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Mrs. Hinck

by MIRIAM ALLEN DEFORD

"I'D LIKE AN OLDER, more settled woman if I could get one — somebody reliable," Gwen said into the telephone. "I've had high school girls and they invite their friends and play the phonograph all hours and keep the children awake. . . . Two, a boy eight and a girl five. . . . Oh, that would be fine. Could she come tomorrow at 6?"

Mrs. Hinck arrived promptly on the hour, a comfortable, grandmotherly sort of person. Gav and Ada seemed to take to her at once. Best of all, Dale wouldn't have to drive her home when they got back; she came in her own little two-seater, which she parked outside.

"Give the children their supper as soon as we leave," Gwen instructed her. "It's all ready in the kitchen. Ada's bedtime is 8 and Gav can stay up till half-past. He can take care of himself, but you'll have to help Ada a little. And oh, yes, much as we deplore it" — Gwen made a little *moue* and Mrs. Hinck smiled sympathetically — "there's a riproaring program on television that they won't be happy without. It comes on at 7:30."

"Now don't you worry about anything," said Mrs. Hinck competently. "We're going to get along beautifully."

It was after 1 when Gwen and Dale got home. The only light was in the living room, where Mrs. Hinck sat placidly knitting something in yellow wool. She had even cleaned up the children's supper dishes. Gwen breathed a sigh of relief, remembering the high school girls.

"It's after midnight, so we owe you an hour overtime," Dale said.

"Nonsense," responded Mrs. Hinck. "I always sit up late anyhow, and I'm just knitting here instead of at home."

Gwen and Dale exchanged incredulous glances.

"Would you have time to come often — say twice a week?" Gwen asked. She didn't want to be more specific till she found out how the kids had liked her. "I'll phone in the morning — what's your number?"

"I'm sorry, but I haven't any phone," said Mrs. Hinck apologetically. "Just call the agency — I check with them every day."

She folded the yellow wool into a knitting bag, put on her smart black hat and coat, and drove away.

"Well, kids, what happened to Roaring Roger last night?" Dale inquired genially at the breakfast table.

Gav and Ada stared at each other blankly.

"Well, for gosh sake!" Gav exploded. "We forgot all about him! Mrs. Hinck was telling us a story."

"Do you like her?"

"She's swell," they said in chorus.

It was grand, being able to get out again together. Gwen was a devoted mother, but you can't help being young and wanting a little fun sometimes. On Mrs. Hinck's second evening, they arranged for Wednesdays and Saturdays, regularly.

"And maybe an extra evening once in a while, if you're not too busy," Gwen said recklessly.

"Any time — just let the agency know. To tell the truth, this is all the baby-sitting I'm doing right now. But I'd love to come here whenever you say. I like children, and I get so lonesome for my own little granddaughter. This is a sweater for her that I'm knitting."

"How old is she?" Gwen asked.

"Just about a year older than your Ada. I miss her a lot."

"Isn't she here in the city?"

"Oh, no, my daughter lives abroad. She married a foreigner: Illinck is his name. I was with them for a while, but I don't know when I'll go back. I just got the wanderlust in my old age, and decided to travel, and now I seem to have settled down here. I do miss Mary, though — and my daughter too, of course. I guess Mary misses me too. She's an only child, and there are no other children around. I wish she had your little boy and girl to play with. They're lovely youngsters."

"We think so," Dale grinned. "Thanks a lot, incidentally, for weaning them from that blood-and-thunder TV program. How did you do it?"

"Oh, I just tell them stories," Mrs. Hinck said vaguely. "I guess they just get interested and forget the television. I did the same way with Mary when I was there. They don't have television, but it was the same thing with radio."

"Illinck," Dale remarked after Mrs. Hinck had left. "That's a funny name — wonder what nationality he is?"

"I can't imagine. Don't let's ask any questions, Dale, there might be some family trouble. I noticed she didn't want to say much. And we don't want to offend her and lose her — we're too lucky."

"I'm the one that's lucky," Dale retorted, "getting a chance again to go places with my best girl."

Nevertheless, Gwen couldn't avoid a tiny unworthy twinge of jealousy when Gav and Ada began watching from the front window for Mrs. Hinck, and rushing to the door to greet her with hugs.

"Don't be a goof," she admonished herself. "She isn't stealing your kids' affections — they're as fond of us as ever. They just needed a grandmother, and she needed some grandchildren."

On summer evenings when it was still light after dinner and they weren't going anywhere, Dale would cut the grass or water the front garden while Gwen got rid of the dishes. That was the signal for Gav and Ada to perch on the bottom step of the porch and engage him in conversation.

"Daddy, why don't I have a grandmother?" That was Ada.

"You have — you've got two of them, and two grandfathers too, only they live way off at the other end of the country. They send you Christmas and birthday presents — don't you remember? Maybe some day one of them will visit us."

"Whenever Mrs. Hinck goes to visit her granddaughter, she takes her simply wonderful toys," said Ada wistfully.

"Well, if one of your grandmothers comes to see you, she'll bring you toys, too."

"Not like Mrs. Hinck," Ada objected stubbornly. "Mrs. Hinck brings Mary toys like nobody else in the world has — she told us so."

"Pig," remarked Gav. "Hey, daddy, can I hold the hose for a while now, huh?"

"I'm getting a trifle tired of Mrs. Hinck's little granddaughter," Dale commented later to Gwen. "She must be the worst spoiled brat in creation."

"She does seem kind of hipped on the subject, doesn't she? But she's lonely, I guess, poor old thing."

"Just so she doesn't give our kids grandiose ideas. Toys like none in the whole world — gosh!"

Another evening, and another gardening session.

"When Mrs. Hinck visits her granddaughter," said Gav informatively, "she doesn't use a train or a bus or a ship or a plane to get there."

"That's nice. What does she do — walk and swim?"

"No, she just *goes*."

Curiosity overmastered Dale.

"She ever tell you the name of the country where her granddaughter lives?"

"Sure. It's called America, just like this one."

"America, eh? And what language do they speak there?"

"Why, English, just like us, of course."

Dale felt ashamed of his prying. Mrs. Hinck obviously had forestalled any possible inquiries on his or Gwen's part. He changed the subject.

"How's your granddaughter's sweater coming along?" Gwen asked Mrs. Hinck the next time she came.

"Almost done. I'm going to make a cap to match. It's for her seventh birthday. Some time this fall I might just pop over and visit there — I do miss Mary so much. How I wish I could take your two along! It would be wonderful for Mary."

"Yes, it's too bad it's so far away," Gwen answered absent-mindedly. Her heart sank. There would never be another Mrs. Hinck, and she and Dale had been having such good times together. "But you'd be back, wouldn't you?" she asked hopefully.

"Oh, I think so, unless — well, anyway, we needn't think about it yet."

That was in August. On Saturday night in the first week of October Dale and Gwen went to a party they hated to be the first ones to break up. It was after 3 when they drove up to their door.

"I feel guilty, keeping that poor old lady up so late," Gwen murmured.

"She's gone to sleep, I guess," Dale consoled her. "There's no light in the living room."

Gwen let out a startled cry.

"Dale!" she gasped. "Look — her car isn't here. She *couldn't* have gone home and left the children alone in the house — not Mrs. Hinck!"

They raced in. There was no one in the living room or anywhere else on the first floor. Together they ran upstairs, the same sudden terror in their hearts.

The two little bedrooms were dark, and the beds were empty. They had not been slept in.

Gwen's knees failed her. Dale dashed to the phone to call the police.

"Gwen," he shouted back from the hall, "what's the license number of Mrs. Hinck's car? I never noticed."

"I never did either," Gwen quavered.

It was almost dawn — with Gwen in tears and Dale pacing the floor — before the police called back. They'd found the license number at last, from the records, and they'd sent a man to the address Mrs. Hinck had given as hers. It was an all-night parking lot.

The night man there knew Mrs. Hinck by sight, but he hadn't seen her since he came on duty at 8. She kept her car there all the time, paying by the month; that was all he knew.

The whole long day was a nightmare. Neither of them had slept, and they kept going on black coffee, for they couldn't eat. A detective had appeared early in the morning and looked at the children's rooms. Nothing of theirs or of their parents' was missing, and there were no signs of struggle, or any evidence that a disturber had been there.

"They were kidnaped, all right," the detective concluded. "But they must have gone voluntarily."

What does "voluntarily" mean, when it is applied to children of five and eight?

Dale told him about the daughter who had married a foreigner named Illinck and lived abroad.

"Never heard of such a name," said the detective. "That all you know about him? We'll send out a general alarm right away, of course, but I don't see how she could leave the country without a passport." He took out his notebook. "Now give me a full description of the little girl and boy. And this Mrs. Hinck — what does she look like?"

"About five feet five, rather plump, nicely curled white hair, bifocals in a gold frame."

It sounded like the description of half the grandmothers in the world.

"Well, that helps a lot," said the detective with false encouragement. "No ransom note, I suppose, or anything like that?"

"No, nothing at all."

"And there won't be, I'm sure of that," Dale put in. "This isn't a kidnaping for money; the old lady seemed to be very well off. It's more like — well, the way I figure it out, she grew fond of our kids and that's why she took them."

"We get plenty of cases like that, though it's usually younger women. By the way, we've checked with the manager of the agency you got her from. They don't know a thing about her. She just came in there and signed up one day. They sent her out half a dozen times but she didn't seem to like the people and wouldn't go to any of them again, till they sent her to you. And the only address she gave was what turned out to be that parking lot."

"I'm absolutely positive," Gwen insisted, "that she's gone to her daughter and granddaughter, and taken Gav and Ada with her. She told me she might make a visit to them this fall, and she said something, months ago, about wishing she could take our two along with her. I thought she was just talking. And of course I expected she'd tell us ahead of time when she planned to leave."

"Neither did you think she'd snatch your children when she went, naturally. Well, folks, don't lose heart. I have kids of my own, and I know how you feel. But we're on the job, and we'll stay on it. We ought to have results very soon. From what you've told me, there isn't a chance she'd do any harm to them. And if she makes any attempt to spirit them out of the country —"

"Oh, the secret journey! I just remembered. Gav said to me only yesterday, 'Mrs. Hinck says some day she'll take us on a secret journey to a strange place.' I just laughed — I never even thought —"

"The only strange place she's going to see is the inside of a jail," the detective said.

But day passed into night again, and still there was no word of progress. They had tried again to eat but the food choked them. Finally they did drop asleep for an hour or two in the late afternoon, until the phone shocked them awake. But it was only the detective, to say that Mrs. Hinck's car had been found parked in the driveway of a vacant house at the other end of the city.

Husband and wife stood together at the front window where Gav and Ada had stood so often watching for Mrs. Hinck. They had stood there for a long time, not even bothering to turn on the lights as night came on. Dale held Gwen close to him, and once in a while she wept quietly.

"Look, darling," he said at last gently. "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

Gwen lifted a wet face and nodded dumbly. Her lips trembled.

"I felt you were. Looking out here reminded me of things the kids used to talk about to me while I gardened.

"Gwen, you never studied any foreign languages: I did. *Hinc* means *on this side*, and *illinc* means *from that side*."

Gwen found a shaky voice.

"And the thing you told me, that Gav said — when Mrs. Hinck goes to visit her granddaughter —"

"She doesn't take a train or a bus or a ship or a plane — she just *goes*. Yes, that too."

"Oh, Dale! there were so many hints we never even noticed. That country's America, too, and the language they speak is English."

"We thought that was funny, or just to keep us from snooping. We'd better face it, Gwen. If we're right, the police can't ever get them back to us. And Mrs. Hinck won't need any passport where she's taken them."

She started to sob again. Dale held her tightly, his own face twisted.

"I wish she had your little boy and girl to play with!" he quoted bitterly.

"The toys!" Gwen whispered. "The toys that are simply wonderful, that aren't like any others in the world —"