

Fifty Cents An Hour

CARL HENN

"We'll try to be back by 11:00 o'clock. There's ham in the refrigerator and cookies in the cabinet. Be a good girl, Minnie; take good care of Debbie. Good-bye."

"Yes, maam, I'll watch her close. G'bye, Mrs. Lampley. G'bye, Mr. Lampley."

Minnie watched from the window, waving until they got into their car and drove away. She turned, walking directly into the kitchen and over to the icebox. There she got ham and milk and a pickle. She put them on the table, then got bread and mustard and a glass for the milk. With a huge sandwich in one hand, the glass of milk in the other hand, and cookies tucked in her dress pocket, Minnie walked back into the living room of the Lampley bungalow. She sat down carefully in the easy chair beside the radio and deposited her burden along the arm of the chair, following which she turned her attention to the radio. Dialing until the whine of a hill-billy fiddle was heard, Minnie heaved a sigh of complete comfort and took her first bite of the sandwich.

Debbie, seated on the living-room couch, had watched Minnie's actions with close attention. Finally, she wiggled herself off the couch and pattered her way across the floor to this strange girl. Stopping in front of Minnie, she held out her hand commandingly.

"Me," she said, and grasped for the sandwich.

"No. Scram," said Minnie, and gulped the last of the milk from the glass.

"Me," repeated Debbie, though a little more uncertainly.

"Get out'a here," said Minnie, and slapped the child's hand aside.

Debbie began to cry, tentatively,

watching Minnie to see if the older girl would give in. When nothing was forthcoming, Debbie cried a little harder and ran back to the couch.

Minnie finished her cookies quite slowly before getting up to approach the couch where Debbie lay, still crying. With a speculative look in her eyes, Minnie grasped Debbie by her long, blond hair, pulled her head up, and slapped her across the face with her open hand. The baby screamed in pain and fright.

Minnie released her and walked over to the radio, which she turned up in volume. She walked back slowly, with a restrained eagerness, and stood in front of Debbie, hands on hips. Then she grasped the child by her arm and pulled her up to dangle above the couch.

"Be quite," she said, and slapped her.

"Keep still," and hit her again, harder.

"You better shut up."

A hunger peeped from Minnie's eyes, and she wet her lips.

"Won't do you no good to yell. Nobody can hear you." Minnie's voice was hoarse and her hand thrilled to the sting of the slaps.

With a final, vicious blow she released Debbie, who by this time was screaming insanely in a paroxysm of fear.

Minnie walked into the kitchen and got another glass of milk with hands that trembled with emotion. Going back to the living room, she sank into the easy chair without glancing at Debbie, still on the couch. The older girl finished the milk, turned the radio down to normal, and picked up her geography book which lay on the coffee table next to the chair. She began to study.

Debbie sobbed for a long time. The sobs turned to hiccoughs; finally, they died away. She slipped off the couch and went past Minnie to the kitchen, where she pulled a chair up to the sink. She climbed up on the chair and ran a glass full of water which she drank thirstily, spilling a part of it down the front of her dress. Then she ran diagonally across the floor of the living room to her parent's bedroom, and climbed into the child's bed which stood against the wall. In a few minutes she was asleep.

Minnie studied her geography sporadically for nearly an hour before the little girl crossed her thoughts. She got up and went in search of Debbie. When she found the child sleeping, she gave way to instant anger. With a single jerk she pulled Debbie from the bed and from sleep. She slapped her again, pulled her hair, and cursed her as she started to undress her. The words Minnie used were from the gutters and alleyways of town, and Minnie spoke them with familiarity, as if she knew what they meant, just as she had heard them used by older children.

When the crying child was undressed, Minnie hustled her into the bathroom before putting her nightgown on her. Then she tossed Debbie back into bed and admonished her to stop sniffing and go back to sleep. Debbie turned her face to the wall and sobbed heart-breakingly. Minnie went into the kitchen for more cookies.

The radio kept Minnie's attention for awhile, until Debbie had gone fast asleep. Then the older girl went back into the

bedroom, and looked at Debbie, carefully. She got a washcloth from the bathroom and rubbed all traces of tears from Debbie's face, taking great pains to keep from awakening her. After another examination she was ready to leave, had her hand on the light switch when she remembered something else. She walked back to Debbie and lifted her head. She turned the tear-wet side of Debbie's pillow down, leaving the dry side uppermost. Then she switched out the light and returned to the living room.

Mr. and Mrs. Lampley returned home at ten minutes to eleven.

"Oh, no, Mrs. Lampley, she was a good girl. She didn't make no trouble at all."

"Here's a \$1.50, Minnie. From eight to eleven. Is that right?"

"Yes sir, that's right, Mr. Lampley. Thank you. G'night. G'night, Mrs. Lampley."

"Good night, Minnie. Are you sure you don't want George to walk home with you?"

"Oh, no, it's only a block. G'night." And Minnie scampered back to the house which she shared with four sisters, three brothers, and parents who had forgotten the joy they had shared when their children were born.

"Isn't that Koviak girl quiet, George? She doesn't smile at all. But she seems to be a nice little girl. We're lucky to have someone in the neighborhood who will stay with children. Oh, I forgot to ask her whether she can come in Friday night. Well, I can ask her tomorrow, I'm sure she won't mind."

