

This story first appeared in the March 2001 issue of CRICKET Magazine.

Piece Work

By

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Helen stood in the factory-lined street, staring at a two story building covered with the same coal dust that filled the air. Two windows on the second floor stared back at her like the rotting, diseased eyes of a dead deer Helen once saw behind the schoolhouse. She wanted to leave, but Pa's voice in her head said, "You're old enough to work and not waste time with school. Help the family instead of being a burden." She took a deep breath, pushing open the heavy steel door of the Walker Clothing Factory.

Helen was disappointed to find the inside as gray and unfriendly looking as the outside. She saw a sign marked office, knocked, and was told to enter.

"I'm here about the job." Helen held out the newspaper clipping.

"Another one, eh?" The stout woman looked at her. "Fifth one today. A bit young, aren't you?"

"I'm fourteen," Helen stood as straight as she could. "Lots of girls my age work." She wondered if it was true. She squeezed her legs together to keep them from shaking.

"Skinny little thing. Look like you'd snap in a strong wind."

"I'll work hard," Helen said. She felt her cheeks get hot as the woman stared.

"You will, huh?" The woman shuffled closer, looking Helen in the eye.

Helen stared back, afraid to speak or move.

"You don't have any diseases, do you?"

"No. ma'am. I hardly ever get sick." Helen didn't know how to convince her she was capable.

"You ever work a sewing machine?"

"I help Ma do mending by hand, and I watched my neighbor use a sewing machine. I can

learn.”

“What’s your name, girl?”

“Helen Washko.”

“You start Monday, Helen Washko. A penny a piece is all I can pay. Bring your lunch. You get two fifteen minute breaks during your shift. Start seven AM, be done four, six days a week. We’re closed Sunday. Can you do that?”

“Yes.” Helen held her hand out. “Thank you, ma’am.”

The woman shook it. “Everyone calls me Mrs. Walker.”

“What job you get?” Pa asked at supper.

Helen spooned Ma’s chicken soup and dumplings into her mouth. It was a favorite meal because she got to have seconds. Usually there wasn’t enough food to go around more than once. She chewed a doughy dumpling and swallowed. “Sewing,” she said.

“Sewing what?”

“Clothes, I guess. Mrs. Walker said I’d get a penny a piece.”

Pa nearly choked on his food. “A stinking penny? We’ll be lucky if you bring home half a buck a week.”

“Mrs. Sobinski daughter get two dollar,” Ma said in her broken English.

“Two bucks sounds better.” Pa stared at Helen. “You work hard, you hear.” He looked around the table. “Too bad the rest of you ain’t old enough.” He shook his head. “Six girls. What’s wrong with you, woman?” He looked at Ma. “Least you could have given me some boys to work the mines and help with heavy chores.” He ate in sulky silence.

Helen watched hurt fill her mother’s eyes. She hated when Pa blamed Ma for things that were nobody’s fault. “Good soup, Ma,” she said, trying to ease the hurt a little.

“I get more,” Ma said.

“I’ll get it.” Helen put her arms around Ma’s neck. “I bet your soup’s better than what the cooks make for president Coolidge.” She kissed Ma’s wrinkled cheek.

Three of Helen's sisters held out their bowls for seconds. She filled them.

"You brats clean up this mess," Pa said, slamming the door as he went outside.

"Pay attention," Mrs. Cook said.

Helen stood with two other girls, carefully watching Mrs. Cook put thread through various slots and holes and finally through the needle.

"Get the sequence wrong and it won't sew." Mrs. Cook looked at them. "Your turn."

Helen let the others go first. They made some mistakes. Mrs. Cook yelled and called them stupid.

With shaking fingers, Helen carefully threaded the machine. She looked nervously at Mrs. Cook.

"At least one of you has an ounce of sense."

Helen didn't like being praised when the other girls were insulted. She wished Mrs. Cook would leave them alone. The girls stared at Helen as if she had scolded them.

It took all morning for Mrs. Cook to finish her instructions. Helen's head throbbed from the constant noise of the machines; the hot, stale air in the large room pressed in on her, making her feel lethargic. Her cotton dress stuck to her back and legs and her feet ached from standing. Her stomach growled from hunger.

When her first break came, Helen was shown a small room with a long table and wooden chairs. Older women filled the seats at the table, so Helen sat on the floor with the new girls.

"I'm Helen," she smiled. "I thought we'd never sit down."

"I'm Joan," said the plump blond. "She's Margie." Joan pointed to the slender girl with dark braids.

"Hi, Margie," Helen said.

Margie tipped her head, remaining silent.

"She's dumb," Joan said.

"What an awful thing to say," Helen said, shocked.

“What else do you call someone who can’t talk?”

“You can’t talk?” Helen looked Margie in the eye.

Margie shook her head.

“How’d she get the job if she can’t talk?”

Joan rolled her eyes at Helen. “She’s dumb but she’s not dumb.”

Margie made a face and the girls laughed.

“Isn’t Mrs. Cook mean?” Helen said. “I hate how she yelled at you. I only got it right because I went last.”

“At first we thought you were trying to be teacher’s pet,” Joan said, “but Margie decided you were all right.”

“How do you know that if she can’t talk?” Helen said, confused.

“When you know her, you get good at seeing answers in her face.”

“Really?” Helen looked at Margie.

Margie smiled.

“Time’s up. Back to work,” Mrs. Cook said.

“We didn’t eat yet,” Helen said.

“You had fifteen minutes. Not my fault you wasted it.” Mrs. Cook scowled, hands on hips. “Eat it next break. Now git. You ain’t hired to sit.”

Helen thought about the hard-boiled eggs and crust of bread Ma had packed for her. She didn’t think she’d make it to the next break.

When it came, three long hours later, Helen was so hungry she would have eaten the straw in Pa’s chicken coop. The meager meal did little to relieve the hungry feeling. The only way she could get a drink was to stick her head under the pump in the washroom. She splashed water on her face before going back to work.

At the end of her first day, Helen was numbed by fatigue, but proud of completing four aprons. With five pieces on each apron, she’d earned twenty cents. She was sure she’d finish at least ten aprons tomorrow.

“How’d you do?” Helen asked Joan and Margie as they were leaving.

“I almost finished three and Margie did eight,” Joan said.

“Eight!” Helen saw the pride on Margie’s face. “Great, Margie.”

They walked to the end of the block and waved good-bye. “See you tomorrow,” Helen said.

Ma gave Helen a second helping of potatoes and cabbage at supper. “Working girl need more,” she said.

Pa was working a double shift in the mines and wouldn’t be home until morning.

“You’re lucky you don’t have to go to school,” Lizzy, Helen’s nine year old sister said.

“Didn’t you have fun chasing Charlie Pulaski?” Helen teased.

“He pulled my hair, I slapped him and Miss Lawrence made me stay after school to shovel ashes out of the stove.” She pouted.

“Poor girl.” Ma smiled. “You no hurt.”

“I wish I could go to work,” Lizzy sighed.

“Me, too,” said seven year old Annie.

“It’s not fun,” Helen told them. “I’d love to be back in school.” She missed the smell of chalk and books and the knowledge contained in them. The only book at home was Ma’s Polish bible that Helen couldn’t read. When things got better, maybe she’d go back.

“I had to sit in the corner because I forgot 6+8,” said Kate, six.

“Fourteen,” Ma said, patting Kate’s brown hair. “You use head.”

“You’re all grown-up,” Annie said. “You can do whatever you want.”

Helen’s shoulders sagged under the weight of her sisters’ admiration as they stared at her in awe. She didn’t feel lucky, grown-up or special. Only tired.

The three year old twins, Aggie and Ruth, stuck out mashed potato tongues and giggled. Helen laughed and felt normal again. She went to bed early, counting aches and pains until she fell asleep.

The girls developed a routine by the end of the week. They'd talk outside the factory a few minutes before work, then get busy. They ate and talked quickly during breaks and shared extra food when they could.

By Saturday, Helen felt like she'd been a seamstress at Walker's forever. Her fingers were cut up and sore from pinning fabric, shoulders ached from bending over the machine. Her bottom felt like it had been whipped with Pa's cat-o-nine-tails from the hard, splintered chair. Helen piled scraps of fabric on the seat to cushion it.

In spite of it all, she managed to finish forty aprons. Her heart pounded thinking about the two dollars she'd get for her labors. Wouldn't Pa be happy?

The girls waited in line outside the office. Mrs. Walker handed out the pay envelopes. Helen excitedly tore it open and reached inside.

She felt like she'd been kicked in the stomach as her fingers closed over four dimes. "There's a mistake," she said. "I made forty aprons. I should get two dollars."

Mrs. Walker said, "How you figure?"

Helen redid the numbers in her head. "Each apron had five pieces. Five times forty is two dollars."

Helen flinched as Sonny's laughter cut through the air like Pa's sickle through grass. "Ninny," he said. "You get a penny for each apron you finish not each piece you sew."

She bit hard on her bottom lip. They would not see her cry. Helen looked at Joan who held 30 cents and Margie fifty. They looked like they could cry, too.

"But...I thought..." Helen whispered. She'd worked so hard for this? What would Pa say when she came home with forty cents?

Pa waited for her when she got there. Like he knew. Helen remembered this was his one Saturday off a month since the union came to the mines.

"Where's the money?" He had his hand out as Helen walked through the door.

"You get pay?" Ma asked. She looked back and forth between Pa and Helen, rubbing her

hands over her arms.

Helen watched them both, mouth suddenly dry. Pa had that impatient look on his face, like he could be mad any minute. Ma looked scared.

“I got paid,” Helen said.

“Hand it over,” Pa said.

She gave him the envelope and sat down at the table.

“Where’s the rest?” he shouted. “You spend it on crap?”

“No,” Helen said, rubbing at tears that stung her eyes. “That’s all I got.”

“Forty cents?” He looked at Helen, then Ma. “You said two dollars.”

Helen explained her mix-up about piecework. “I finished forty garments with five pieces each. I thought I was supposed to count each piece.”

“Stupid girl!” He tossed the envelope on the table and stormed out of the room.

Helen bit into her bottom lip, trying to hold back tears.

“You work hard, yes?” Ma said, stroking Helen’s hair.

“You know I did.”

“Keep money.” She pressed the coins into Helen’s hand. “Think how make easy work.”

“I don’t know.” Helen let out a weary sigh. “I’ll try.”

Helen stood and went to Ma’s outstretched arms, nestling her head on the soft, pillowy chest as she cried. Maybe she cried herself to sleep, because the next thing she remembered was waking up in her bed.

She stayed in her room all day. Ma must have felt sorry for her because she didn’t call her down for chores or ask her to help with the little ones. Ma brought up a plate of cabbage and potatoes. Helen ate then even though she didn’t feel hungry; Ma got upset when food went to waste. Helen had lots of time to think. By Monday morning she had an idea.

She told Margie and Joan. “One of us will sew part of the aprons, another the next part and the third one will sew the last part. Maybe it will go faster. Then we’ll add them up and divide by three.” She hoped they’d be willing to try.

“The first part is easiest for me,” Joan said.

Helen looked at Margie. “What part do you like?”

Margie held up three fingers.

“Good, I like the middle anyway,” Helen said.

They each started an apron so the rest would have something to do, then began their parts. By the first break they’d assembled thirty aprons.

“It’s going well,” Joan said. “Why didn’t we think of this before?”

“I saw some of the other ladies doing things that way last week, but didn’t really think about it,” Helen said.

The girls worked hard and completed three hundred sixty aprons. Helen felt better seeing a dollar twenty in the envelope at the end of the week. She wondered if it would make any difference to Pa.

Pa wasn’t there when she got home. Helen left the envelope on the table.

The envelope was gone when she woke up the next morning. Pa came in with surprises. A food sack for Ma with flour, sugar, salt, cabbage, onions, lard and yeast. He held out a smaller sack and said, “For the girls.”

Inside was a dozen licorice sticks and a jar of molasses.

“Candy, yummy.” Aggie and Ruth jumped up and down. Ruth put one end of the licorice in her mouth and leaned forward. Aggie grabbed the other end in her mouth. They chewed their way to the middle. Even Pa laughed.

“Thanks for the treats, Pa,” Helen said. “What’s the molasses for?”

“When I was a boy my Ma used it to make taffy. She boiled it in a pot and we greased up our hands and pulled and pulled on it.” He looked at Ma. “You ever taste it, Anne?”

“My mother make, too,” she said.

“If I remember right, it was as much fun to make as it was to eat.” Pa looked at Helen. “You want to give it a try?”

Helen put a pot on the stove and poured the molasses in.

“Low heat,” Pa said. “Make sure it don’t burn.”

They spent the rest of the afternoon making the taffy. They greased their hands with lard and took turns pulling and stretching the sticky strands. When it was cool enough, Pa tasted first. Helen watched as his face broke out in a rare smile that always took her by surprise.

“Tastes like I remember,” he said. He gave a piece to Ma.

“Is good,” she said.

Everyone agreed.

Helen couldn’t remember a better Sunday. “Thanks, Pa. It was fun making taffy.”

“Well,” he said. “Don’t expect it every Sunday.” He sounded gruff, but Helen saw the corner of his mouth twitch in a half smile.

Before she lost her nerve, she kissed him on the cheek.

“That’s enough of that.” he said.

Helen could see in his eyes that he didn’t really mind.