

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



Mother and wall phone

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 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 Mother 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. Fearrington!” 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. Fearrington 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. Fearrington’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. Fearrington 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.

next chapter—Cal breathes

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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.