

The girl was so sure she would get the job that she had come to Westchester with her suitcase. She sat in the living room of the Christiansens' house, looking, in her plain blue coat and hat, even younger than her twenty-one years.

'Have you worked as a governess before?' Mr Christiansen asked. He sat beside his wife on the sofa. 'Any references, I mean?'

'I was a maid at Mr Dwight Howell's home in New York for the last seven months.' Lucille looked at him with suddenly wide gray eyes. 'I could get a reference from there if you like... But when I saw your advertisement this morning, I didn't want to wait. I've always wanted a place where there are children.'

Mrs Christiansen smiled at the girl's enthusiasm, and said, 'We might phone them, of course... What do you say, Ronald? You wanted someone who really liked children...'

And fifteen minutes later Lucille Smith was standing in her room in the servants' house, at the back of the big house, putting on her new white uniform.

'You're starting again, Lucille,' she told herself in the mirror. 'You're going to forget everything that happened before.'

But her eyes grew too wide again, as though to deny her words. They looked like her mother's when they opened like that, and her mother was part of what she must forget.

There were only a few things to remember. A few silly habits, like burning bits of paper in ashtrays, forgetting time sometimes - little things that many people did, but that she

must remember not to do. With practice she would remember, because she was just like other people (hadn't the psychiatrist told her so?).

'She looked out at the garden and lawn that lay between the servants' house and the big house. The garden was longer than it was wide, and there was a fountain in the center. It was a beautiful garden! And trees so high and close together that Lucille could not see through them, and did not have to admit or believe that there was another house somewhere beyond . . . The Howell house in New York, tall and heavily ornamented, looking like an old wedding cake in a row of other old wedding cakes.

The Christiansen house was friendly, and alive! There were children in it! Thank God for the children. But she had not even met them yet.

She hurried downstairs and went across to the big house. What had the Christiansens agreed to pay her? She could not remember and did not care. She would have worked for nothing just to live in such a place.

Mrs Christiansen took her upstairs to the nursery where the children lay on the floor among colored pencils and picture books.

'Nicky, Heloise, this is your new nurse,' their mother said. 'Her name is Lucille.'

The little boy stood up and said, 'How do you do.'

'And Heloise,' Mrs Christiansen said, leading the second child, who was smaller, to Lucille.

Heloise stared and said, 'How do you do.'

'Nicky is nine, and Heloise six.'

Lucille could not take her eyes from them. They were the perfect children of her perfect house. They looked up at her with eyes that were curious, trusting, loving.

Mrs Christiansen smoothed the little girl's hair with a loving gentleness that fascinated Lucille. 'It's just about time for their lunch,' she said. 'You'll have your meals up here, Lucille. Lisabeth will be up with the lunch in a few minutes.' She paused at the door. 'You aren't nervous about anything, are you, Lucille?'

'Oh, no, madam.'

'Well, you mustn't be.' She seemed about to say something else, but only smiled and went out.

Lucille stared after her, wondering what that something else might have been.

'You're a lot prettier than Catherine,' Nicky told her. 'Catherine was our nurse before. She went back to Scotland. We didn't like Catherine.'

'No,' said Heloise. 'We didn't like Catherine.'

Nicky stared at his sister. 'You shouldn't say that. That's what I said!'

Lucille laughed. Then Nicky and Heloise laughed too.

A maid entered with lunch and put it on the table in the center of the room. 'I'm Lisabeth Jenkins, miss,' she said shyly.

'My name's Lucille Smith,' the girl said.

'If you need anything, just shout,' said the maid.

There were three omelets and some tomato soup. Lucille's coffee was in a silver pot, and the children had two large glasses of milk.

It was wonderful to be with these children. She had always been clumsy at the Howell house, but here it would not matter if she dropped a plate or a spoon. The children would only laugh.

Lucille drank some of her coffee, but the cup slipped and she spilled some of the coffee on the cloth.

'Piggy!' laughed Heloise.

'Heloise!' said Nicky, and went to fetch some paper towels from the bathroom.

They cleaned up together.

'Dad always gives us a little of his coffee,' said Nicky, as he sat down again.

Lucille had been wondering if the children would mention her spilling the coffee to their mother. She sensed that Nicky was offering her a bribe. 'Does he?' she asked.

'He pours a little in our milk,' Nicky went on.

'Like this?' Lucille poured a bit into each glass.

The children gasped with pleasure! 'Yes!'

'Catherine wouldn't give us any coffee, would she, Heloise?' said Nicky.

'Not her!' Heloise took a long, delicious drink.

A happy feeling rose inside Lucille. The children liked her, there was no doubt of that.

She remembered going to public parks in the city, during the three years she had worked as a maid in different houses, just to sit and watch the children play. But they had usually been dirty and had used bad language. Once she had seen a mother hit her own child across the face. Lucille remembered how she had run away in pain and horror.

'Why do you have such big eyes?' Heloise demanded.

Lucille jumped. 'My mother had big eyes, too,' she said deliberately, as if confessing.

Her mother had been dead three weeks now, but it seemed much longer. That was because she was forgetting all the hope of the last three years as she had waited for her mother to recover. But recover to what? The illness was something separate, something which had killed her mother. It had been stupid to hope for her mother to become sane, which she had never been. Even the doctors had told her that. And they had told her other things, about herself. Good, encouraging things; that she was as sane as her father had been.

'You haven't finished eating,' said Nicky.

'I wasn't very hungry,' said Lucille.

'We could go out to the sand-box now,' he suggested. 'I want you to see our castle.'

The sand-box was in the back corner of the house. Lucille sat on the wooden edge of the box and watched while the children built their sand-castle.

'I'm the young queen, and I'm a prisoner in the castle!' Heloise shouted.

'Yes, and I'll rescue her, Lucille!' shouted Nicky.

When the castle was finished, Nicky put six small colored stones just inside.

'These are the good soldiers,' he said.

'They're prisoners in the castle, too.' Heloise got more small stones from the garden. She was to be the castle army as well as the queen.

As the game continued, Lucille found herself wishing for something really dangerous to happen to Heloise, so that she could prove her great courage and loyalty. She would be seriously wounded herself, perhaps with a bullet or a knife, but she would beat off the attacker. Then the Christiansens would love her and keep her with them always.

'O-o-ow!'

It was Heloise. Nicky had pushed one of her fingers against the edge of the box as they struggled to get the same small stone.

Lucille was alarmed at the sight of the blood, and was wildly afraid that Lisabeth or Mrs Christiansen might see it. She took Heloise to the bathroom next to the nursery, and gently washed the finger. It was only a small scratch, and Heloise soon stopped her tears.

'Look, it's only a little scratch!' Lucille said, but it was said to calm the children. To Lucille it was not a little

scratch. It was a terrible disaster which she had failed to prevent. And on her first afternoon!

Heloise smiled. 'Don't punish Nicky. He didn't mean to do it.' And she ran from the bathroom and jumped on to her bed. 'We have to have our afternoon sleep now,' she told Lucille. 'Goodbye.'

'Goodbye,' Lucille answered, and tried to smile.

She went down to get Nicky, and when they came back up Mrs Christiansen was at the nursery door.

Lucille's face went white. 'I don't think it's bad, madam. It - it's a scratch from the sand-box.'

'Heloise's finger? Oh, don't worry, my dear. They're always getting little scratches. Nicky, dear, you must learn to be more gentle. Look how you frightened Lucille!' She laughed and ruffled his hair.

While the children slept, Lucille looked at one of their story books. The hospital doctor had encouraged her reading, she remembered, and had told her to go to the cinema, too. 'Be with normal people and forget all about your mother's difficulties...'

And the psychiatrist had said, 'There's no reason why you should not be as normal as your father was. Get a job outside the city - relax, enjoy life. Forget even the house your family lived in. After a year...'

That, too, was three weeks ago, just after her mother had died. And what the doctor had said was true. In this house, where there was peace and love, beauty and children, she would forget for ever her mother's face.

With a little gasp of joy, she pressed her face into the pages of the story book, her eyes half closed. Slowly she rocked backwards and forwards in the chair, conscious of nothing but her own happiness.

'What are you doing?' Nicky asked, politely curious.

Lucille brought the book down from her face. She smiled like a happy but guilty child. 'Reading!' she laughed.

Nicky laughed too. 'You read veiy close!'

'Ye-es,' said Heloise, who had also sat up.

Nicky came over and looked at the book. 'We get up at three o'clock. Would you read to us now? Catherine always read to us until dinner.'

Lucille sat down on the floor so they could see the pictures as she read. She read for two hours, and the time slipped by. Just after five, Lisabeth brought their dinner, and when the meal was over Nicky and Heloise demanded more reading until bedtime. Lucille gladly began another book, but Lisabeth came to say that it was time for the children's bath, and that Mrs Christiansen would be up to say good night in a little while.

When the children were in bed, Lucille went downstairs with Mrs Christiansen.

'Is everything all right, Lucille?'

'Yes, madam. Except. . . can I come up once in the night to see that the children are all right?'

'That's a very kind thought, Lucille, but it really isn't necessary.'

Lucille was silent.

'I'm afraid the evenings are going to seem long to you. If you ever want to go the cinema in town, Alfred, that's the chauffeur, will be glad to take you in the car.'

'Thank you, madam.'

'Then good night, Lucille.'

Lucille went out the back way and across the garden. When she opened her door, she wished it was the nursery door; that it was morning and time to begin another day.

How good, she thought as she turned out the light, to feel pleasantly tired (although it was only nine o'clock) instead of being unable to sleep because of thinking about her mother or worrying about herself. She remembered one day not so long ago when for fifteen minutes she had been unable to think of her name. She had run in fear to the doctor.

That was past! She might even ask Alfred to buy her some cigarettes - a luxury she had denied herself for months.

The second day was like the first - except that there was no scratched hand - and so was the third and the fourth. The only thing that changed was Lucille's love for the family. A love which grew greater each day.

Saturday evening she found an envelope addressed to herself at the servants' house. Inside was \$20.

It meant nothing to her. To use it she would have to go to the shops where other people were. What use had she for money if she was never to leave the Christiansen home? In a

year's time she would have \$1040, and in two years \$2080. Eventually she would have as much as the Christiansens, and that would not be right.

Would they think it was very strange if she asked to work for nothing? Or for \$10 perhaps?

She went to see Mrs Christiansen the next morning.

'It's about my pay, madam,' she said. 'It's too much for me.'

Mrs Christiansen looked surprised. 'You are a funny girl, Lucille! You want to be with the children day and night. You're always talking about doing something "important" for us. And now your pay is too much!' She laughed. 'You're certainly different, Lucille!'

Lucille was listening closely. 'How do you mean different, madam?'

'I've just told you, my dear. And I refuse to pay you less because that would be treating you badly. In fact, if you ever want more-'

'Oh, no, madam! But I wish there was something more I could do for you, and the children. Something bigger-'

'Nonsense, Lucille,' Mrs Christiansen interrupted. 'Mr Christiansen and I are both very pleased with you.'

'Thank you, madam.'

Lucille went back to the nursery where the children were playing. Mrs Christiansen did not understand. If she could just explain about her mother, and her fear of herself for so many months, how she had never dared take even a

cigarette, and how just being with the family in this beautiful house had made her well again . . .

That night she sat in her room with the light on until after twelve o'clock. She had her cigarettes now, and allowed herself just three in the evening, but even these were enough to relax her mind, to make her dream of being a heroine. And when the three cigarettes were smoked and she would have liked another, she put them in her top drawer so that they could not tempt her.

She noticed the \$20 bill the Christiansens had given her. She took a match and lit it, and put the burning end down against the side of her ashtray. Slowly she lit the rest of the matches, one after another, and made a tiny, well controlled fire. When all the matches were burnt, she tore the \$20 bill into bits and added these to the fire.

Mrs Christiansen did not understand, but if she saw this, she might. But this was not enough. Just loyal service was not enough either. Anyone would give that, for money. She was different. Mrs Christiansen had said that. Lucille remembered what else Mrs Christiansen had said: 'Mr Christiansen and I are both very pleased with you.' Lucille smiled at the memory. She felt wonderfully strong and happy. Only one thing was lacking in her happiness. She had to prove herself in a crisis.

She moved nervously around the room.

If only there were a flood ... She imagined the water coming higher and higher around the house, until it almost rushed into the nursery. She would rescue the children and swim with them to safety.

Or if there were an earthquake ... She would rush in among falling walls and pull the children out. Perhaps she would go back for some small thing - one of Nicky's toys - and be killed! Then the Christiansens would know how much she loved them.

Of if there were a fire... Fires were common things. There might be a terrible fire just from the gasoline that was in the garage . . .

She went downstairs, through the door that opened into the garage. The gasoline tank was three feet high and completely full. Despite its weight, she got it out of the garage and rolled it across the garden, making no noise on the grass. The windows were dark, but even if there had been lights Lucille would not have stopped. Nor if Mr Christiansen himself had been standing by the fountain, because probably she would not have seen him.

She poured some gasoline on a corner of the house, rolled the tank further, and poured some more. She went on like this until she reached the far corner. Then she lit a match and walked back the way she had come, touching it against the wet places. Without looking back, she went to stand by the door of the servants' house to watch.

At first the flames were pale and eager, then they became yellow with bits of red. Lucille began to relax. She would let the flames grow tall, even to the nursery window, before she rushed in, so that the danger would be at its highest.

A smile came to her mouth, and her face was bright in the light of the fire. Anyone seeing her there would certainly have thought her a beautiful young woman.

She had lit the fire at five places, and now it was creeping up the house like the fingers of a hand, warm and gentle. Lucille smiled, but made herself wait.

Suddenly the gasoline tank, having grown too warm, exploded with a sound like a huge gun and lit up the whole garden for an instant.

As though this was the sign for which she had been waiting, Lucille went confidently forward.