

# 1

**A**nother day . . . and another chance . . . and if I don't find work today I'll start home tonight. "Oh, dear God, please help me to find a job and a place to stay. I just . . . can't go home!"

With a deeply drawn breath that wavered in spite of her effort to hold it steady, the girl buried her face in the pillow and drew her coat closer about her shoulders. In the other corner of the rest room of this large railway station the young mother who had come in during the night was preparing to catch an early train. In the washroom other women and children were hurrying about. Of course they were hurrying! They were all going some place, and their trains would soon be leaving. In a minute she must get up and join them and give the impression that she, too, had to catch a train. Oh, if she only did! Wouldn't it be wonderful to *know* where you were going and to have someone waiting for you at the end of the trip? To really belong some place where folks loved you and wanted you?

It was more awful than she had dreamed it could be, to live as she had been doing for the past three days. If she had heard of any other girl doing such a thing she would have been disgusted and shocked. Yet the events of the past week had happened so unexpectedly and so swiftly that she had had to do *something*, and this was all that occurred to her. Sleeping in railway stations was certainly not a thing to be done by the kind of girl she had always thought herself to be, and she had a horrible fear all the time that the ever-present attendants would discover her secret

—that she never caught a train at all but just pretended to be stopping over, so that she could sleep on the comfortable couches of the rest room. She had not dared to stay at the same station twice, and even in this great city there were only a few such rooms as this, where she could check her suitcases in the locker and get a real rest. If she did not find a room today she would *have* to go home.

Maybe that was what she was ordained to do. Surely the circumstance of losing her job and her room both in one week was such an unusual one that it must have been decreed by fate. None of it was of her planning or even her fault. She never had liked Mr. Skeen, that assistant department manager, but she had not had any trouble with him. She had hardly spoken to him and certainly did not know he was the kind of man who would act as he had done last Monday when he had come in and found her alone working overtime. Ugh! She became sick even yet when she remembered how startled she had been when she turned from her desk and found his smirking face close to hers and his clammy hand on her arm. She could still hear his grunt of astonishment as she gave him a shove that landed him in the wastebasket. Before he could get up she had snatched her purse and fled from the room. As the elevator door had clanged behind her, she had heard the office door bang but had reached the street without pursuit and caught a bus at once. What a mess! She had thought that such things did not happen to good girls. But she had not been to blame; she knew she had not. And if it happened once it could happen again. There might be danger of finding such a man in any office. What should be done?

Who could have thought up a more improbable coincidence than to have had to leave her room at Mrs. Moon's the same night. Of course she *could* have stayed, but who would want to after finding the landlady's daughter rummaging through her suitcases and dresser drawers? Who would have dreamed that a room in a hotel or the YWCA could not be found for even one night? There had been nothing to do but go to the station, and she could not stay there indefinitely—work must be found first, and then a room, that the threatening prospect of a return home might be dispelled.

*Hope Thompson, don't be a baby! You know you don't want to go home today . . . or ever! So up and at it. You have to find a place today.*

She came from the washroom twenty minutes later, looking as if ready for travel, and joined the stream of humanity that was pouring from the train sheds toward the long ramp that led to the street above. Waiting on the sidewalk for the streetcar that would carry her to the heart of the city, she breathed again her waking prayer, "Please, God, help me to find a place to stay. I just can't bear to go home."

At the employment office Hope sat waiting her turn. For three days she had gone wearily from one such office to another. Several times the placement women had wanted to send her out on a prospective job. Each time Hope had been reluctant, and another had been sent instead. How could she ever dare to go into an office again to work? Some strange man might try to kiss her. She could not tell the efficient women at the placement desks about this fear, and she realized that they would not keep trying to help her if she were not willing to go out and apply for work.

The woman at this desk had been more kindly than any of the others, and Hope determined that when her turn came today she would ask if there were any places where the work would be among women only. Just now she felt very definitely and decidedly that she had no use for men!

When her turn came Hope managed, with flushing face and rapidly beating pulse, to state her unusual request. For a moment the woman looked at her in amazement, then her gaze softened. Perhaps she herself had once been a frightened small-town girl in a large city. Perhaps she had enough sympathetic understanding of human nature to recognize that the girl before her was near a complete breakdown. She spoke meditatively, shuffling the papers in the file drawer before her.

"I don't know—I can't think of such an office at all. Would you like a place in a dress shop? Have you had any experience in selling?"

"No—but I could try."

The woman shook her head. "That wouldn't do. The manager specifically asked for an experienced saleswoman. I'm afraid, my dear, that we haven't any such place. Won't you try a

large office? We have one place open . . . ” She was interrupted by a girl from a desk in another corner of the room.

“It’s that Henderson girl again. She says they must have someone today, and for you to send out the first person coming in who can boil an egg!”

The woman turned and look at Hope. “Can you boil an egg?”

In spite of her nervousness, Hope laughed. “Yes, I could even boil two at a time without disaster.”

“Would you take a place as a mother’s helper and part-time cook?”

Hope thought quickly. *A place as cook would probably mean a place to room also. She was really a good cook, although not fond of cooking. She did like to care for children, and had enough experience of that kind to satisfy anyone. It would be a place to stay while hunting for a better job.*

“Yes, I would.”

The woman looked through the file drawer again and drew out a card. “Clean—refined—good cook . . . they don’t care so much about that now, I guess. H’m . . . a Christian. Are you a Christian?”

The woman looked embarrassed at having to ask that question, but Hope answered quickly, “Oh, yes, I am. I’ve been a church member since I was thirteen. I’ve always been regular in attendance at both church and Sunday school.”

“Well, I don’t see what difference that makes to your employer, but that’s not *my* business. I’ll fill out this card, and you can go out at once.”

Fifteen minutes later Hope found herself on the streetcar. In her purse was a card addressed to *Mrs. Philip King, 1239 West Sherman Street*. As she rode along with her purse clasped tightly in her hand, and with her eyes on the streets through which she was passing, she felt a growing sense of panic at the step taken. What had she got herself into? Should she stop now before it was too late and go back and tell that woman at the agency that she must look for another cook for Mrs. King or Mrs. Henderson, or whoever it was that wanted a person to boil eggs? No, she could not do that. The agency people would not try further to help her. They would be too disgusted with her for being so fussy. Her

only alternative was to go home, and she did not want to do that. As long as she lived she did not want to go home—not even for a visit.

The district through which she was passing was a shabby one. The high buildings and busy streets of the downtown section had been left far behind. This was a region of small factories, run-down frame apartment buildings, small shops with unattractive merchandise in not-too-clean windows, and more taverns than she could count. The houses had no yards, and the front doors opened onto small porches leading directly to the sidewalks. Some of the yards were three or four feet below the level of the walk, and by the dingy curtains at the windows Hope deduced that people lived in these basement hovels. How terrible it all was! She had heard of slums and thought that they probably were somewhat like Mrs. Moon's rooming house, which had been one of a long row of brick flat buildings on a side street where the smoke of passing trains got on the curtains and where the children often played in the streets because the backyards were full of drying clothes. But this was so much worse that Mrs. Moon's neighborhood seemed to her, as she looked back on it, like a pleasant, homey suburb. How *could* anyone live here? And why should anyone in this community be wanting a cook? For she was now nearing her destination. Sherman Street was only a block south of this car line, and the next street was where she would get off.

Even after she had alighted, Hope felt that she could not go through with this crazy scheme. If there had been a car coming from the opposite direction that she could have boarded, she would have taken it back to the depot.

While waiting in indecision, she thought of her recent office experience and a fresh wave of repulsion swept over her. Then she thought of what it would mean to have to go home. No—she could not. So, turning her back on the car line and facing toward Sherman Street, she determined to at least see what lay in that direction.

The houses got no better. Some of them looked ready to fall, and if one fell the whole crazy block would tumble, just like the long row of dominoes she used to patiently line up and push down when she was a youngster. Insecure looking stairways

climbed drunkenly up the outsides of some of the buildings, and on these stairs hung blankets and clothing, while overflowing garbage cans stood on the landings, on every one of which small children were playing.

Hope shuddered. How *could* she live in such a neighborhood? Then she remembered that Mrs. King had specified that she wanted a Christian cook. There came a vision of a little old lady who might have once been wealthy and was now perhaps ill and helpless, surely poor, and who had to live in this sad place. It might be fun to help such a person. Anyway, here she was, and she would do her best.

Then she turned the corner and stopped in amazement. There was only one house in the block, so it would have to be 1239. Feeling as if she were in some fairyland, Hope crossed the street and passed through the great gate before her.

## 2

On either side of the broad walk a tangle of shrubs and bushes, which had not been trimmed in many years, rose like a green jungle. Great trees spread their leafy branches so densely that the August sun, which blazed fiercely down on the streets and sidewalks outside the high iron fence, seemed dim and feeble here. In the center of the large grounds, which had once been beautifully landscaped, stood the house, and as Hope advanced toward it she gazed in wonder at finding such a house in such a place.

It was of time-mellowed gray stone, full three stories tall, with a great round tower at one corner and numerous gables and turrets breaking the line of the tile roof. A wide porch with huge pillars stretched across the front, and at one side a covered drive gave entrance onto the porch. All this Hope noted as she slowly came up the walk and mounted the broad steps which, she thought whimsically, reminded her of the pictures she had seen of the approach to the Capitol in Washington. Surely no little sick, poverty-stricken old lady lived in *this* house! Over the door she saw the tarnished bronze numerals 1239—so it must be the right place. Summoning all her courage, she rang the queer old bell, then jumped in nervousness at the clangor it made.

The noise died away, and for many minutes there was only silence. Hope rang again and waited, and was on the verge of leaving when there was a patter of running feet inside, a fumbling at the door, and it opened to disclose a small boy.

"Oh, hello!" he said with a smile. "I didn't hear you at first. Will you 'scuse it, please?"

"Surely," said Hope, answering both his words and his smile. "Is this where Mrs. King lives?"

"Yes, she's my mother, I'm Chad. I had to come to the door because she's sick—just miserably sick."

"Oh, I'm sorry. I am the girl that was sent out from the employment agency. I wonder if she could see me."

"I don't know. Will you wait while I ask her? I am not supposed to ask folks in unless I know them. And I don't know you. So I'll go talk to Mother and you can wait on the porch."

Hope agreed to this frankly stated arrangement and waited while the little boy trotted back into the dimness of the big hall. In a moment he came back, saying apologetically, "Mother says, 'I'm sorry to keep you waiting.' Will you come in and see her? She hopes you won't mind."

Hope followed him across the outer vestibule which, in itself, was larger than the bedroom she had had at Mrs. Moon's, then down the length of a huge hall to a door through which Chad ushered her, saying, "Here's the lady, Mother."

"How do you do?" said a weak voice from the bed. "Get her a chair, Chad. Then you run over and get Aunt Billy."

The little fellow sped away, and Hope sat tensely in the chair. This room had apparently been a grand parlor at some time. Across one end was an old-fashioned grate and mantel, and above them a large plate glass mirror. Just now the room was serving as a bedroom. The woman on the bed was speaking.

"I'm dreadfully ashamed to greet you this way. When I get one of these headaches I can't do *anything*. My friend will be here in a few minutes, and she will explain the work. It hurts my head even to talk."

She lay exhausted after this short effort, and Hope sat in sympathetic silence. The bed was in tumbled disarray, and the bronze curls on the pillow were damp with perspiration. Mrs. King looked hardly older than Hope herself, and certainly much smaller and more helpless in her illness. The heat of the day had penetrated the recesses of even this great house, and the room seemed stifling. Hope saw a fresh spasm of pain cross Mrs. King's face and arose in quick decision.

“Mrs. King, while we wait won’t you let me help you? I know I’m a stranger, but I’m sure I can make you more comfortable.”

Mrs. King opened her eyes and smiled wanly. “I’d welcome anyone who could do that. I’m too miserable to have pride left at all. If I weren’t afraid of frightening Chad, I think I’d cry!”

Some time later when Chad and a brisk young lady came in, the bed was smoothed, the pillow had been shaken and turned, and Hope was bathing the hot head. Mrs. King lay relaxed, and when she heard the two enter she said in a drowsy voice, “This is Hope Thompson, Billy. Will you take charge of her for me? She is my new helper, and I hope she likes us well enough to stay.”

“Eleanor King, you should be spanked! I told you yesterday not to chase out in that sun. If you weren’t so sick I’d—oh, what will Phil say?”

“Probably the same things you do, only in more dignified terms. Don’t scold, Billy. I’m paying for my foolishness. And there’s a silver lining to this cloud. Miss Thompson has proved herself such a jewel that I can’t be sorry. Will you take her to her room and show her where the kitchen is? She gave me an aspirin, and I think I can sleep now.”

As Billy and Hope turned to go away, Mrs. King caught sight of the troubled face of little Chad and called him to her side.

“Don’t worry, son. Mother will be all right tomorrow.”

“But I telled Daddy I’d take care of you, and it makes my stomach feel funny when you get sick.”

“You did take care of me, dear, and Daddy will understand. Now run along with Aunt Billy and Miss Hope, and Mother will try to sleep.”

The lively young lady called “Billy” led Hope to a room across the hall and said as she threw open the door, “This will be your room, Miss—Thompson, did Eleanor say? It hasn’t much furniture yet, but if you will be patient that will be remedied. You see, they have just moved here—came only last week—and Eleanor has been having a siege of headaches. She’s a country gal and can’t take this city heat. Things are in a mess.”

“Don’t worry,” said Hope, “I can sleep on this cot. Mrs. King was too sick to talk, and I don’t know whether I’m really hired or not.”

“Sure, you are! That is, if you’ll stay! I talked to the woman at the agency just after you started out here, and she said you can cook. That’s all we’re asking at present—except, of course—you *are* a Christian, aren’t you?”

“Yes, but what difference does *that* make?” Hope somehow felt very free with this girl with a boy’s name, and dared to ask the question that had been puzzling her for hours.

“Much indeed,” said Billy promptly. “You see, this isn’t just a private home. It’s part of Henderson Institute, and all the workers must be Christians.”

Hope wanted to ask what Henderson Institute was, and whether Billy was one of the workers also, but she had no time, for as soon as the suitcases had been stowed in the corner and Hope’s hat placed on a shelf in the huge closet, Billy spoke again.

“I’ll show you the kitchen now, and I’m afraid you’ll have to shift for yourself this evening. Phil—that’s Dr. King—is away, and when Eleanor gets a headache she’s worse than useless. I can’t stay for I left thirty-seven young ’uns in charge of Anna Solinski, and if they’re all undamaged when I get back I’ll be surprised. Oh, here’s Chad. Listen, Chad, can’t you show Miss Hope the kitchen and help her find things? Sure, I knew you could. That will help Mother so she will get well fast. I’ll be back after five o’clock to see if you need any further help, Miss—oh, I’m going to call you Hope. You don’t mind, do you? I’m Billy to you, too. So long, Chad. Keep your chin up, old fellow. Mother will soon be OK, and Daddy will be home tomorrow.” She ran her hand affectionately through the tangled mop of yellow curls on his head and disappeared through a side door.

For the next few hours Hope and Chad were left alone. She had small understanding of her status here, but further enlightenment would have to wait until tomorrow when Mrs. King would be able to talk. So Hope and Chad worked together, and she found him an intelligent and industrious little helper. Back of the great hall were pantries so large that Hope wondered how a single family could ever use them.

“Oh, we don’t ’spect to,” Chad said in answer to her exclamation. “Daddy is going to get a smaller stove—just an our size one—and put it in this pantry, and that will be our kitchen. Daddy says it’s a plenty big enough kitchen for such a little mother as ours. And we are going to have this other room for our dining room. It was a—a serv . . . serv . . . I can’t say the word. But Aunt Billy says it’s a place for flowers. My Grandma has flowers, but she keeps them in the living room and the dining room and some in the kitchen window. Isn’t this a pretty dining room, Miss Hope? I like such a many windows.”

Hope, too, liked the many windows that overlooked the backyard. She tried to picture to herself how this must have appeared long ago when it was filled with ferns and flowers. It would make a pleasant family dining room, and she hoped Mrs. King would have some pretty furniture and curtains to relieve the present bareness.

Chad showed her the electric table stove on which she would be expected to cook until the new one came. The two of them had lunch together in front of the “many windows.” Then Chad, explaining that he must take a nap so that he could play outdoors when it became cooler, went into his bedroom, and Hope was left alone.

She looked about her, wondering what to do. If she knew where Mrs. King wanted her dishes and utensils placed she could unpack them from the barrels and boxes that stood in the large room that had obviously once been a dining room, but that would have to wait. She could scour cupboards, however, and this she did. She longed to go on a tour of exploration and see the other floors of this old mansion. But that, too, must wait. She peeped through the door at the other side of the pantry into the big kitchen and gasped in amazement at the great black stove, the long worktables, and the old-fashioned sink. The windows were gray with a long accumulation of grime, and the dust that covered everything proclaimed that long years had passed since this room was used. The shining cleanliness of the other rooms told her that someone had worked hard to make them habitable.

With nothing to do until Billy should come back and leave some instructions for dinner, Hope wandered to the side door and out into the yard. It was such a tangle of weeds and shrubs

that she did not go far but turned back and stood gazing about her. Beyond the tall fence, at one side, stood another large building—a gray stone church, and from this direction came the sound of children's voices singing in some merry game. Could that be Henderson Institute? And what was it anyway? That would be one more place to explore when she had time. She felt as if she were many miles and days removed from the desperate girl who had been so fearful of life that morning. She did not know just what this place was, but she did know she had fallen in with kindly Christian people and had work to do and a place to stay. Best of all, she wouldn't have to go home!