

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.

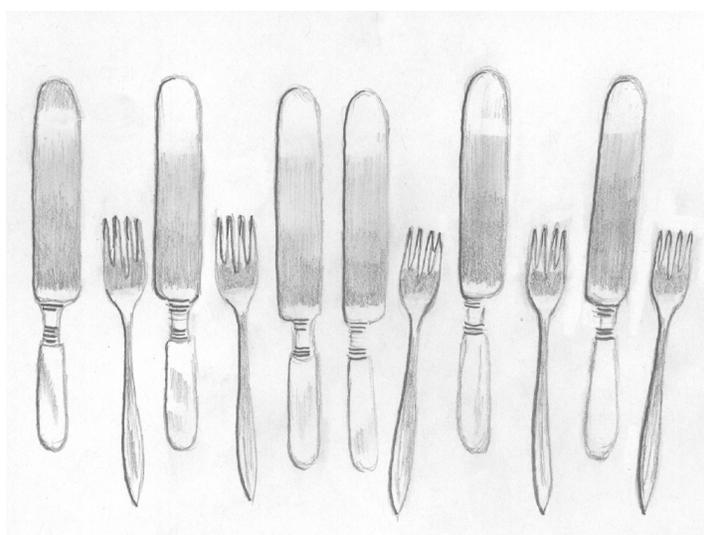
Mother and Sis Nan did all they could for Helen. Sis Nan had announced that she would stay as long as she was needed. “No one can take better care of that child than I can!” she had said to Mother. “Why, haven’t I just watched over Cal? Well, I plan to stay right here and do the same for Helen.” She 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, but, this time Helen 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.”



Knives and forks

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

next chapter—Textiles come to town

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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.