

# The Lost Children

ALLYN WOOD

The children passed Mrs. Sibling's window as she was having supper. The corner lamp had just gone on, and no one had passed on the street for a long while. They straggled across the window, which she faced like a companion across table; one family, she thought, poor and dignified—for Mrs. Sibling, although retired, never would cease to be a social worker—all different sizes, of whom first one and then another took the lead in a pseudopodic motion from the mass, only to draw in uncertainly. They progressed as slowly as the littlest boy who dragged his feet and was growing chilly in his sun suit. Reaching the corner lamp, they stood swaying under it, looking up at the street sign. Then they turned back.

Mrs. Sibling rose, overcoming the momentary hesitation which always interposed—not from lack of courage, but because her indomitable spirit needing room for action had to trespass into the affairs of others.

"Children!" she demanded from the porch. They stopped. "Are you lost?"

They stood together staring. From the mass one indistinguishable said,

"We were going home through the dusty place where the houses are being torn down; and we stopped to play, until it grew dustier and dustier and then dark, and we were nowhere that we knew."

She remembered a housing project, meant to bring new material comfort to poverty, which had been progressing for some time. "Where do your parents live?" They were silent. "On what street do you live?" asked Mrs. Sibling in a gently squeezing tone.

"Earth Street," the children said. A night wind stirred.

Mrs. Sibling returned for her coat and purse and a handful of cookies. Picking up the littlest boy and wrapping him in a fold, she began to walk, the others silently clinging like shavings to a magnet. Earth Street was far across the city: she knew it, although she would ask the way of bus and trolley drivers. Along the street screen doors were opening. Porch swings like pendulums began to move. She answered familiar Good evenings with reserve, feeling rhythmic, efficient. A bus stopped. She maneuvered the children in, and after a while they transferred to a trolley. The younger children had solidified into apathy, neither asleep nor awake; the older stared out of solemn eyes. She asked a few questions about their home, but they seemed not to understand. Poor things! thought Mrs. Sibling; how short memory is, in the child mind. Home in a day had become impersonal—as they sat there holding cookies which they did not eat, almost unnecessary. Yet was it natural? She was aroused to consider their cleanliness and that their buttons were on, and that they appeared well fed.

It was time to walk.

At the end of the line, Earth Street stretched before them, wide, unpaved, utterly dark. But now the stars descended—had they ever come so close?—and the dry summer wind blew day and night against their cheeks. She breathed the odor of vegetables growing and heard rustle of corn leaves behind the houses. They brought back her life. Working among the poor, in the midst of the city,

had been like country vacations when one rests by cultivating the garden vigorously. The people were like vegetables—corn and squashes, from hardships or a combination of hardship and contentment, the men like corn, their wives squashes. She had asked questions of them, and recorded their replies hesitant with confusion and new shame-in-their-existence which she (with the other welfare workers) brought before the milk, blankets, and soap. She remembered how, when they had forgotten or absorbed their shame, they received their benefits with the dignity of vegetables receiving rain.

The littlest boy slept under Mrs. Sibling's coat. She brought greater gifts. And they, the gifts, were to be given home. She led her caravan saying, "Remember, you are leading me." They began to look about, and presently a light, almost like moonlight and flowing forth from the window of a cottage drew the children and they advanced refreshed. At the door they crowded vaguely. Mrs. Sibling knocked. From the depths of someone a voice replied, "Come in."

She stood in the doorway in the light which had opened with the door. Before her, out of the cultivated-field patches of a quilt, an old man sat upright in bed. The children filed past her, murmuring "Grandfather!" and she was alone with him, still holding the youngest, asleep. She laid him like an offering at the foot of the bed; then drew herself up, with a ripple of excitement, a ripple of calm, and a demanding look. When she explained

what had happened, the grandfather appeared unaffected. That he had put a light in the window sufficed.

"Their parents?" asked Mrs. Sibling.

"Their parents quarrel," he said. "They are only children themselves. They go and they return. They are working on the housing project."

Mrs. Sibling met the dull mineral lustre of his eyes across the quilt. She thought that everything had been explained: then she was unsure: she felt a radiation of sun-warmed pebbles.

"You take good care of the children!" she exclaimed. They were too young, perhaps, to understand and appreciate him—nor did she quite, herself. He sat motionless, waiting, but she had no question, nothing to tell him. She turned to go, and as she closed the door, thought she heard him thank her for their return, yet it might have been her own satisfaction. She glanced behind the house to see if there were a garden. At the end of the plot, beyond a low fence, hung a row of lanterns suffusing the vegetables lividly, and, on the farther side, illuminating bases of great refuse piles. The untended lights flamed and extended, flickered, and drew in to flame again. Mrs. Sibling was surprised. She had not imagined the project so close! Indeed, she felt engulfed by it and lost, and that it was endlessly extensive and advancing toward her, making great heaps of the houses but building nothing—even as she wondered how the children so near to home had strayed.