under the opened umbrella at the chickens, thrusting their heads forward and back and scratching in the dirt made soft from cool spring rains. They made good use of this time before roosting, poking the ground for worms that were near the surface. The late day sun was just coming from behind the clouds and glistening on the chickens’ feathers.

Then into the barn she went, passing the empty horse stall where Maude was kept. She headed up the ladder that led to the hayloft. Keeping the umbrella high, she balanced herself with it, like the aerial artist she had seen once in the circus parade downtown.

“Alan, Cal,” she called to them. “Mother wants you to come inside now.”

Cal responded with a cough he had had for several days.

As Helen climbed near the top, she looked over the floorboards into the ee-



***Wright Brothers airplane***

rie light of the loft. She saw silhouettes of Alan and Cal as they pitched hay out for Maude through the loft door beyond them. The fading sunlight that came slanting into the barn caught a few drifting pigeon feathers and floated them in a river of pale light. The pigeons cooed as they settled in their nests for the night.

“Come on up,” Cal called as first the umbrella and then Helen appeared in the loft. She walked over to join them near the hayloft door and looked down at the alley. She thought Papa would soon be rattling home this way with Maude and the wagon.

While she stood there, umbrella still in hand, Cal exploded with an idea. “Why don’t you try to fly, Helen? You’re so light. With that big umbrella, you’d probably float down like one of those feathers.”

Alan shook his head, “Don’t tell her that, Cal; she just might do it.” Then he turned to Helen to make certain that she knew jumping was a wild idea.

Cal continued, “You’ve heard of the Wright brothers, haven’t you? Two men with flying machines?”

Cal waited for Helen to show that she understood what he was saying. “You know they’ve experimented with flight and, in the last few years, the brothers have learned a lot about it.”

Alan spoke directly to Helen, “Well, you are crazy if you think that umbrella you’re holding would help you fly to the ground! And Cal is too!”

Alan stamped the hay from his feet and brushed his hands clean before

heading down the ladder from the loft.

“You can do it.” Cal repeated after Alan left, “You’ll just float down. And you will have a soft landing.”

Nothing in Cal’s voice made Helen afraid. With Alan gone, no one was there to warn Helen or remind her to be careful.

She wanted to try flying to please Cal and to show him that she loved adventure as much as he did. Besides, she did think jumping would be fun. Without another word, she held the umbrella over her head and stepped out of the loft door. Before Cal could say or do anything, she fell. When he looked down, he saw her lying on the ground in the hay, with the broken umbrella by her side.

.....

Alan was stooped next to Helen, holding one of her hands when she opened her eyes. He brushed the hay from her face as he spoke to her. “Thank goodness for the hay!”

“Tell me, “ Alan asked. “Does it hurt badly? Tell me where you hurt.”

Helen moved and started to sit up but was too stunned to speak. She saw Alan glaring up at Cal who looked horrified that she had actually tried to fly.

“She seems to be all right,” Alan shouted as he lifted Helen in his arms and turned toward the house. “Lucky for her, and for you, too, that we had pitched the hay out for Maude!”

“Now, you can be the one to rake the hay inside the stall, and you can be standing here to explain all this when Papa gets home,” Alan said

What happened to Cal turned out to be far worse than any punishment.

**ACTIVITY:** What happened to Helen and her brothers in this chapter? Create a storyboard that describes the sequence of events. Use comic strips as models.

Create a storyboard based on an action story selected from your newspaper.

**HISTORY:** The promise of “constant wind” led Wilbur and Orville Wright to Kitty Hawk and enabled their first flight in 1903.

## Chapter Four

# Red paper reads 'quarantine'

WINSTON, N.C. 1909—Helen and Libby watched from the front window of the sitting room as the police officer rode down the street toward their house. Stopping at the gate, he dismounted and tied his horse to a picket of the fence. He walked to the porch where the tap of his shoes changed to the tap of his hammer as he nailed up a red paper sign that read, "Quarantine."

After he left, Libby slipped her shoulder under Helen's arm and whispered, "He didn't knock on the door and wait to speak to Mother. He didn't tell her about the big word you said was written on the sign."

Helen sighed, "He didn't have to explain, Libby. I think Mother already knows."

The entire town knew about diphtheria. Everybody was afraid of the terrible illness that often attacked children. Now the sign would announce to anyone who passed that someone with the disease was in this house. "Quarantine" told everyone not to come here.

"You remember," Helen whispered, "at church there was a prayer for the Hartman family when their baby was ill. At school, my teacher said that the Shore brothers were getting behind in their work because all in the family were quarantined."

Now everyone knew for certain that Cal had diphtheria. Mother had not sent any of her children to school, and she had not taken the time to explain why.

Nothing that anyone had said at church or at school had scared Helen in quite the same way as her mother did. By the time the children got home from school yesterday, Mother had started a fire in the wood stove in the parlor. She had moved Cal from the boys' room upstairs to a bedroll she had made for him in front of the stove. She moved back and forth from the other rooms to the



### ***Mother and wall phone***

parlor, carrying quilts and wood.

Wondering about these changes, Helen ventured to interrupt her. “What’s wrong? Why are you starting a fire on such a warm day?”

“Can’t you see that you need to stay back when I’m so busy?” she had barked as she rushed to the kitchen to bring a kettle of water. She was so caught up in her work that she failed to ask for help. So Helen quickly moved to the stairs to be out of the way.

Settling Cal in his temporary bed, Mother talked only to him. “Come on, Cal, try not to cough. You rest now and breathe easy.” Cal’s coughing had not stopped.

The water Mother had put on the parlor stove began to boil, and steam started to rise from the kettle. The steam spread out into the room until Moth-

er trapped it with a tent she devised from a sheet draped over two chairs. After she directed the steam toward Cal, Mother seemed somewhat relieved and tiptoed to the back hallway to the telephone that hung on the wall.

For a moment she rested her head on her arm that reached up to hold the crank on the side of the phone. Then she stood straight and began to turn the crank that rang the operator. “Quick, connect me with Dr. Fearington!” she called into the mouthpiece. The calm voice that she used to soothe Cal was gone, and a new frantic voice replaced it as she spoke. “We need the doctor! I think my boy has the croup, and it’s bad! I’m afraid it’s getting worse, and .....

” She leaned her head against the mouthpiece, continuing to listen with the receiver held to her ear.

The doctor must not have been free, for shortly after the telephone call, his wife came to the house. From Helen’s spot on the front stairs, she could see her come to the door. Helen bolted down to let her into the hall. Mrs. Fearington charged into the house, giving directions as she came. She took off her hat and shawl and handed both to Helen. She began to help Mother mix the mustard plaster.

“I came as quickly as I could,” she puffed. “The doctor said for us to cover his chest with the mixture but take care not to burn his skin. Flora, get some old pieces of cloth and tear them into strips. We’ll put the strips around his neck and chest. That should help him to breathe until the doctor can get here.”

With that, her mother changed from the person that Helen was accustomed to seeing. Usually she was the one with the answers and the directions for others. Now she was following Mrs. Fearington’s orders, grateful to have someone take the responsibility from her tired shoulders.

After a time, a feeling of calm settled over the parlor. Cal was sleeping while his sheet-tent piped the steam to him, and his breathing seemed to improve with the pungent smell of the mustard plaster around him.

Having done what she could to help, Mrs. Fearington whispered, “Now, Flora, try not to worry, and rest a bit while he is sleeping.” She paused. “The doctor will be around to see him later this evening.”

The doctor’s visit, which came late that evening, did little to relieve the tension in the house. The children stayed in the kitchen while Mother and Papa

talked with the doctor near Cal's makeshift bed in the parlor.

After getting Jack to bed, Mabel took the girls upstairs. After Libby and Moddy fell asleep, Helen slipped out of the room and tiptoed part of the way down the steps to a place where she could watch what was going on in the parlor. Nothing she saw made her feel any better.

**ACTIVITY:** Based on its use in this chapter, what do you think the word “quarantine” means? Search the newspaper’s archive, available through the Web or e-edition for any recent illnesses that led to quarantines.

**HISTORY:** Between 1900 and 1925, before treatments to prevent diphtheria became widely available, the disease infected about 200,000 people each year.

## Chapter Five

# Cal breathes

WINSTON, N.C., 1909—Mother and Papa were frozen like two statues. Papa was standing tall and erect, with a look of concern on his face, and Mother was bent over Cal like Mary leaning over the manger. They were still while Dr. Ferrington stood behind a chair that he rocked back and forth while he talked.

“I cannot say for sure what will happen next.” He stopped and cleared his throat. “I don’t need to tell you that he is having a difficult time getting air. He could get much worse suddenly and not be able to breathe at all.” He continued to rock the chair as he explained, “A young doctor just moved to town from a hospital in Virginia. He has had special training in treating patients with diphtheria and has a method for keeping the disease from closing the throat.”

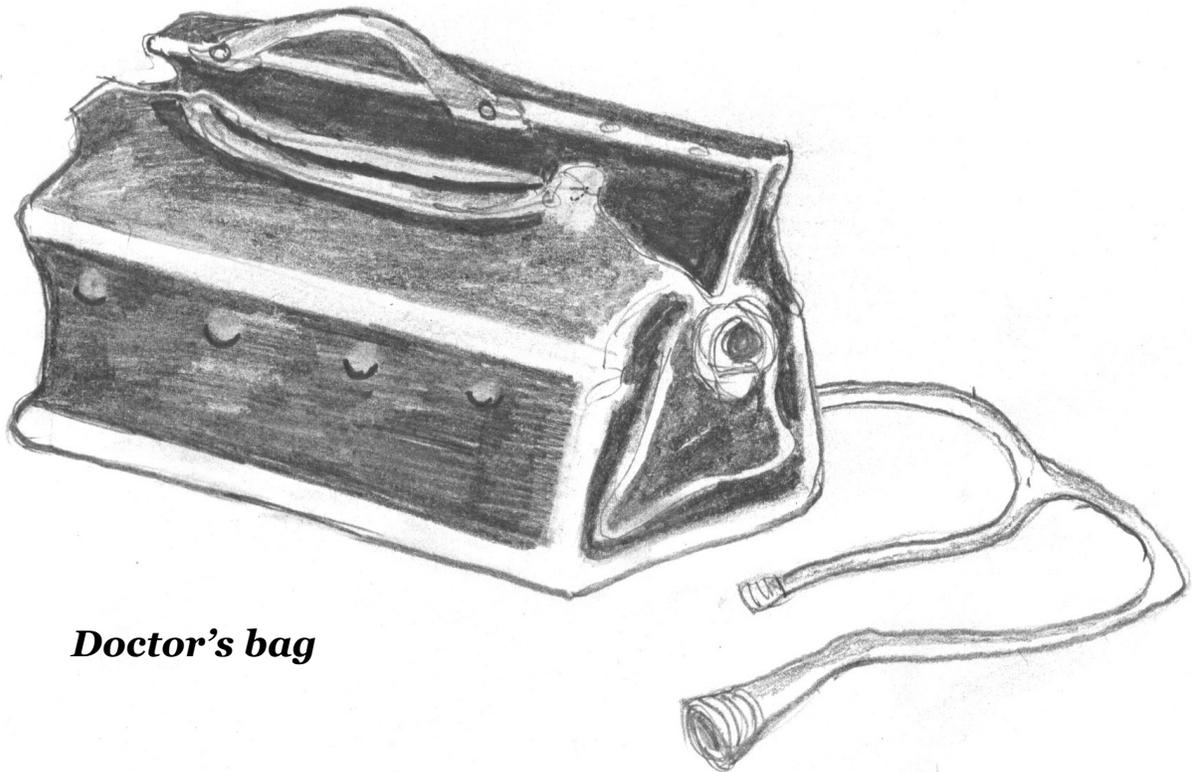
Just then Mabel found Helen on the stairs and hurried her back to the other girls. “Come to bed,” she said. “Mother and Papa don’t need to worry about the rest of us right now. They have enough on their minds.”

Mabel sat on the side of the bed while Moddy, Libby and Helen knelt by the bed to say their prayers.

All through the night and all through the house, Cal’s brothers and sisters worried. In the parlor, at the telephone, up and down the stairs and tucked away in the bedrooms, they thought about Cal.

In the early morning, as the sky turned from black to gray and the first pink light appeared in the sky, the doctors arrived at the house. Their horse and carriage could be heard clearly in the stillness of early morning. Mother and Papa hurried to meet both doctors and direct the new one to Cal. He and Dr. Ferrington seemed to know already what to do if Cal’s condition had not improved during the night.

By the time the doctors opened their medical bags, Cal’s brothers and sisters were out of bed and waiting on the stairs to learn the result of the doctors’ visit. Each of them strained to hear.



***Doctor's bag***

Dr. Fearington gave some directions to Mother and Papa who left the parlor and went to the kitchen. Next the doctors talked to Cal, soothing him as they spoke. After that they talked only to each other as they worked.

The children heard the sounds of low voices and of feet passing between the kitchen and the parlor. Cal coughed and choked, and then the children heard no sound at all.

.....

When the doctors had gone, Mother and Papa stood together at the bottom of the stairs looking at the group huddled at the top. Papa had his arm around Mother and had a weak smile on his face that broke into a big one. Mother spoke first and announced, "He's breathing clearly. They think he will be able to get through this, and I know he will. We'll get Sis Nan to come and help care for him while he's getting better. But, I know he will get well."

The children scrambled down the stairs to join in the embrace. When the initial excitement was over, Mother explained all that happened. The doc-

tor had held Cal's head back until his throat was straight, and then they had slipped a rubber tube down his windpipe. The air he desperately needed could get through to him at last. They had saved his life.

**ACTIVITY:** What do you learn about diphtheria from this story? How is diphtheria treated or prevented? What more do you want to know? How would you find out?

Look for a current news report about a disease. What do you learn about the disease from the story? What more do you want to know? How would you obtain more information? Use your newspaper's archive, available through its Web or e-edition, to learn about any publicized illnesses, treatments and health services available in your community.

**HISTORY:** In the 1880s, as an alternative to surgical tracheotomies, New York physician Joseph O'Dwyer designed tubes and a method for inserting the tubes to relieve the suffocating effects of diphtheria.

## Chapter Six

# Helen plays with fire

WINSTON, N.C., 1909—After many weeks, Cal recovered from diphtheria, and the period of quarantine ended at last. A true spirit of celebration filled the Sharps' house.

To the children, the long weeks of being confined to the house and yard seemed longer than they actually were. The young ones had made playhouses under the dining room table and behind the piano. Helen had read the books that had been sent from school to keep from getting too far behind the other children in her grade. She also read aloud to entertain Libby and Moddy while Mother looked after Cal and Jack and kept the house in order.

Because she adored books, Moddy begged for “just one more story.” Even though she was too young to attend school, she learned quickly and gathered first when someone had a story to tell or song to sing.

But, on this day, no one was still enough for reading. The house pulsed with activity. Anything with diphtheria germs had to be cleaned or destroyed. All the bedclothes and curtains were taken from the house and washed, and each of the children was busy carrying armfuls of linens down the steps to Aunt Emma who had a fire going under the great wash pot in the backyard.

There Aunt Emma stirred strong smelling lye soap into scalding water with the handle of an old broom. Nearby stood the wash bench with the tubs filled and ready for the wash.

Aunt Emma was the woman who helped Mother with the laundry on Mondays and Tuesdays. She was so close to their family and such a faithful worker that she had continued to come to their house during the quarantine. All of the children loved her, and, when she told them to go and fetch something for her, they ran to get it.

“Bring those things on down to me,” she shouted to the girls as they came through the kitchen door onto the back porch above her. Moddy and Libby took care not to trip over their small bundles, but Cal gathered up his entire

bedroll. Rather than drag it down the stairs, he merely pushed it over the railing and let it fall.

“Cal,” Aunt Emma yelled to him. “You just walk down those steps like you ought to. I know you’ve been sick, and mighty sick, I say. But, not now!” She went on cautioning him, “You just about started a fire in all these sheets, dropping them the way you did. We’re supposed to wash ‘em not burn ‘em.”

Farther down in the yard, beyond where the chickens were fenced near the barn, Helen was standing with Harry and Alan. She had been watching the boys, sticks in hand, as they poked at the cakes of brimstone they had been using to fumigate the house. Since Harry and Alan were older than the others, Mother had entrusted them with the task of burning the brimstone in the house and removing it after they were finished.

“Let me hold the stick,” Helen begged. “I want to see if I can break those cakes open.” She had been fascinated as she watched the curls of smoke rise from the brimstone bricks whenever they were poked. The bricks glowed a yellow color, then some blue, and then after a while, the stones gave off no smoke at all. “Let me have a turn!”

“No, don’t play with hot stones. You could get burned,” Harry warned her. From the corner of her eye, Helen watched her brothers. Finally, when they were looking away toward the barn, she reached down and picked up one of the cakes. The cake was blazing hot. No one saw her drop the cake into the



***Washtub and clothesline***

pocket of her dress and quickly turned away.

She started across the yard, intending to go through the gate to the front yard where she could look at the brimstone. But the gate wouldn't open. The latch seemed stuck. Then she thought she would run up the back stairs and go through the house to the front, but she could not. She felt a terrible burning on her stomach, and suddenly her dress was on fire. She grabbed at it and screamed, while Aunt Emma ran and lifted her in her arms.

"Mrs. Sharp, come quick, this baby's on fire!"

Aunt Emma seemed to hold Helen too close. Why wouldn't she let her go? And why didn't she stop the fire? Helen screamed and cried, while Aunt Emma held her tight.

Mother came flying down the steps. In one big swoop she grabbed Helen, spreading her wide walking skirt and wrapping it around her. The fire ate its way up under Helen's arm. She cried, and mother rocked her and moaned. "Oh, my girl, my girl. Whatever has happened to my beautiful girl?"

Now Aunt Emma threw herself, half running, half falling, up the steps to the back porch railing where she had hung a big rug that she and Sis Nan had just washed and put there to dry. Aunt Emma pulled and heaved and somehow dragged the rug to where she and Mother could roll Helen in it.

When the flames were finally smothered, they gently unrolled Helen from the heavy rug. She lay there, charred and burned badly. Once again Dr. Fearington was called to the home.

**ACTIVITY:** Is "brimstone" an unfamiliar word? First, use context clues and then dictionaries to understand the word.

Select unfamiliar words from news stories and use context clues, class discussions and online dictionaries to learn more about the words.

**HISTORY:** In the 1930s, the first automatic washing machine appeared, reducing the time and effort required to do laundry.

## Chapter Seven

# Helen feels better

WINSTON, N.C., 1909—Again a small bed was made in the center of the parlor, but, this time Helen was the patient. She lay there on her back with Sis Nan always in a chair by her side. The doctor came each day to change the dressing on the burns. Helen waited in fear because of the pain the dressing caused.

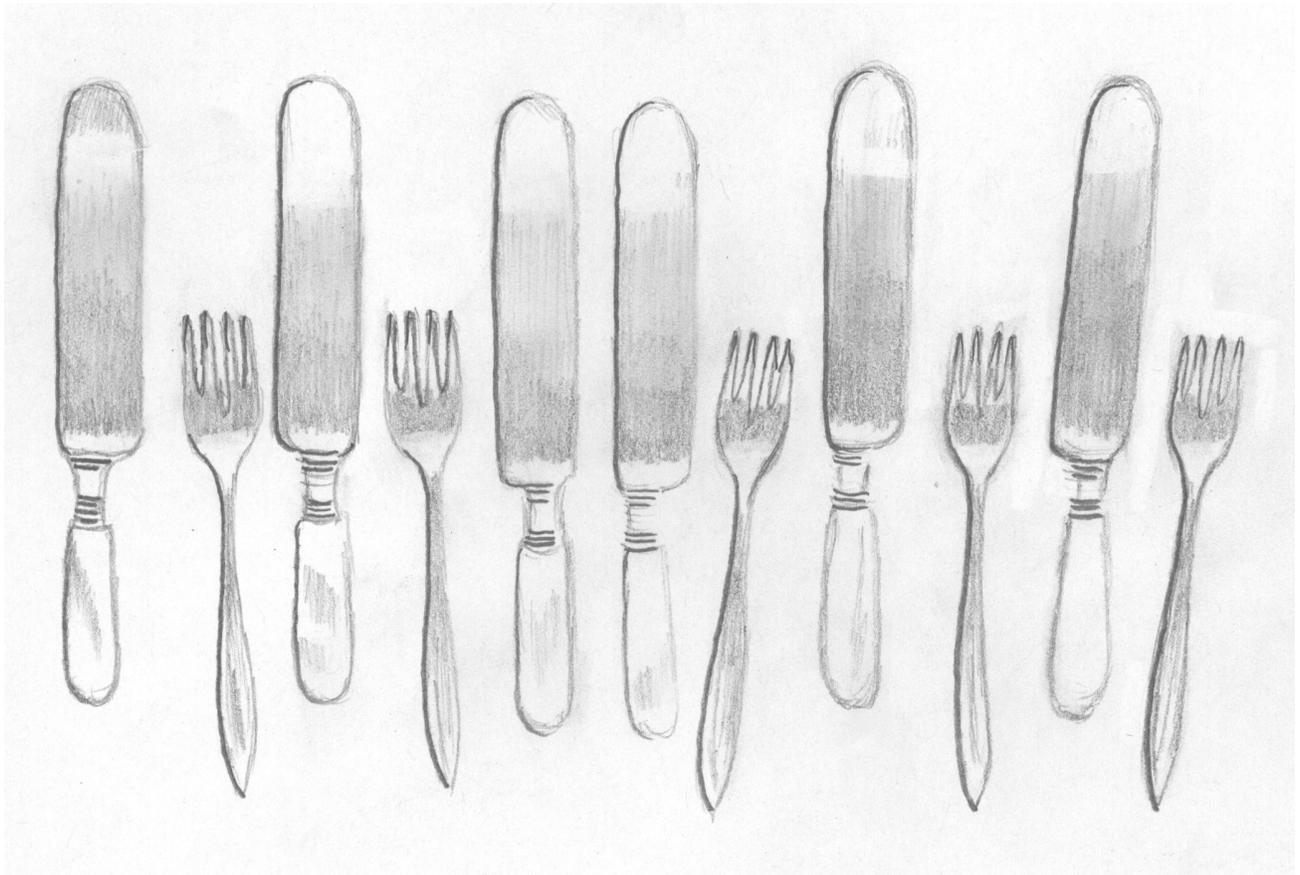
Mother and Sis Nan did all they could for Helen. Sis Nan had announced that she would stay as long as she was needed. “No one can take better care of that child than I can!” she had said to Mother. “Why, haven’t I just watched over Cal? Well, I plan to stay right here and do the same for Helen.” She insisted, and she stayed. She was an excellent nurse and never seemed to tire of keeping Helen’s mind off her burns.

She told Helen how she taught herself to play the piano when she was a child. Getting some knives and forks, she set them on a pillow beside her. “These will make the keyboard,” she said. “The knives will be the white keys, long and narrow as they are on the piano. The forks will be the black ones, not as long and placed between the white keys.” She hummed as she carefully pressed her fingers on the new keys. “Now, you try. Put your fingers where I show you, and you can learn this simple tune.”

Helen lay on her side and tried to follow the instructions. Trying was like a game, helping her pass the time and learn something new. Helen pictured herself at the piano, sitting straight and tall, playing a beautiful melody for her family and friends. Later, Sis Nan sat at the real piano and played while Helen played at her knives and forks.

For days, Sis Nan sang songs and hymns and told stories as she stitched lace onto a wedding dress that she was making for a customer. “Just imagine,” she said, “how beautiful the bride will be, dressed in creamy white, wearing lace gloves and carrying a bouquet of pink and white roses.”

Sis Nan had never married and had no children of her own. She lived in



### ***Knives and forks***

Kernersville with her parents who required her care. She was able to leave them and stay with her sister, Flora, when she was needed.

“I’m so glad that you are with me,” Helen whispered to her. “You are so good to me, even though I was bad and caused the trouble.”

Sis Nan stopped sewing. Letting the roll of lace fall to the floor, she bent to hold Helen’s hand and reassured her. “You’re not bad, dear,” she said. “Whatever would make you think that?”

“But I really feel ashamed of myself for playing with the brimstone. I knew I wasn’t supposed to do it.” Helen confessed.

“Oh, Helen, that’s so sad.” Sis Nan stopped and took her hand again. “You must not think that you are bad.” She paused, then continued. “You may feel guilty for something that you have done. You may be very sorry that you did it. But, please don’t think you’re bad.”

Sis Nan offered reassurance, “The burn hurts enough. Heartache just

makes the pain worse. Now, promise me that you'll remember this. You are worth every minute that I spend with you. You are very special to me and to your mother and father as well."

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One evening while Helen was lying in her bed in the parlor, Papa came in from his work with a long roll of paper under his arm. "I've brought you something," he said as he unrolled his surprise. She looked up at a large picture of a flock of sheep on a hillside. In it, the sky was pale blue and clouds shaded the meadow; the breeze and the feet of the grazing sheep bent the grass. Near the bottom of the picture, the grass softened into a fresh spring of water. The scene looked cool, and somehow it made her feel better.

Papa turned the picture so that she could see it better. Then he said, "I hope you'll like it." He stood and stretched his long arms to tack the picture to the door that led to the hallway. There she could see it whenever she looked up from her bed. What pleased her most was that Papa had gotten the surprise especially for her, and he had come home from the store in time for her to see the picture before she went to sleep.

**ACTIVITY:** Sis Nan and Papa help Helen. Sis Nan teaches Helen where to place her fingers on a piano keyboard, and Papa hangs a picture that makes Helen feel better when she looks at it. In the news, find a reference to an action that makes someone feel better. Also, select a photo or illustration that's soothing to view.

**HISTORY:** In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, hospitals served those who could not afford health care in their home.

## Chapter Eight

# Textiles come to town

WINSTON, N.C., 1909—As time passed, Helen could be up and doing some things around the house. Sis Nan returned to her home, and Mother took away the bed in the parlor. Though Helen still wore her bandages, she went back to her normal summer routine of watching the younger children, helping in the kitchen while staying close to Mother.

Papa and Mother saved visiting and relaxing for the evening hours when they retreated to the front porch to enjoy the night air. There they talked and regained the energy they spent at work during the day. One night Helen was sitting on the porch with them. The evening was peaceful with a slight breeze moving the leaves of the vines that Mother had planted at the side of the porch. The vines formed a thick green curtain that filtered some of the noise coming from the textile mill that had been built recently a few blocks away.

Since the mill opened, Mother had tried to shield her family from the effects of having the mill nearby. Others in the community said their town was getting ahead by becoming industrialized, but Mother resisted the growth that the mill represented. The mill was an unwanted neighbor that moved to town, right down the street from her.

Helen looked in that direction. “Why does the mill have to be so close to town, right where we live?” she asked.

Papa didn’t welcome the mill either, but he knew it was good for business. Putting Jack down to toddle about the porch, he leaned forward and propped his elbows on his knees to explain. “Not long ago,” he said, “mills were located near the river so they could use the energy from the water wheel to run the machinery. But now that electricity can provide the power, mills can be built where they are convenient to the marketplace, to the railroad and to the people who will work there.”

Helen knew when Papa mentioned the workers living close to her family, he hit on the problem that most bothered Mother. She was a stickler for things being the best that she could make them, and she was surely worried about



### ***Sawtooth Building***

the village of smaller houses that had been built around the mill. She had said it before, and she said it again. “Those houses will change the value of our home.” She added, “Some of them are so small that the folks must eat, sleep and work in the same room.”

“Now, Mother,” Harry interrupted, “our YMCA was established to help men like the ones who have come to work in the mills. They’ve left their farms and the only life they knew. Some of them have brought their families with them, but many young men have broken their ties to home and have come to town to make a new start.”

Papa turned to Helen again and tried to explain. “Some big changes have taken place on the farms near here. You see, farmers used to grow and make almost all the things they needed, food and clothes, furniture and houses. They didn’t need much money because they didn’t have much to buy. Now, all over

the south, farmers are pouring everything into raising some kind of cash crop. Around here the crop is tobacco or wheat or sometimes cotton. If they don't get the price they expect at the market in the fall, then they don't have enough money to pay for what they need."

"And," Harry added, "you should hear some of the men that come to the YMCA. They tell stories about their families' losing their farms after a bad year of trying to grow a cash crop. Then they moved to someone else's farm and worked for a share of the money that was made from that farm's crop. They would plan and dream of making enough to buy their own land, but each year they'd be disappointed. Sometimes they'd move to yet another farm where they hoped things would be better."

"Or," Mother broke in, "they would move to town where they hoped things would be better." Mother had given up trying to sew as twilight had turned to dark. She had been listening while Papa and Harry talked.

Now Mother returned to the idea of the mill. "Some people say the mill owners are doing a wonderful thing by bringing the poor farmers to work in the factories and mills. Giving them work, giving them a home and saving them from poverty, those are good things. But something has gone wrong between what started as a good idea and what is actually happening."

Her voice became softer as she switched her thinking from the houses to the people who lived in them. "I see women going to work all day in the mill. And I see young children your own age, Helen, going to work in the heat and a din of machinery. Oh, I know the women and children worked hard on the farm, but some of the children are working full time when they're just too young. They should be in school."

Papa stood and walked to the railing of the porch next to Harry, then walked to stand behind Mother's chair. Papa rested his hands on Mother's shoulders.

"Well," he said, "all of us are dreaming of a better life and looking for a place to try new ideas. That's what brought people across the sea to America and from the north to settle on the farmland in the south. Now hope brings them from the farms into town, still looking for something better for themselves and their families."

**ACTIVITY:** Compare the economic troubles described in the chapter to forces described in today's news. What changes took place during Helen's childhood? What changes do print and/or online newspapers report today?

**HISTORY:** When factories close, some are converted to other uses. Built as a hosiery mill, the Sawtooth building in Winston-Salem now serves as a visual arts center. Have factories in your community been converted?

## Chapter Nine

# Girls fill bucket

WINSTON, N.C., 1909—The day for a picnic arrived, and Mabel and Mother were busy in the kitchen. Mother was anxious to hurry and bake the pies while the cook stove was still hot from the breakfast biscuits. Mabel was more concerned that the pies turn out perfectly to impress her new friend, Bradley. She invited him to go along on the family outing.

“Moddy, Libby,” Mabel said to her little sisters underfoot. “You two, get the bucket, and go with Helen to gather some apples for the pies. Mother and I will roll out the dough for the crusts.” She shook her rolling pin toward the door to get them moving.

As the girls headed down the back steps, Helen looked at the old tree that was full of apples. It grew close to the porch where its buds and flowers were protected from the cold in the spring. Helen had been told that Mother had saved the tree from cutting, when the house was built.

Its knobby lower limbs were perfect for swinging and climbing, a favorite with the boys. But it was the higher branches that Helen loved. They hung over the back porch roof where she would sometimes climb from the stairway window and hide. The branches sheltered her when she was tucked away in her secret place. She sat among the white blossoms in the spring and the cooling leaves in the heat of the summer.

In the tree, Helen was out of the house, yet not away from it. She was apart from the commotion, but she was not really alone. She could see out to the blue sky and the world behind the high board fence, yet she was close to the place where she felt secure. She was still home.

Libby dropped the empty bucket with a clang that brought Helen’s mind back to gathering apples. Under the tree, the apples cluttered the ground where they had fallen. Many had split, and their sweet juice had seeped out making them sticky and attracting the bees. “Don’t forget to give them a push

with the toe of your shoe before you touch them,” Helen warned. “Sometimes a bee hides inside.”

The girls carefully filled the bucket with the golden ripe apples. Now that the bucket was heavy, Helen and Libby shared the job of carrying it inside.

Back in the kitchen, the sisters found three pie pans placed on the table, each one draped with pastry. Beside them on the breadboard, were long strips of dough. Mabel and Mother worked quickly to get the fruit peeled and cut into quarters. After the piecrusts were filled with sugared and spiced apples, Mabel skillfully laced the strips of dough into a top crust. Between the strips, she left spaces where the juice could bubble as the pies baked. “Surely, Bradley will be impressed,” she said as she put them in the oven and closed the door behind them.

As Mabel began to clear the table of the baking utensils, Mother put a heavy iron skillet of lard on the stove to heat. The girls were happy to help with the next chore as the newfangled potato chips were their favorite. They formed a chain to do their work. Moddy took the potatoes from the box, Helen washed them and Libby dried. Mother stood at the table and pushed the potatoes again and again over the sharp blade of the slaw cutter, making a round thin slice with every pass. When enough slices had accumulated on the plate, Mabel carefully slid them into the hot grease to fry. Then with a big spoon, she lifted them onto a piece of brown paper, hot and crispy and ready for a sifting of salt.



***Bucket filled with apples***

When the food for the picnic was finished, everyone gathered for the excursion. Harry and Alan led the group up Spruce Street. They carried the trunk with the picnic dinner inside. They rolled up their shirtsleeves, and Harry tilted his hat to one side. Mother looked happy and relaxed, wearing a becoming white summer blouse and a big straw hat. Even with Jack riding on his shoulders, Papa looked as he always did, in perfect order.

The Sharps stepped excitedly toward Fourth Street where they would catch the streetcar.

**ACTIVITY:** The chapter tells how to prepare some of the girls' favorite foods, apple pies and potato chips. Write down each step. Then write down how you prepare a favorite snack, step by step.

Select recipes for favorite dishes from print and online newspapers.

**HISTORY:** Almost every city with 10,000 people or more acquired a streetcar system operated by electric utility companies from the 1890s to 1920s, according to historian Walter Turner. Conduct research to find out if the city where you live or another city in your region operated streetcars during the late 1800s and early 1900s.

## Chapter Ten

# Sharps ride streetcar

WINSTON, N.C., 1909—The family didn't wait long before the streetcar came down the tracks toward them.

The streetcar arrived without the noise that the train made or the racket of the few new automobiles that caused so much commotion in town. Except for the clanging of the bell as it approached them, the streetcar was quiet. It had a long pole on the top that reached up like an arm to the electric wires above and carried the power to speed the streetcar down the tracks.

When it stopped, Papa lowered Jack to the ground and stepped up into the streetcar. He spoke to the motorman standing at the front. "I have all my family with me," he announced as he paid the fare, "and we're headed to Nissen Park for the rest of the day."

The others crowded in behind him. Cal was pushing for the best seat. "Let me sit by the window," he said as he pressed past everyone to get there.

Inside the streetcar, the wood and brass gleamed, and the breeze blew through the open window. The passengers laughed and chattered. As they rode, Helen could see around Cal to the stores and warehouses downtown. At the courthouse square, they made a turn onto Main Street and headed out beyond the edge of town.

After they got off at the park, Harry looked for Alan. "He's over there," Papa said as he pointed to the end of the streetcar line where Alan was watching the driver take down one pole and put up another.

"Come on," Harry shouted to him. "We're waiting for you!"

As Alan joined them and grabbed his side of the trunk, he looked over his shoulder at the streetcar. "Isn't that smart?" he commented. "The streetcar won't have to turn around. Now the rear motor will drive it, and the back will be the front."

Mother had walked down a hill with Mabel and Bradley to a spot near a big oak tree. They had already spread a cloth on the ground when Harry and Alan came with the dinner. The picnic was a treat of sandwiches, cold chicken and



### ***Streetcar***

pickles. The chips were salty and delicious, and the apple pies were as good as Mabel had hoped.

After dinner, Harry and Alan went to explore the park with their cousin, Richard, and a friend of theirs. Jack fell asleep with his head in Mother's lap, but the other children left to watch the boys' bowling on the grass and to spend their pennies.

As evening approached, the electric lights that lined the walkways and encircled the bandstand changed the park into a dreamland. The music from the band lured the family back together. As the Sharps met near the bandstand, Alan ran to join his family. "We're going to be singing during the band program!" he exclaimed. "The director saw that our quartet was here tonight and asked if we could perform. Of course, we said we could."

Alan's quartet sang their special version of, "In the Good Old Summertime."

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On the way home in the streetcar, Helen and Cal were tired and shared a seat in silence. Helen was thinking of the song Harry and Alan had sung at the bandstand. Summertime was the carefree time that she loved the best. It was the time to be on the porch and in the yard, trample through the woods with Papa on a Sunday afternoon and share a picnic in Nissen Park.

Summer was almost over, and school would begin soon. Helen worried that school would be difficult for her this year. She had missed many days during the quarantine and while she recovered from her burn. She would be behind the others in her grade. Then she remembered what a fortuneteller at the park had said that day. “You will go far. I see that you will grow up to help others. You may become a teacher or perhaps a nurse.” Well, she couldn’t do either of those without school. The fortune was worth the penny she had paid.

**ACTIVITY:** The Sharp family enjoyed their picnic in the park. Use grocery ads to choose foods for and figure out the cost of a picnic for your family and/or friends.

**HISTORY:** Located at the end of streetcar lines, parks attracted riders, offering such activities as music, picnics, games rides, bowling, zoos and movies. When cars and buses displaced streetcars, the parks closed.

## Chapter Eleven

# What's in the store?

WINSTON, N.C., 1909—One Saturday at the end of September, Helen and Alan set off walking to Papa's store. Helen was eager to visit the town on a day when the tobacco market was open.

New electric wires lined the streets near the textile mill. Alan and Helen turned onto Fourth Street just as the trolley went past. Poindexter's General Store was near the square.

"I wish we could go in," Helen begged and tugged at him, "Just for a little while. Maybe you could get me a piece of candy."

"Don't act like that," Alan warned, "or next time I won't bring you with me."

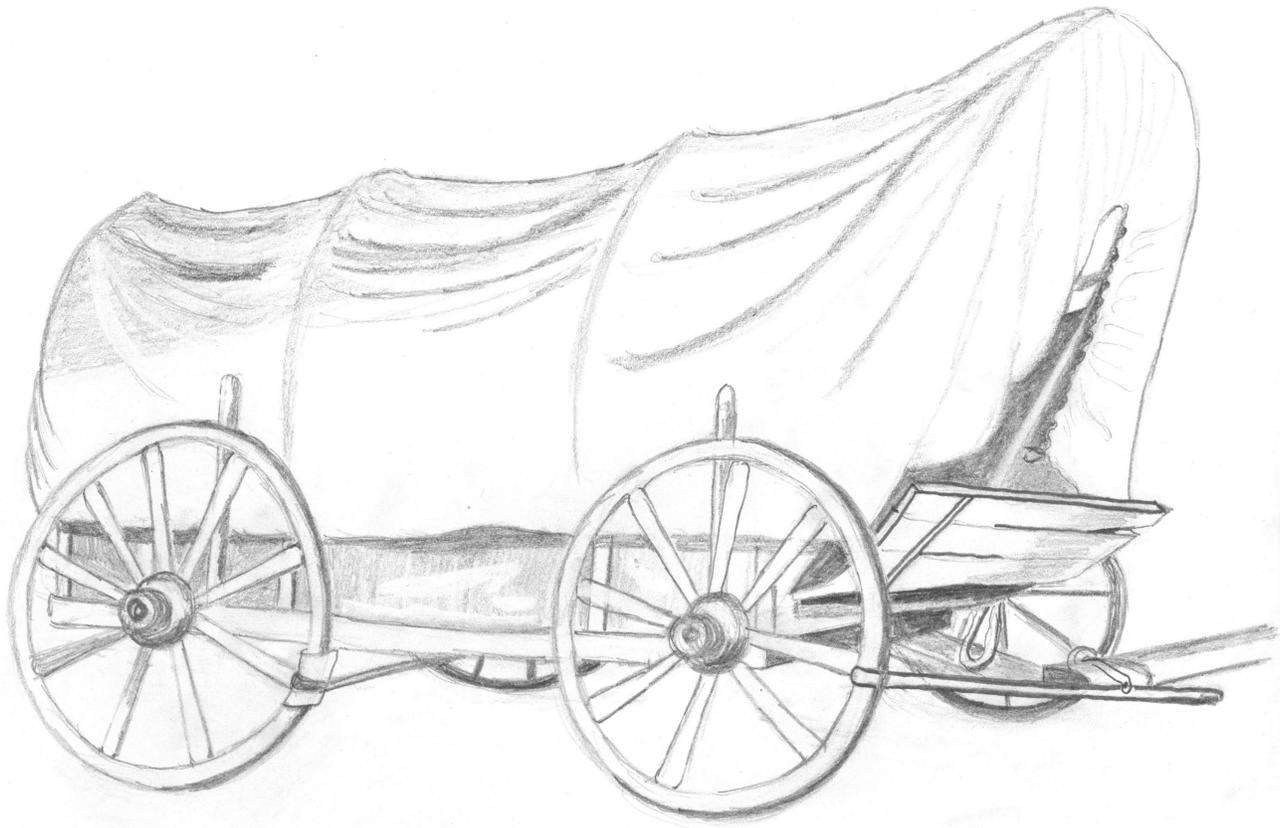
Helen reluctantly looked away from the store and down Old Town Street. It was clogged with wagons, covered and open, all piled high with sweet smelling tobacco leaves. One after another, the wagons with the horses and mules were pulled to the side of the road where the tobacco warehouses were located.

Alan pointed to them. "Most of those farmers will wait in the street until time to move their tobacco into the warehouse for inspection. Then they'll probably stay inside to find out what they will earn for their year's work. They'll listen to the auctioneer to hear whether their tobacco brings a good price."

"People say that it takes thirteen months to raise a crop of tobacco?" Alan went on, "That's because growing tobacco is hard work that requires effort by everybody on the farm. Men and women, children and old folks have to work together to get all the different jobs done."

They walked by the town square, crossed Main Street and followed the railroad tracks the rest of the way. Papa's business was located near a railroad siding, so that deliveries could be made directly from the train car to the back door of his store.

Finally they climbed the few steps to the main entrance. When they opened the door, a shaft of light cut through the great dark storage room. As her eyes adjusted to the inside, Helen could see rows of bushel baskets holding peas and



### ***Covered wagon***

potatoes and October beans. Beyond them were stacks of pumpkins. Along the wall she could make out the shapes of huge bunches of bananas hanging from hooks.

Helen imagined that the tobacco warehouse was like this, with piles of tobacco on the floor in much the same way the vegetables were here. The warehouse needed to be big, with space for the farmers and auctioneers, and the area would need light, so the tobacco could be seen and felt by the buyers.

Just then Robert came from the back and reached to switch on an electric light hanging near the door. “Thought I heard you come in,” he called. “Come see what your daddy got you. Maybe it’s something Cal would like. Not me, no sir, not me. And maybe not you, Missy.” He was shaking his head. “But this here will surprise you, even scare you!” He leaned down and picked up a fruit jar from the floor, and the two moved closer to get a better look.

“See here,” he held out the jar. “Your daddy found him in a bunch of bananas. Tarantula, he called it.”

There in the jar was the biggest spider that Helen and Alan had ever seen. He was dark, almost black, and completely covered with tiny hairs. When Helen looked at him from the front, he looked like a king, with a little head and a crown-like place where his eyes were.

“Alan, are you scared?” Helen whispered.

“No, but I guess you are.” he replied.

“I am not!” she boasted.

“Go ahead then,” he urged her. “Take him home with you.”

Helen finally decided to keep the spider. Robert put the jar into a sack for her, then he got a couple of York apples from the apple barrel and put those in another sack for him and Helen to take home.

“I’m going to show Papa the jar while you and Alan get the peas.” Helen said as she moved toward her dad’s office, knocked on the door and peeked in.

The office was small, an area boxed off from the remainder of the store with walls that didn’t go all the way to the ceiling. The area had a window that looked onto the street when the shutters were open. The space was brighter here, with two electric lights hanging from the ceiling, one above Papa’s desk and one near Miss May’s.

“Why, hello, Helen,” Miss May greeted her as she stopped her work and looked up from her typewriter. “Your mother rang earlier to say that you and Alan were coming to get some peas to take home.”

“Yes ma’am,” Helen replied, as she put the sack of apples on the bookshelf near Papa’s desk.

Holding tight to the sack that had the spider, she waited for Papa to finish his phone call. He spoke with his courteous, gentle voice, thanking the customer before he said good-bye. He turned to face the room. “Hello, dear,” he said, “Miss May told me that you and Alan were coming to the store.”

“Look what Robert let me have!” Helen said, carefully pulling the jar from the sack and holding it out for her dad and Miss May to see.

The typing stopped. Miss May shot from her desk, knocking over her chair and spilling all her papers onto the floor. “What in the world is that?” she screamed as she stumbled backwards into the far corner. “Keep it away. Please, just get it out of the office!”

Papa picked up Miss May's chair and got her a drink of water from the lavatory in the corner. Then he retrieved the bag with the apples, and he and Helen left the room. "Put the jar back in the sack, and don't get the two mixed up," Papa said, "I don't want you to scare Mother or the other children with the spider when you get home."

**ACTIVITY:** Which local businesses advertise in your local newspaper's print and/or online editions? Locate them on an area map.

Map Helen's and Alan's trip to Papa's store. Name all of the businesses they pass. Map a trip through your neighborhood or town. Name any businesses you pass. Use technology tools to create the maps.

**HISTORY:** Winston-Salem and other towns in North Carolina have been called "tobacco towns" because of the impact tobacco had on their local economies.

For history about Winston-Salem's tobacco industry, search for information available through archived news stories and other information provided by the NC Division of Cultural Resources. Use "tobacco" and "RJ Reynolds" as key words.

## Chapter Twelve

# Ruthie meets 'one caring person'

WINSTON, N.C., 1909— A few weeks later, the weather turned cold. 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.

"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 child?" Mother asked.

The child stood there with her coat too small and her shoes too big. She was wet all over, and the water from her hair was dripping onto her face, stained with dirt and tears.

"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.

Mother rubbed her hands together the way she did when she couldn't de-

side 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.



***Helen and Ruthie***

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 can

take her back where you found her.”

Each girl took a biscuit, and Helen showed her new friend how to spoon the molasses onto hers. They sat at the table while they ate, and then Helen read her a story. Ruthie began to nod and soon fell asleep with her head on the table.

Eventually Mabel arrived at the front door, and Helen heard Mother giving her some instructions. When Mother came to the kitchen, she saw that Ruthie was 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.

**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.

## Chapter Thirteen

# The Sharps receive 'best' gifts

WINSTON, N.C., 1909—Soon Christmas came. Helen thought about the candles that would be in church and the big tree that would be in her family's parlor.

Late in the afternoon on Christmas Eve, time came for the children's Christmas service at the Moravian Church down the street. Helen held Libby's and Moddy's mittened hands, while Mother held Jack on her hip. Just the five of them were going. The older children had cut a tree and were secretly preparing it behind the closed parlor doors.

As the younger Sharp children were leaving the house, Mother stopped on the porch and turned to Helen. "Will you run inside and get the linen napkins that I laid on the table?" With a smile, she reminded them, "You know we'll need them when we are served buns and coffee at the service."

Of course, Helen knew about the buns and coffee. She especially loved that part of the service and the candles. She also knew that Mother wanted her children to spread their best napkins on their laps.

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Inside the church, the room was filled with the smell of coffee, the sound of the choir and the light from the many candles. Helen, too, was filled with the wonder of it all and the mystery of what she might find at her own house.

Afterwards, as they picked their way home over the icy patches on the road, they could still hear the church band playing Christmas carols. The girls joined in and sang to each other, "Joy to the world....."

Helen thought Christmas morning would never come.

Eating supper was hard but sleeping was even harder. The piano was strange to hear at bedtime, but there it was, "Joy to the world....."

.....

Realizing that night had passed, and Christmas morning had arrived, Helen jumped out of bed. The other girls sprang up with her and ran, tripping over night-gowns, to get down the stairs to the front hall. Alan was playing the piano in the parlor, and Papa was standing in the hallway with his back to the closed parlor doors. He was smiling and waiting to show the surprise to all the little ones. He swung open the doors to show a beautiful tree decorated with tiny candles and colored glass ornaments.



***Moravian candle, coffee cup and bun***

Mother had to hold tight to Jack to keep him from squirming out of her arms, but Moddy and Libby ran closer to look at the tree and the little town that was built in a box under the bottom branches.

“See how the candle is the star over the stable,” Helen said as she touched the limb that hung lowest to the floor. A tin candle holder was clipped on the green needles, and in it was a small candle. “See how the light shines on the baby in the manger.”

“Look,” Libby cried, as she pointed under the branch. Libby saw them first, then Moddy, then Helen. Just beyond where they were crouched were three dolls placed under the tree. They had sweet faces with painted eyes and little curls that showed from under their crocheted caps. As the girls reached for them, Moddy stumbled against Jack who was climbing onto his new rocking horse. She fell into the tree, tipping one of the candles from its holder. In an

instant, the tiny twinkle grew into a blaze.

Helen heard the crackle, and turned toward the sound. She saw the flame lick up a branch of the cedar. She held her doll to the scar that crossed her stomach, but she could not move. She stood thinking how a little flame looked like a star when it was safe on the end of a candle. A flame safe in the cook stove could bake bread and warm the kitchen. But a fire out of its place struck fear deep inside of her.

While she stood fixed to the floor, the others reacted. Alan swung around from his place at the piano. "Get some water!" he called as he moved toward the bucket placed near the parlor stove. He threw water on the flames while Harry and Papa steadied the tree and snuffed out the remaining candles.

When it was over, Papa praised his older sons, "Harry, Alan," he turned to each of them. "You acted so quickly that the tree was saved and we didn't have to carry it outside. You kept the fire from ruining our day."

In the quiet that followed, he smiled at Mother and the younger children and gave Helen a special pat. He must have sensed her thoughts; he sat next to her and talked of other things.

The rest of Christmas Day was full of such happiness that the thought of the fire faded. The children received gifts of candy sticks and delicious golden raisins still attached to the stems where they grew. They were given nuts to crack and precious oranges to peel and savor. Helen was glad that the Sharps took a gift box with many of the same things to Ruthie and her family.

The family shared a wonderful book. It gave instructions for making all sorts of gadgets. With its help and their imagination, they could turn bits of cloth, thread and paper into countless hours of fun.

Alan received the best gift. "Look at this!" he exclaimed as he opened his package, "a box Brownie camera!" The Sharps put on their coats and posed on the front porch for a family picture. Their cousin Richard took the snapshot. The boys were clowning. Harry held Jack, the girls held their dolls, and Mabel held the hand of the man she planned to marry in the spring.

**ACTIVITY:** Pretend you're Helen writing a letter to a friend or family member about her family's Christmas celebration. Explain Helen's experiences, her thoughts and feelings. Also, write a letter, blog or email in which you describe a favorite holiday celebration.

**HISTORY:** Moravians celebrate a "love-feast" on Christmas Eve. The service promotes unity and fellowship. Congregants sing, share food and drink, light candles and receive a blessing.

## Chapter Fourteen

# Papa suffers accident

WINSTON, N.C., 1910—January was cold and snowy, so the family stayed in doors.

Cal had gone, and Helen was watching Aunt Emma as she pressed Mr. Sharp's shirts, humming and talking at the same time. The ringing of the telephone startled Aunt Emma and Helen. They heard Mother leave the sitting room where she was sewing and walk to the hall to answer the ring.

"Yes, this is Mrs. Sharp," she was saying. Then, in a strange voice, she was asking questions. "What happened? ...Where was he? ...When? ...Yes ...yes ...thank you." She stopped.

Aunt Emma stopped ironing, led Mother to the sitting room and settled her in a chair. After getting Mother a cup of coffee, Aunt Emma picked up Jack and left Mother with the girls.

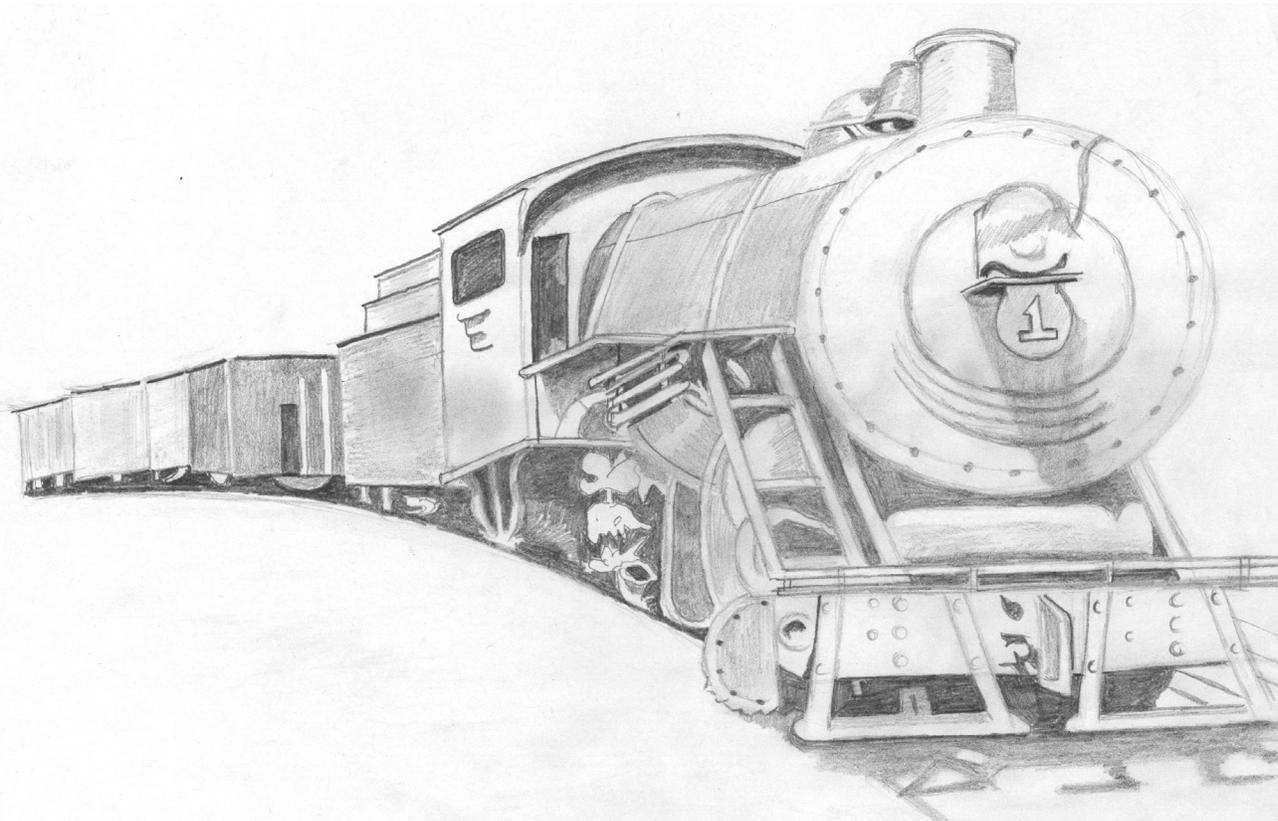
Mother sat quietly and continued to stare, this time at the fire that glowed in the sitting room stove. Her hands were shaking so badly that Helen took the coffee cup and set it on the table. For a while Mother rested her head against the chair. Next she began to twist her handkerchief and then her hands. She was talking softly, more to herself than to the girls.

"Your father was worried about a shipment of fruit from Florida that had not arrived. Late this afternoon he walked to the freight yard to investigate. While he was standing near a sidetrack, a switcher engine hit him from behind, knocking him to the track in its path. Before he could move, his leg was crushed by the engine....." her voice trailed off.

Aunt Emma came in the sitting room bringing a hat and coat for Mother. Someone had come in a buggy to carry her to the hospital where Papa had been taken.

Mother rose from her chair. As she put on her coat, she seemed to put on a strong front, one that she would have to wear for a while.

The girls stood quietly in the front hall to say goodbye to her. She stooped to kiss them on the cheeks, giving each of them a quick pat and promising them



### *A railroad*

that Papa would be all right. Then she walked out into the early darkness, stepped into the buggy and rode away.

.....

Later in the evening and again the next day, Mabel and Harry, who visited Papa at the hospital, talked to the other children about what had happened to him. The story remained about the same with a few details added. Each one would tell how his back was turned, how he had not heard the switcher engine, how some men saw and rushed to help him... and how he cried. Papa's crying was more than Helen could imagine.

The following evening when Mother returned home, she gathered her family around the kitchen table. The soft glow of the oil lamp held them in a close circle. They leaned in to hear Mother's news, but she just looked at her children, gazing at each face in the lamplight. At last Harry spoke for her. "Papa's leg is so badly hurt," he explained, "the doctor says that he won't be able to get well unless they amputate it."

“Amputate it?” Libby asked. “What is that?”

Mabel turned and spoke to the girls. “Well, that means that the doctor will take off the bottom, injured part of his leg because he can’t use it anymore.”

“Will he be able to walk?” Helen’s heart sank as she asked it.

Then Alan stood up. “Just think of the old man who lives on Holly Avenue. You remember his story. He lost his leg after he was shot in the war.”

“Yes, sometimes we see him sitting on the porch when we’re walking home from school,” Cal said. “He sits in a chair most of the time.”

“But he can get about on his crutches,” Alan cut in again, “and now there are good artificial legs for people who are willing to learn to walk with them.” He became more emphatic. “Papa is like that! He will never sit still if he can walk, and I know he’ll never stop trying until he does it.”

“And work, too,” Cal added. “You know he won’t give up on his store. It’s his dream.”

Mother listened and nodded. She shared Papa’s dream of owning a house and having a business, which would provide the food and money that the family needed.

The children knew the sacrifices their parents had made to open the store: the long hours that Papa worked, the sewing that Mother did and the extra people that she fed at the house. Once Helen had seen Mabel give Mother a nickel to help with family expenses, and she had wished that she, too, had a nickel to contribute. Now Mother would worry about Papa’s losing his leg and his giving up on his dream.

**ACTIVITY:** Does your local print and/or digital newspaper cover accidents? Study examples. Write a headline and opening paragraph about Papa’s accident.

**HISTORY:** “Spencer Shops” located near Salisbury repaired steam locomotives for Southern Railway. Today, “Spencer Shops” serves as the location for North Carolina’s Transportation Museum.

## Chapter Fifteen

# Papa walks

WINSTON, N.C., 1910—Papa had to stay at the hospital for three months. On the children’s first trips to see him, Papa seemed weary and worried. But with time, he gained some energy and began to walk with his crutches to meet them at the door.

In February, Helen took him a beautiful valentine she had made with bits of lace and ribbon from Mother’s sewing box. “This is for you,” she said as she slipped it from her pocket and surprised him with it.

He put both crutches under one arm and balanced himself to hold the card with his free hand. “You are my valentine,” he said to her as he looked at it, “and you’re Mother’s valentine, too. I’m sure you’re a big help to her with all the little ones at home. And school? How is school going for you this winter?”

Her lessons had not been easy. She was behind in her studies because she had missed days of school last spring. Other things about school troubled her too. She didn’t fit into the classroom as well as she did at home, and the teacher expected more of her than Helen could do.

She looked up at Papa. “I’m doing my best,” she said, “and I think I’m growing up a little bit.

The smile on his face made her think that he was pleased and feeling better.

She was encouraged too because he was wearing his glasses again and talking about the news he had read in the paper. He had started to get dressed each day, and he asked Mother if she would pin up the leg of his pants so that he could move around more easily. “Now don’t cut the pants’ leg or sew it because I’ll need to let it down again if I get a new leg.”

“A new leg,” Helen thought when she heard it. “He will walk again.”

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As the weather warmed, visiting the hospital became easier. One afternoon after school was out for the day and the dishwashing chore was completed,



### *A Valentine heart*

Helen and Cal carried a basket of cold supper to Papa.

When they arrived, Papa was full of talk about what had happened that day. “A man came to the hospital to talk to me about getting an artificial leg. He, too, had had a leg amputated, and he explained what it would be like if I had one like his. He walked over some rough ground in the yard, and he went

up and down the porch steps to show me how smoothly he could move.”

Cal interrupted, “What did the leg look like, Papa?”

He laughed. “It looked just like a leg. He had a shoe and sock on the foot, and his pants covered the wooden leg. He did roll up his pants, so I could see how it attached at the knee.” He continued, “Now that my own leg is healing, I need to decide what to do.”

“Papa, we do want you to walk just like you used to,” Helen declared as she hugged him around his waist.

.....

When the day finally arrived to leave the hospital, Mother and Harry went to get Papa in the buggy. The children were dressed for his homecoming in their spring best, waiting on the porch, and Mabel could hardly hold them back as they pushed out the walk to meet him.

Alan handed Papa the crutches, and he leaned on them to slide off the seat. With help Papa made it to the house and into the sitting room. He lowered himself into his favorite chair, which had been moved close to the window. His eyes moved around the room and back to the window where the sun came pouring through the freshly-washed curtains. He was glad to be home.

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Later, Libby and Moddy came running to Helen with a secret. “Come here and see,” they whispered as each of them tried to explain first. “Somebody is hiding under Mother’s and Papa’s bed.”

Helen thought she knew the answer to the mystery, but her sisters were still reluctant to enter the room. “Don’t you want to go and see?” she asked them.

The two smaller girls clutched Helen’s hands as they stood at the door. Nodding in silent agreement, they tiptoed into the room and approached the bed. Helen leaned down and gently raised the bed curtain enough to peer under the bed.

“Oh, Papa’s leg!” Libby cried with a gasp.

“Sh,” Helen hushed her.

The girls looked at each other. All three were curious about the leg and wanted to get a better look at it. Carefully they pulled it from under the bed

and began their inspection.

The leg was made completely of wood, with Papa's shoe covering the foot portion and his sock coming up on the leg. At the top there were leather straps so that the wooden leg could be attached to Papa's leg at the knee.

The girls had watched him as he was learning to walk with it. He would hold his weight on his strong side while he moved his new leg forward. He said that dragging it was easier, but he was trying to lift the leg instead. He limped, but he was learning to walk more smoothly and without a crutch.

Helen had wondered about Papa's new leg, and now she felt satisfied to have seen it up close. The sisters quietly pushed it back and went to see how Papa was getting along without it.

**ACTIVITY:** Helen made Papa a Valentine. What would you give your father or other family member to show your love and appreciation? Use words and illustrations from the newspaper to create a Valentine. Or, choose a gift from ads in the print and/ or digital edition of your newspaper and determine the cost of the gift.

**HISTORY:** Injured soldiers often require artificial limbs. Confederate soldier James Hanger developed a wooden leg to serve Civil War veterans. Current research focuses on using modern technology to improve the limbs for soldiers and other amputees.

## Chapter Sixteen

# Helen views from perch

WINSTON, N.C., 1910—Helen couldn't remember when she had last come here to her favorite spot near the back porch roof. It had been her secret place to go for thinking, dreaming and wishing, but lately she had been too caught up in the life of the family to take time for herself. A year of healing had passed. Now, the time had come to celebrate Mabel's wedding.

Tonight's wedding party did not include the younger children. Aunt Emma had come to take care of them. She had gotten Jack and the other girls to bed, but Helen had slipped away to the window at the top of the stairway. Hearing the voices from below, Helen couldn't resist climbing out for a look.

Carefully, she had inched her way from the window to the edge of the roof and to the shelter of her apple tree. The snowy blossoms that had decorated the tree earlier in the spring were gone and had been replaced by a curtain of new green leaves. Through the leaves, she peered into the backyard and watched the guests as they gathered for Mabel's party.

Next to the house and under the tree the ground was covered with dark green violet leaves. They made a thick mat where Mabel and Bradley stood to greet their friends. A table had been placed over the wash pot with Mother's white linen tablecloth hiding the workings of washday. On the table stood tall glasses, a big pitcher of lemonade and a vase filled with daisies that the children had picked earlier in the day. Nearby, Alan and Harry had set two ice cream churns on the wash bench and were calling to their friends to help turn the cranks. Helen knew that later the guests would be served fruit from Papa's store. Cantaloupe halves would serve as ice cream bowls and fresh strawberries, toppings.

Helen looked to the middle part of the yard. Cousin Jesse and Richard sat on the swing that hung from the big oak tree. They weren't getting as high a ride as she would have liked, but still they were laughing and having a fine time.



***Helen in her secret place***

Across from the frame of the swing and against the high board fence grew a hedge of white flowers that added sweetness to the night air. In front of the fence were spikes of larkspur in shades of blue that matched the evening sky.

Seeing the glowing lanterns, Helen thought about Alan who had wired the lights for the party. He had drawn pictures of the wires connecting the batteries to the lanterns and had talked about the wiring at the table at suppertime. He was fascinated by electricity and was anxious to have their house hooked to the power lines now on Spruce Street.

Helen could not believe her big sister and older brothers and cousins had become adults. Even Cal! He was on the porch just under her perch. She couldn't see him, but she could hear his music from the gramophone, and she knew he was turning the handle to make it play. He had almost become a man during this year. He had fought a crushing illness and helped the family in ways he had never done before.

Perhaps the one who had grown the most was Helen herself. She was not the child she had been. She had known nothing of the difficulties the family would face when she and her sister played their way home from school just months ago. Now, she thought of the fortuneteller at Nissen Park who said that she might be a nurse someday. Of course, she could be; she would be. She

wanted to help folks get well the way she and Cal had recovered. She wanted to give the comfort and support that Sis Nan had given her. She wanted to be like the nurses at the hospital who helped Papa when he lost his leg.

Now the lights were shining on all of the people she loved most. Papa sat beneath the arbor under one of the lanterns, and Mother stood close beside him. Helen felt proud and happy as she looked at them. She was truly glad to be a part of the family.

Helen knew that Papa would rest tonight, for tomorrow the train would bring his parents and Sis Nan. Tomorrow the house would be filled with friends and family, young and old. And tomorrow Papa would walk Mabel into the church to be married.

## THE END

**ACTIVITY:** Do you have a special place where you go to read, write, think or gather with family members or friends? Is the place a location or is it a “virtual” space? What makes a personal or public space “special?” Find examples in the news.

**HISTORY:** Electricity enabled cities to develop, but nine of 10 rural homes lacked power until the 1930s. To spread electricity, the Rural Electrification Act passed in 1935 as part of the New Deal.

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