Jessica's First Prayer; and, Jessica's Mother

by Hesba Stretton

Free public domain classic — Noveliopdf

The Project Gutenberg eBook of Jessica's First Prayer; and, Jessica's Mother

This eBook is for the use of anyone anywhere in the United States and most other parts of the world at no cost and with almost no restrictions whatsoever. You may copy it, give it away or re-use it under the terms of the Project Gutenberg License included with this eBook or online at www.gutenberg.org. If you are not located in the United States, you will have to check the laws of the country where you are located before using this eBook.

Title: Jessica's First Prayer; and, Jessica's Mother

Author: Hesba Stretton

Release date: October 1, 2015 [eBook #50104] Most recently updated: October 22, 2024

Language: English

Other information and formats: www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/50104

Credits: Produced by The Online Distributed Proofreading Team at http://www.pgdp.net (This file was produced from images generously made available by The Internet Archive/Canadian Libraries)

*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK JESSICA'S FIRST PRAYER; AND, JESSICA'S MOTHER ***

Jessica’s First Prayer and Jessica’s Mother

Frontispiece

“‘Lord, these are the lambs of thy flock.’”

Title page

Jessica’s First Prayer

Jessica’s Mother

Hesba Stretton

New York H. M. Caldwell Co. Publishers

CONTENTS.

Jessica’s First Prayer

CHAPTER I. THE COFFEE-STALL AND ITS KEEPER.

In a screened and secluded corner of one of the many railway-bridges which span the streets of London there could be seen, a few years ago, from five o’clock every morning until half-past eight, a tidily set out coffee-stall, consisting of a trestle and board, upon which stood two large tin cans with a small fire of charcoal burning under each, so as to keep the coffee boiling during the early hours of the morning when the work-people were thronging into the city on their way to their daily toil. The coffee-stall was a favorite one, for besides being under shelter, which was of great consequence upon rainy mornings, it was also in so private a niche that the customers taking their out-of-door breakfast were not too much exposed to notice; and, moreover, the coffee-stall keeper was a quiet man, who cared only to serve the busy workmen without hindering them by any gossip. He was a tall, spare, elderly man, with a singularly solemn face and a manner which was grave and secret.

Nobody knew either his name or dwelling-place; unless it might be the policeman who strode past the coffee-stall every half-hour and nodded familiarly to the solemn man behind it. There were very few who cared to make any inquiries about him; but those who did could only discover that he kept the furniture of his stall at a neighboring coffee-house, whither he wheeled his trestle and board and crockery every day not later than half-past eight in the morning; after which he was wont to glide away with a soft footstep and a mysterious and fugitive air, with many backward and sidelong glances, as if he dreaded observation, until he was lost among the crowds which thronged the streets. No one had ever had the persevering curiosity to track him all the way to his house, or to find out his other means of gaining a livelihood; but in general his stall was surrounded by customers, whom he served with silent seriousness, and who did not grudge to pay him his charge for the refreshing coffee he supplied to them.

For several years the crowd of work-people had paused by the coffee-stall under the railway-arch, when one morning, in a partial lull of his business, the owner became suddenly aware of a pair of very bright dark eyes being fastened upon him and the slices of bread and butter on his board, with a gaze as hungry as that of a mouse which has been driven by famine into a trap. A thin and meagre face belonged to the eyes, which was half hidden by a mass of matted hair hanging over the forehead and down the neck—the only covering which the head or neck had; for a tattered frock, scarcely fastened together with broken strings, was slipping down over the shivering shoulders of the little girl. Stooping down to a basket behind his stall, he caught sight of two bare little feet curling up from the damp pavement, as the child lifted up first one and then other and laid them one over another to gain a momentary feeling of warmth. Whoever the wretched child was, she did not speak; only at every steaming cupful which he poured out of his can her dark eyes gleamed hungrily, and he could hear her smack her thin lips as if in fancy she was tasting the warm and fragrant coffee.

“Oh, come now,” he said at last, when only one boy was left taking his breakfast leisurely, and he leaned over his stall to speak in a low and quiet tone, “why don’t you go away, little girl? Come, come; you’re staying too long, you know.”

“I’m just going, sir,” she answered, shrugging her small shoulders to draw her frock up higher about her neck; “only it’s raining cats and dogs outside; and mother’s been away all night, and she took the key with her; and it’s so nice to smell the coffee; and the police has left off worriting me while I’ve been here. He thinks I’m a customer taking my breakfast.” And the child laughed a shrill laugh of mockery at herself and the policeman.

“You’ve had no breakfast, I suppose,” said the coffee-stall keeper, in the same low and confidential voice, and leaning over his stall till his face nearly touched the thin, sharp features of the child.

“No,” she replied, coolly, “and I shall want my dinner dreadful bad afore I get it, I know. You don’t often feel dreadful hungry, do you, sir? I’m not griped yet, you know; but afore I taste my dinner it’ll be pretty bad, I tell you. Ah! very bad indeed!”

She turned away with a knowing nod, as much as to say she had one experience in life to which he was quite a stranger; but before she had gone half a dozen steps she heard the quiet voice calling to her in rather louder tones, and in an instant she was back at the stall.

“Slip in here,” said the owner, in a cautious whisper; “here’s a little coffee left and a few crusts. There. You must never come again, you know. I never give to beggars; and if you’d begged I’d have called the police. There; put your poor feet towards the fire. Now, aren’t you comfortable?”

The child looked up with a face of intense satisfaction. She was seated upon an empty basket, with her feet near the pan of charcoal, and a cup of steaming coffee on her lap; but her mouth was too full for her to reply except by a very deep nod, which

expressed unbounded delight. The man was busy for a while packing up his crockery; but every now and then he stopped to look down upon her, and to shake his head.

“What’s your name?” he asked, at length; “but there, never mind! I don’t care what it is. What’s your name to do with me, I wonder?”

“It’s Jessica,” said the girl: “but mother and every body calls me Jess. You’d be tired of being called Jess, if you were me. It’s Jess here, and Jess there: and every body wanting me to go errands. And they think nothing of giving me smacks, and kicks, and pinches. Look here!”

Whether her arms were black and blue from the cold or from ill-usage he could not tell; but he shook his head again seriously and the child felt encouraged to go on.

“I wish I could stay here for ever and ever, just as I am!” she cried. “But you’re going away, I know; and I’m never to come again, or you’ll set the police on me!”

“Yes,” said the coffee-stall keeper very softly; and looking round to see if there were any other ragged children within sight, “if you’ll promise not to come again for a whole week, and not to tell any body else, you may come once more. I’ll give you one other treat. But you must be off now.”

“I’m off, sir,” she said, sharply; “but if you’ve a errand I could go on I’d do it all right, I would. Let me carry some of your things.”

“No, no,” cried the man; “you run away, like a good girl; and, mind! I’m not to see you again for a whole week.”

“All right,” answered Jess, setting off down the rainy street at a quick run, as if to show her willing agreement to the bargain; while the coffee-stall keeper, with many a cautious glance around him, removed his stock in trade to the coffee-house near at hand, and was seen no more for the rest of the day in the neighborhood of the railway-bridge.

CHAPTER II. JESSICA’S TEMPTATION.

Her part of the bargain Jessica faithfully kept; and though the solemn and silent man under the dark shadow of the bridge looked for her every morning as he served his customers, he caught no glimpse of her wan face and thin little frame. But when the appointed time was finished she presented herself at the stall, with her hungry eyes fastened again upon the piles of buns and bread and butter, which were fast disappearing before the demands of the buyers. The business was at its height, and the famished child stood quietly on one side watching for the throng to melt away. But as soon as the nearest church clock had chimed eight she drew a little nearer to the stall, and at a signal from its owner she slipped between the trestles of his stand and took up her former position on the empty basket. To his eyes she seemed even a little thinner, and certainly more ragged, than before; and he laid a whole bun, a stale one which was left from yesterday’s stock, upon her lap, as she lifted the cup of coffee to her lips with both her benumbed hands.

“What’s your name?” she asked, looking up to him with her keen eyes.

“Why,” he answered, hesitatingly, as if he was reluctant to tell so much of himself, “my christened name is Daniel.”

“And where do you live, Mr. Dan’el?” she inquired.

“Oh, come now!” he exclaimed, “if you’re going to be impudent, you’d better march off. What business is it of yours where I live? I don’t want to know where you live, I can tell you.”

“I didn’t mean no offence,” said Jess humbly; “only I thought I’d like to know where a good man like you lived. You’re a very good man, aren’t you, Mr. Dan’el?”

“I don’t know,” he answered uneasily; “I’m afraid I’m not.”

“Oh, but you are, you know,” continued Jess. “You make good coffee; prime! And buns too! And I’ve been watching you hundreds of times afore you saw me, and the

police leaves you alone, and never tells you to move on. Oh, yes! you must be a very good man."

Daniel sighed, and fidgeted about his crockery with a grave and occupied air, as if he were pondering over the child's notion of goodness. He made good coffee, and the police left him alone! It was quite true; yet still as he counted up the store of pence which had accumulated in his strong canvas bag, he sighed again still more heavily. He purposely let one of his pennies fall upon the muddy pavement, and went on counting the rest busily, while he furtively watched the little girl sitting at his feet. Without a shade of change upon her small face she covered the penny with her foot and drew it in carefully towards her, while she continued to chatter fluently to him. For a moment a feeling of pain shot a pang through Daniel's heart; and then he congratulated himself on having entrapped the young thief. It was time to be leaving now; but before he went he would make her move her bare foot and disclose the penny concealed beneath it, and then he would warn her never to venture near his stall again. This was her gratitude, he thought; he had given her two breakfasts and more kindness than he had shown to any fellow-creature for many a long year, and at the first chance the young jade turned upon him and robbed him! He was brooding over it painfully in his mind when Jessica's uplifted face changed suddenly, a dark flush crept over her pale cheeks, and the tears started to her eyes. She stooped down, and picking up the coin from among the mud she rubbed it bright and clean upon her rags and laid it upon the stall close to his hand, but without speaking a word. Daniel looked down upon her solemnly and searchingly.

"What's this?" he asked.

"Please, Mr. Dan'el," she answered, "it dropped, and you didn't hear it."

"Jess," he said sternly, "tell me all about it."

"Oh, please," she sobbed, "I never had a penny of my own but once; and it rolled close to my foot; and you didn't see it; and I hid it up sharp; and then I thought how

kind you'd been, and how good the coffee and buns are, and how you let me warm myself at your fire; and, please, I couldn't keep the penny any longer. You'll never let me come again, I guess."

Daniel turned away for a moment, busying himself with putting his cups and saucers into the basket, while Jessica stood by trembling, with the large tears rolling slowly down her cheeks. The snug, dark corner, with its warm fire of charcoal and its fragrant smell of coffee, had been a paradise to her for these two brief spans of time; but she had been guilty of the sin which would drive her from it. All beyond the railway-arch the streets stretched away, cold and dreary, with no friendly face to meet hers and no warm cups of coffee to refresh her; yet she was only lingering sorrowfully to hear the words spoken which should forbid her to return to this pleasant spot. Mr. Daniel turned round at last, and met her tearful gaze, with a look of strange emotion upon his own solemn face.

"Jess," he said, "I could never have done it myself. But you may come here every Wednesday morning, as this is a Wednesday, and there'll always be a cup of coffee for you."

She thought he meant that he could not have hidden the penny under his foot, and she went away a little saddened and subdued, notwithstanding her great delight in the expectation of such a treat every week; while Daniel, pondering over the struggle that must have passed through her childish mind, went on his way, from time to time shaking his head, muttering to himself, "I couldn't have done it myself: I never could have done it myself."

CHAPTER III. AN OLD FRIEND IN A NEW DRESS.

Week after week, through the three last months of the year, Jessica appeared every Wednesday at the coffee-stall and, after waiting patiently till the close of the breakfasting business, received her pittance from the charity of her new friend. After

a while Daniel allowed her to carry some of his load to the coffee-house, but he never suffered her to follow him farther, and he was always particular to watch her out of sight before he turned off through the intricate mazes of the streets in the direction of his own home. Neither did he encourage her to ask him any more questions; and often but very few words passed between them during Jessica's breakfast time.

As to Jessica's home, she made no secret of it, and Daniel might have followed her any time he pleased. It was a single room, which had once been a hay-loft, over the stable of an old inn, now in use for two or three donkeys, the property of costermongers dwelling in the court about it. The mode of entrance was by a wooden ladder, whose rungs were crazy and broken, and which led up through a trap-door in the floor of the loft. The interior of the home was as desolate and comfortless as that of the stable below, with only a litter of straw for the bedding and a few bricks and boards for the furniture. Every thing that could be pawned had disappeared long ago, and Jessica's mother often lamented that she could not thus dispose of her child. Yet Jessica was hardly a burden to her. It was a long time since she had taken any care to provide her with food or clothing, and the girl had to earn or beg for herself the meat which kept a scanty life within her. Jess was the drudge and errand-girl of the court; and what with being cuffed and beaten by her mother, and overworked and ill-used by her numerous employers, her life was a hard one. But now there was always Wednesday morning to count upon and look forward to; and by and by a second scene of amazed delight opened upon her.

Jessica had wandered far away from home in the early darkness of a winter's evening, after a violent outbreak of her drunken mother, and she was still sobbing now and then with long-drawn sobs of pain and weariness, when she saw a little way before her the tall, well-known figure of her friend Mr. Daniel. He was dressed in a suit of black, with a white neckcloth, and he was pacing with brisk yet measured steps along the lighted streets. Jessica felt afraid of speaking to him, but she

followed at a little distance, until presently he stopped before the iron gates of a large building and, unlocking them, passed on to the arched doorway, and with a heavy key opened the folding-doors and entered in. The child stole after him but paused for a few minutes, trembling upon the threshold, until the gleam of a light lit up within tempted her to venture a few steps forward, and to push a little way open an inner door, covered with crimson baize, only so far as to enable her to peep through at the inside. Then, growing bolder by degrees, she crept through herself, drawing the door to noiselessly behind her. The place was in partial gloom, but Daniel was kindling every gaslight, and each minute lit it up in more striking grandeur. She stood in a carpeted aisle, with high oaken pews on each side almost as black as ebony. A gallery of the same dark old oak ran round the walls, resting upon massive pillars, behind one of which she was partly concealed, gazing with eager eyes at Daniel, as he mounted the pulpit steps and kindled the lights there, disclosing to her curious delight the glittering pipes of an organ behind it. Before long the slow and soft-footed chapel-keeper disappeared for a moment or two into a vestry; and Jessica, availing herself of his short absence, stole silently up under the shelter of the dark pews until she reached the steps of the organ loft, with its golden show. But at this moment Mr. Daniel appeared again, arrayed in a long gown of black serge; and as she stood spell-bound gazing at the strange appearance of her patron, his eyes fell upon her, and he also was struck speechless for a minute, with an air of amazement and dismay upon his grave face.

“Come, now,” he exclaimed, harshly, as soon as he could recover his presence of mind, “you must take yourself out of this. This isn’t any place for such as you. It’s for ladies and gentlemen; so you must run away sharp before any body comes. How did you ever find your way here?”

He had come very close to her, and bent down to whisper in her ear, looking nervously round to the entrance all the time. Jessica’s eager tongue was loosened.

“Mother beat me,” she said, “and turned me into the streets, and I see you there, so I followed you up. I’ll run away this minute, Mr. Daniel; but it’s a nice place. What do the ladies and gentlemen do when they come here? Tell me, and I’ll be off sharp.”

“They come here to pray,” whispered Daniel.

“What is pray?” asked Jessica.

“Bless the child!” cried Daniel, in perplexity. “Why, they kneel down in those pews; most of them sit, though; and the minister up in the pulpit tells God what they want.”

Jessica gazed into his face with such an air of bewilderment that a faint smile crept over the sedate features of the pew-opener.

“What is a minister and God?” she said; “and do ladies and gentlemen want any thing? I thought they’d every thing they wanted, Mr. Daniel.”

“Oh!” cried Daniel, “you must be off, you know. They’ll be coming in a minute, and they’d be shocked to see a ragged little heathen like you. This is the pulpit, where the minister stands and preaches to ’em; and there are the pews, where they sit to listen to him, or to go to sleep, may be; and that’s the organ to play music to their singing. There, I’ve told you every thing, and you must never come again; never.”

“Mr. Daniel,” said Jessica, “I don’t know nothing about it. Isn’t there a dark little corner somewhere that I could hide in?”

“No, no,” interrupted Daniel impatiently; “we couldn’t do with such a little heathen, with no shoes or bonnet on. Come, now, it’s only a quarter to the time, and somebody will be here in a minute. Run away, do!”

Jessica retraced her steps slowly to the crimson door, casting many a longing look backwards; but Mr. Daniel stood at the end of the aisle, frowning upon her whenever she glanced behind. She gained the lobby at last, but already some one was approaching the chapel door, and beneath the lamp at the gate stood one of her

natural enemies, a policeman. Her heart beat fast, but she was quickwitted, and in another instant she spied a place of concealment behind one of the doors, into which she crept for safety until the policeman passed on upon his beat.

She stretched out a thin little finger

The congregation began to arrive quickly. She heard the rustling of silk dresses, and she could see the gentlemen and ladies pass by the niche between the door and the post. Once she ventured to stretch out a thin little finger and touch a velvet mantle as the wearer of it swept by, but no one caught her in the act, or suspected her presence behind the door. Mr. Daniel, she could see, was very busy ushering the people to their seats; but there was a startled look lingering upon his face, and every now and then he peered anxiously into the outer gloom and darkness, and even once called to the policeman to ask if he had seen a ragged child hanging about. After a while the organ began to sound, and Jessica crouched down in her hiding-place, listening entranced to the sweet music. She could not tell what made her cry, but the tears came so rapidly that it was of no use to rub the corners of her eyes with her hard knuckles; so she lay down upon the ground and buried her face in her hands and wept without restraint. When the singing was over she could only catch a confused sound of a voice speaking. The lobby was empty now, and the crimson doors closed. The policeman also had walked on. This was the moment to escape. She raised herself from the ground with a feeling of weariness and sorrow; and thinking sadly of the light, and warmth, and music that were within the closed doors, she stepped out into the cold and darkness of the streets, and loitered homeward with a heavy heart.

CHAPTER IV. PEEPS INTO FAIRY-LAND.

It was not the last time that Jessica concealed herself behind the baize-covered door. She could not overcome the urgent desire to enjoy again and again the secret and

perilous pleasure, and Sunday after Sunday she watched in the dark streets for the moment when she could slip in unseen. She soon learned the exact time when Daniel would be occupied in lighting up, before the policeman would take up his station at the entrance, and again, the very minute at which it would be wise and safe to take her departure. Sometimes the child laughed noiselessly to herself until she shook with suppressed merriment, as she saw Daniel standing unconsciously, in the lobby, with his solemn face and grave air, to receive the congregation, much as he faced his customers at the coffee-stall. She learned to know the minister by sight, the tall, thin, pale gentleman who passed through a side door, with his head bent as if in deep thought, while two little girls, about her own age, followed him with sedate yet pleasant faces. Jessica took a great interest in the minister's children. The younger one was fair, and the elder was about as tall as herself, and had eyes and hair as dark; but oh, how cared for, how plainly waited on by tender hands! Sometimes, when they were gone by, she would close her eyes, and wonder what they would do in one of the high black pews inside, where there was no place for a ragged barefooted girl like her; and now and then her wonderings almost ended in a sob, which she was compelled to stifle.

It was an untold relief to Daniel that Jessica did not ply him with questions, as he feared, when she came for breakfast every Wednesday morning; but she was too shrewd and cunning for that. She wished him to forget that she had ever been there, and by-and-by her wish was accomplished, and Daniel was no longer uneasy, while he was lighting the lamps, with the dread of seeing the child's wild face starting up before him.

But the light evenings of summer-time were drawing near apace, and Jessica foresaw with dismay that her Sunday treats would soon be over. The risk of discovery increased every week, for the sun was later in setting, and there would be no chance of creeping in and out unseen in the broad daylight. Already it needed both watchfulness and alertness to dart in at the right moment in the gray twilight;

but still she could not give it up; and if it had not been for the fear of offending Mr. Daniel, she would have resolved upon going until she was found out. They could not punish her very much for standing in the lobby of a chapel.

Jessica was found out, however, before the dusky evenings were quite gone. It happened one night that the minister's children, coming early to the chapel, saw a small tattered figure, bareheaded and barefooted, dart swiftly up the steps before them and disappear within the lobby. They paused and looked at one another, and then, hand in hand, their hearts beating quickly, and the color coming and going on their faces, they followed this strange new member of their father's congregation. The pew-opener was nowhere to be seen, but their quick eyes detected the prints of the wet little feet which had trodden the clean pavement before them, and in an instant they discovered Jessica crouching behind the door.

"Let us call Daniel Standring," said Winny, the younger child, clinging to her sister; but she had spoken aloud and Jessica overheard her, and before they could stir a step she stood before them with an earnest and imploring face.

"Oh, don't have me drove away," she cried; "I'm a very poor little girl, and it's all the pleasure I've got. I've seen you lots of times, with that tall gentleman as stoops, and I didn't think you'd have me drove away. I don't do any harm behind the door, and if Mr. Daniel finds me out he wont give me any more coffee."

"Little girl," said the elder child, in a composed and demure voice, "we don't mean to be unkind to you; but what do you come here for, and why do you hide yourself behind the door?"

"I like to hear the music," answered Jessica, "and I want to find out what pray is, and the minister, and God. I know it's only for ladies and gentlemen, and fine children like you; but I'd like to go inside, just for once, and see what you do."

"You shall come with us into our pew," cried Winny, in an eager and impulsive tone; but Jane laid her hand upon her outstretched arm, with a glance at Jessica's

ragged clothes and matted hair. It was a question difficult enough to perplex them. The little outcast was plainly too dirty and neglected for them to invite her to sit side by side with them in their crimson-lined pew, and no poor people attended the chapel with whom she could have a seat. But Winny, with flushed cheeks and indignant eyes, looked reproachfully at her elder sister.

“Jane,” she said, opening her Testament, and turning over the leaves hurriedly, “this was papa’s text a little while ago: ‘For if there come unto your assembly a man with a gold ring, in goodly apparel, and there come in also a poor man in vile raiment; and ye have respect to him that weareth the gay clothing, and say unto him, Sit thou here in a good place; and say to the poor, Stand thou there, or sit here under my footstool; are ye not then partial in yourselves, and are become judges of evil thoughts?’ If we don’t take this little girl into our pew we ‘have the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with respect of persons.’”

“I don’t know what to do,” answered Jane, sighing; “the Bible seems plain, but I’m sure papa would not like it. Let us ask the chapel-keeper.”

“Oh, no, no!” cried Jessica, “don’t let Mr. Daniel catch me here. I wont come again, indeed; and I’ll promise not to try to find out about God and the minister, if you’ll only let me go.”

“But, little girl,” said Jane, in a sweet but grave manner, “we ought to teach you about God, if you don’t know him. Our papa is the minister, and if you’ll come with us we’ll ask him what we must do.”

“Will Mr. Daniel see me?” asked Jessica.

“Nobody but papa is in the vestry,” answered Jane, “and he’ll tell us all, you and us, what we ought to do. You’ll not be afraid of him, will you?”

“No,” said Jessica cheerfully, following the minister’s children as they led her along the side of the chapel towards the vestry.

“He is not such a terrible personage,” said Winny, looking round encouragingly, as

Jane tapped softly at the door, and they heard a voice saying, “Come in.”

CHAPTER V. A NEW WORLD OPENS.

The minister was siting in an easy chair before a comfortable fire with a hymn-book in his hand, which he closed as the three children appeared in the open doorway. Jessica had seen his pale and thoughtful face many a time from her hiding-place, but she had never met the keen, earnest, searching gaze of his eyes, which seemed to pierce through all her wretchedness and misery, and to read at once the whole history of her desolate life. But before her eyelids could droop, or she could drop a reverential courtesy, the minister’s face kindled with such a glow of pitying tenderness and compassion as fastened her eyes upon him, and gave her new heart and courage. His children ran to him, leaving Jessica upon the mat at the door, and with eager voices and gestures told him the difficulty they were in.

“Come here, little girl,” he said, and Jessica walked across the carpeted floor till she stood right before him, with folded hands, and eyes that looked frankly into his.

“What is your name, my child?” he asked.

“Jessica,” she answered.

“Jessica?” he repeated, with a smile; “that is a strange name.”

“Mother used to play ‘Jessica’ at the theatre, sir,” she said, “and I used to be a fairy in the pantomime, till I grew too tall and ugly. If I’m pretty when I grow up mother says I shall play too; but I’ve a long time to wait. Are you the minister, sir?”

“Yes,” he answered, smiling again.

“What is a minister?” she inquired.

“A servant!” he replied, looking away thoughtfully into the red embers of the fire.

“Papa!” cried Jane and Winny, in tones of astonishment; but Jessica gazed steadily at the minister, who was now looking back again into her bright eyes.

“Please, sir, whose servant are you?” she asked.

“The servant of God and of man,” he answered solemnly. “Jessica, I am your servant.”

The child shook her head, and laughed shrilly as she gazed round the room and at the handsome clothing of the minister’s daughters, while she drew her rags closer about her and shivered a little, as if she felt a sting of the east wind which was blowing keenly through the streets. The sound of her shrill childish laugh made the minister’s heart ache.

“Who is God?” asked the child. “When mother’s in a good temper, sometimes she says ‘God bless me!’ Do you know him, please, minister?”

But before there was time to answer the door into the chapel was opened and Daniel stood upon the threshold. At first he stared blandly forward, but then his grave face grew ghastly pale, and he laid his hand upon the door to support himself until he could recover his speech and senses. Jessica also looked about her, scared and irresolute, as if anxious to run away or to hide herself. The minister was the first to speak.

“Jessica,” he said, “there is a place close under my pulpit where you shall sit, and where I can see you all the time. Be a good girl, and listen, and you will hear something about God. Standring, put this little one in front of the pews by the pulpit steps.”

Before she could believe it, for very gladness, Jessica found herself inside the chapel, facing the glittering organ, from which a sweet strain of music was sounding. Not far from her Jane and Winny were peeping over the front of their pew with friendly smiles and glances. It was evident that the minister’s elder daughter was anxious about her behavior, and she made energetic signs to her when to stand and when to kneel; but Winny was content with smiling at her whenever her head rose above the top of the pew. Jessica was happy, but not in the least abashed. The

ladies and gentlemen were not at all unlike those whom she had often seen when she was a fairy at the theatre; and very soon her attention was engrossed by the minister, whose eyes often fell upon her, as she gazed eagerly, with uplifted face, upon him. She could scarcely understand a word of what he said, but she liked the tones of his voice and the tender pity of his face as he looked down upon her. Daniel hovered about a good deal, with an air of uneasiness and displeasure, but she was unconscious of his presence. Jessica was intent upon finding out what a minister and God were.

CHAPTER VI. THE FIRST PRAYER.

When the service was ended the minister descended the pulpit steps just as Daniel was about to hurry Jessica away, and taking her by the hand in the face of all the congregation he led her into the vestry, whither Jane and Winny quickly followed them. He was fatigued with the services of the day, and his pale face was paler than ever, as he placed Jessica before his chair, into which he threw himself with an air of exhaustion; but bowing his head upon his hands he said, in a low but clear tone, “Lord, these are the lambs of thy flock. Help me to feed thy lambs!”

“Children,” he said, with a smile upon his weary face, “it is no easy thing to know God. But this one thing we know, that he is our Father—my Father and your Father, Jessica. He loves you, and cares for you more than I do for my little girls here.”

He smiled at them, and they at him, with an expression which Jessica felt and understood, though it made her sad. She trembled a little, and the minister’s ear caught the sound of a faint though bitter sob.

“I never had any father,” she said sorrowfully.

“God is your Father,” he answered very gently: “he knows all about you, because he is present everywhere. We cannot see him, but we have only to speak and he hears us, and we may ask him for whatever we want.”

“Will he let me speak to him, as well as these fine children, that are clean and have got nice clothes?” asked Jessica, glancing anxiously at her muddy feet, and her soiled and tattered frock.

“Yes,” said the minister, smiling, yet sighing at the same time; “you may ask him this moment for what you want.”

Jessica gazed round the room with large wide-open eyes, as if she were seeking to see God; but then she shut her eyelids tightly, and bending her head upon her hands, as she had seen the minister do, she said, “O God! I want to know about you. And please pay Mr. Daniel for all the warm coffee he’s give me.”

Jane and Winny listened with faces of unutterable amazement; but the tears stood in the minister’s eyes, and he added “Amen” to Jessica’s first prayer.

CHAPTER VII. HARD QUESTIONS.

After waiting until the minister left the vestry Daniel found that Jessica had gone away by the side entrance. He had to wait, therefore, until Wednesday morning for an opportunity to speak to her, and the sight of her pinched little face was welcome to him when he saw it looking wistfully over the coffee-stall. Yet he had made up his mind to forbid her to come again, and to threaten her with the policeman if he ever caught her at the chapel, where for the future he intended to keep a sharper lookout. But before he could speak Jess had slipped under the stall and taken her old seat upon the upturned basket.

“Mr. Daniel,” she said, “has God paid you for my sups of coffee yet?”

“Paid me?” he repeated, “God? No.”

“Well, he will,” she answered, nodding her head sagely; “don’t you be afraid for your money, Mr. Daniel; I’ve asked him a many times, and the minister says he’s sure to do it.”

“Jess,” said Daniel, sternly, “have you been and told the minister about my coffee-stall?”

“No,” she answered, with a beaming smile, “but I’ve told God lots and lots of times since Sunday, and he’s sure to pay in a day or two.”

“Jess,” continued Daniel, more gently, “you’re a sharp little girl, I see; and now, mind, I’m going to trust you. You’re never to say a word about me or my coffee-stall; because the folks at our chapel are very grand, and might think it low and mean of me to keep a coffee-stall. Very likely they’d say I mustn’t be chapel-keeper any longer, and I should lose a deal of money.”

“Why do you keep the stall then?” asked Jessica.

“Don’t you see what a many pennies I get every morning?” he said, shaking his canvas bag. “I get a good deal of money that way in a year.”

“What do you want such a deal of money for?” she inquired; “do you give it to God?”

Daniel did not answer, but the question went to his heart like a sword-thrust. What did he want so much money for? He thought of his bare and solitary room, where he lodged alone, a good way from the railway-bridge, with very few comforts in it, but containing a desk, strong, securely fastened, and in which were his savings’ bank book, his receipts for money put out at interest, and a bag of sovereigns, for which he had been toiling and slaving both on Sunday and week-days. He could not remember giving any thing away, except the dregs of the coffee and the stale buns for which Jessica was asking God to pay him. He coughed, and cleared his throat, and rubbed his eyes; and then, with nervous and hesitating fingers, he took a penny from his bag and slipped it into Jessica’s hand.

“No, no, Mr. Daniel,” she said; “I don’t want you to give me any of your pennies. I want God to pay you.”

“Ay, he’ll pay me,” muttered Daniel; “there’ll be a day of reckoning by and by.”

“Does God have reckoning days?” asked Jessica. “I used to like reckoning days when I was a fairy.”

“Ay, ay,” he answered, “but there’s few folks like God’s reckoning days.”

“But you’ll be glad; wont you?” she said.

Daniel bade her get on with her breakfast, and then he turned over in his mind the thoughts which her questions had awakened. Conscience told him he would not be glad to meet God’s reckoning day.

“Mr. Daniel,” said Jessica, when they were about to separate, and he would not take back his gift of a penny, “if you wouldn’t mind, I’d like to come and buy a cup of coffee to-morrow, like a customer, you know; and I wont let out a word about the stall to the minister next Sunday. Don’t you be afraid.”

She tied the penny carefully into a corner of her rags, and with a cheerful smile upon her thin face she glided from under the shadow of the bridge and was soon lost to Daniel’s sight.

CHAPTER VIII. AN UNEXPECTED VISITOR.

When Jessica came to the street into which the court where she lived opened, she saw an unusual degree of excitement among the inhabitants, a group of whom were gathered about a tall gentleman whom she recognized in an instant to be the minister. She elbowed her way through the midst of them, and the minister’s face brightened as she presented herself before him. He followed her up the low entry, across the squalid court, through the stable, empty of the donkeys just then, up the creaking rounds of the ladder, and into the miserable loft where the tiles were falling in and the broken window-panes were stuffed with rags and paper. Near to the old rusty stove, which served as a grate when there was any fire, there was a short board laid across some bricks, and upon this the minister took his seat, while Jessica sat upon the floor before him.

“Jessica,” he said, sadly, “is this where you live?”

“Yes,” she answered; “but we’d a nicer room than this when I was a fairy and mother played at the theatre; we shall be better off when I’m grown up, if I’m pretty enough to play like her.”

“My child,” he said, “I’m come to ask your mother to let you go to school in a pleasant place down in the country. Will she let you go?”

“No,” answered Jessica; “mother says she’ll never let me learn to read, or go to church; she says it would make me good for nothing. But please, sir, she doesn’t know any thing about your church, it’s such a long way off, and she hasn’t found me out yet. She always gets very drunk of a Sunday.”

The child spoke simply, and as if all she said was a matter of course; but the minister shuddered, and he looked through the broken window to the little patch of gloomy sky overhead.

“What can I do?” he cried mournfully, as though speaking to himself.

“Nothing, please, sir,” said Jessica, “only let me come to hear you of a Sunday, and tell me about God. If you was to give me fine clothes—like your little girls’—mother ’ud only pawn them for gin. You can’t do any thing more for me.”

“Where is your mother?” he asked.

“Out on a spree,” said Jessica. “She wont be home for a day or two. She’d not hearken to you, sir. There’s the missionary came, and she pushed him down the ladder till he was nearly killed. They used to call mother ‘the vixen’ at the theatre, and nobody durst say a word to her.”

The minister was silent for some minutes, thinking painful thoughts, for his eyes seemed to darken as he looked round the miserable room, and his face wore an air of sorrow and disappointment. At last he spoke again.

“Who is Mr. Daniel, Jessica?” he inquired.

“Oh,” she said cunningly, “he’s only a friend of mine as gives me sups of coffee. You don’t know all the folks in London, sir!”

“No,” he answered, smiling, “but does he keep a coffee-stall?”

Jessica nodded her head, but did not trust herself to speak.

“How much does a cup of coffee cost?” asked the minister.

“A full cup’s a penny,” she answered promptly; “but you can have half a cup; and there are half-penny and penny buns.”

“Good coffee and buns?” he said, with another smile.

“Prime,” replied Jessica, smacking her lips.

“Well,” continued the minister, “tell your friend to give you a full cup of coffee and a penny bun every morning, and I’ll pay for them as often as he chooses to come to me for the money.”

Jessica’s face beamed with delight, but in an instant it clouded over as she recollected Daniel’s secret, and her lips quivered as she spoke her disappointed reply.

“Please, sir,” she said, “I’m sure he couldn’t come; oh! he couldn’t. It’s such a long way, and Mr. Daniel has plenty of customers. No, he never would come to you for money.”

“Jessica,” he answered, “I will tell you what I will do. I will trust you with a shilling every Sunday, if you’ll promise to give it to your friend the very first time you see him. I shall be sure to know if you cheat me.” And the keen, piercing eyes of the minister looked down into Jessica’s, and once more the tender and pitying smile returned to his face.

“I can do nothing else for you?” he said, in a tone of mingled sorrow and questioning.

“No, minister,” answered Jessica, “only tell me about God.”

“I will tell you one thing about him now,” he replied. “If I took you to live in my house with my little daughters you would have to be washed and clothed in new clothing to make you fit for it. God wanted us to go and live at home with him in heaven, but we were so sinful that we could never have been fit for it. So he sent his own Son to live among us, and die for us, to wash us from our sins, and to give us new clothing, and to make us ready to live in God’s house. When you ask God for any thing you must say, ‘For Jesus Christ’s sake.’ Jesus Christ is the Son of God.”

After these words the minister carefully descended the ladder, followed by Jessica’s bare and nimble feet, and she led him by the nearest way into one of the great thoroughfares of the city, where he said good-by to her, adding, “God bless you, my child,” in a tone which sank into Jessica’s heart.

He had put a silver sixpence into her hand to provide for her breakfast the next three mornings, and with a feeling of being very rich she returned to her miserable home.

The next morning Jessica presented herself proudly as a customer at Daniel’s stall, and paid over the sixpence in advance.

He felt a little troubled as he heard her story, lest the minister should endeavor to find him out; but he could not refuse to let the child come daily for her comfortable breakfast. If he was detected, he would promise to give up his coffee-stall rather than offend the great people of the chapel; but unless he was it would be foolish of him to lose the money it brought in week after week.

CHAPTER IX. JESSICA’S FIRST PRAYER ANSWERED.

Every Sunday evening the barefooted and bareheaded child might be seen advancing confidently up to the chapel where rich and fashionable people worshipped God; but before taking her place she arrayed herself in a little cloak and bonnet which had

once belonged to the minister's elder daughter, and which was kept with Daniel's serge gown, so that she presented a somewhat more respectable appearance in the eyes of the congregation. The minister had no listener more attentive, and he would have missed the pinched, earnest little face if it were not to be seen in the seat just under the pulpit. At the close of each service he spoke to her for a minute or two in his vestry, often saying no more than a single sentence, for the day's labor had wearied him. The shilling, which was always lying upon the chimney-piece, placed there by Jane and Winny in turns, was immediately handed over, according to promise, to Daniel as she left the chapel, and so Jessica's breakfast was provided for her week after week.

But at last there came a Sunday evening when the minister, going up into his pulpit, did miss the wistful, hungry face, and the shilling lay unclaimed upon the vestry chimney-piece. Daniel looked out for her anxiously every morning, but no Jessica glided into his secluded corner, to sit beside him with her breakfast on her lap and with a number of strange questions to ask. He felt her absence more keenly than he could have expected. The child was nothing to him, he kept saying to himself; and yet he felt that she was something, and that he could not help being uneasy and anxious about her. Why had he never inquired where she lived? The minister knew, and for a minute Daniel thought he would go and ask him; but that might awaken suspicion. How could he account for so much anxiety when he was supposed only to know of her absence from chapel one Sunday evening? It would be running a risk, and, after all, Jessica was nothing to him. So he went home and looked over his savings bank book and counted his money, and he found to his satisfaction that he had gathered together nearly four hundred pounds, and that he was adding more every week.

But when upon the next Sunday Jessica's seat was again empty the anxiety of the solemn chapel-keeper overcame his prudence and his fears. The minister had retired to his vestry, and was standing with his arm resting upon the chimney-piece, and his

eyes fixed upon the unclaimed shilling which Winny had laid there before the service, when there was a tap at the door, and Daniel entered with a respectful but hesitating air.

“Well, Standring?” said the minister questioningly.

“Sir,” he said, “I’m uncomfortable about that little girl, and I know you’ve been once to see after her; she told me about it; and so I make bold to ask you where she lives, and I’ll see what’s become of her.”

“Right, Standring,” answered the minister; “I am troubled about the child, and so are my little girls. I thought of going myself, but my time is very much occupied just now.”

“I’ll go, sir,” replied Daniel promptly; and after receiving the necessary information about Jessica’s home he put out the lights, locked the door, and turned towards his lonely lodgings.

But though it was getting late upon Sunday evening, and Jessica’s home was a long way distant, Daniel found that his anxiety would not suffer him to return to his solitary room. It was of no use to reason with himself, as he stood at the corner of the street, feeling perplexed and troubled, and promising his conscience that he would go the very first thing in the morning after he shut up his coffee-stall. In the dim, dusky light, as the summer evening drew to a close, he fancied he could see Jessica’s thin figure and wan face gliding on before him, and turning around from time to time to see if he were following. It was only fancy, and he laughed a little at himself; but the laugh was husky, and there was a choking sensation in his throat, so he buttoned his Sunday coat over his breast, where his silver watch and chain hung temptingly, and started off at a rapid pace for the centre of the city.

It was not quite dark when he reached the court, and stumbled up the narrow entry leading to it; but Daniel did hesitate when he opened the stable-door, and looked into a blank, black space, in which he could discern nothing. He thought he had

better retreat while he could do so safely; but as he still stood with his hand upon the rusty latch he heard a faint, small voice through the nicks of the unceiled boarding above his head.

“Our Father,” said the little voice, “please to send somebody to me, for Jesus Christ’s sake. Amen.”

“I’m here, Jess,” cried Daniel, with a sudden bound of his heart, such as he had not felt for years, and which almost took away his breath as he peered into the darkness until at last he discerned dimly the ladder which led up into the loft.

Light shone upon Jessica’s features

Very cautiously, but with an eagerness which surprised himself, he climbed up the creaking rounds of the ladder and entered the dismal room, where the child was lying in desolate darkness. Fortunately he had his box of matches in his pocket, and the end of a wax candle with which he kindled the lamps, and in another minute a gleam of light shone upon Jessica’s white features. She was stretched upon a scanty litter of straw under the slanting roof where the tiles had not fallen off, with her poor rags for her only covering; but as her eyes looked up into Daniel’s face bending over her a bright smile of joy sparkled in them.

“Oh!” she cried, gladly, but in a feeble voice, “it’s Mr. Daniel! Has God told you to come here, Mr. Daniel?”

“Yes,” said Daniel, kneeling beside her, taking her wasted hand in his, and parting the matted hair upon her damp forehead.

“What did he say to you?” said Jessica.

“He told me I was a great sinner,” replied Daniel. “He told me I loved a little bit of dirty money better than a poor, friendless, helpless child, whom he had sent to me to see if I would do her a little good for his sake. He looked at me, or the minister did, through and through, and he said, ‘Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee: then whose shall those things be which thou hast provided?’ And I could

answer him nothing, Jess. He had come to a reckoning with me, and I could not say a word to him."

"Aren't you a good man, Mr. Daniel?" whispered Jessica.

"No; I'm a wicked sinner," he cried, while the tears rolled down his solemn face. "I've been constant at God's house, but only to get money; I've been steady and industrious, but only to get money; and now God looks at me, and he says, 'Thou fool!' Oh, Jess, Jess, you're more fit for heaven than I ever was in my life!"

"Why don't you ask him to make you good for Jesus Christ's sake?" asked the child.

"I can't," he said. "I've been kneeling down Sunday after Sunday when the minister's been praying, but all the time I was thinking how rich some of the carriage people were. I've been loving money and worshipping money all along, and I've nearly let you die rather than run the risk of losing part of my earnings. I'm a very sinful man."

"But you know what the minister often says," murmured Jessica:

"'Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.'"

"I've heard it so often that I don't feel it," said Daniel. "I used to like to hear the minister say it, but now it goes in at one ear and out at the other. My heart is very hard, Jessica."

By the feeble glimmer of the candle Daniel saw Jessica's wistful eyes fixed upon him with a sad and loving glance; and then she lifted up her weak hand to her face, and laid it over her closed eyelids, and her feverish lips moved slowly.

"God," she said, "please to make Mr. Daniel's heart soft, for Jesus Christ's sake. Amen."

She did not speak again, nor Daniel, for some time.

He took off his Sunday coat and laid it over the tiny, shivering frame, which was

shaking with cold even in the summer evening; and as he did so he remembered the words which the Lord says he will pronounce at the last day of reckoning:

“Forasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.”

Daniel Standring felt his heart turning with love to the Saviour, and he bowed his head upon his hands, and cried, in the depths of his contrite spirit, “God be merciful to me, a sinner.”

CHAPTER X. THE SHADOW OF DEATH.

There was no coffee-stall opened under the railway arch the following morning, and Daniel’s regular customers stood amazed as they drew near the empty corner where they were accustomed to get their early breakfast. It would have astonished them still more if they could have seen how he was occupied in the miserable loft. He had intrusted a friendly woman out of the court to buy food and fuel, and all night long he had watched beside Jessica, who was light-headed and delirious, but in the wanderings of her thoughts and words often spoke to God, and prayed for her Mr. Daniel. The neighbor informed him that the child’s mother had gone off some days before, fearing that she was ill of some infectious fever, and that she, alone, had taken a little care of her from time to time. As soon as the morning came he sent for a doctor, and after receiving permission from him he wrapped the poor deserted Jessica in his coat, and bearing her tenderly in his arms down the ladder he carried her to a cab, which the neighbor brought to the entrance of the court. It was to no other than his own solitary home that he had resolved to take her; and when the mistress of the lodgings stood at her door with her arms a-kimbo, to forbid the admission of the wretched and neglected child, her tongue was silenced by the gleam of a half-sovereign which Daniel slipped into the palm of her hard hand.

By that afternoon’s post the minister received the following letter:

“REVERED SIR,

“If you will condescend to enter under my humble roof you will have the pleasure of seeing little Jessica, who is at the point of death, unless God in his mercy restores her. Hoping you will excuse this liberty, as I cannot leave the child, I remain with duty,

“Your respectful servant,

“D. STANDRING.

“P. S. Jessica desires her best love and duty to Miss Jane and Winny.”

The minister laid aside the book he was reading, and without any delay started off for his chapel-keeper’s dwelling. There was Jessica lying restfully upon Daniel’s bed, but the pinched features were deadly pale, and the sunken eyes shone with a waning light. She was too feeble to turn her head when the door opened, and he paused for a moment, looking at her and at Daniel, who, seated at the head of the bed, was turning over the papers in his desk, and reckoning up once more the savings of his lifetime. But when the minister advanced into the middle of the room Jessica’s white cheeks flushed into deep red.

“Oh, minister,” she cried, “God has given me every thing I wanted except paying Mr. Daniel for the coffee he used to give me!”

“Ah! but God has paid me over and over again,” said Daniel, rising to receive the minister. “He’s given me my own soul in exchange for it. Let me make bold to speak to you this once, sir. You’re a very learned man, and a great preacher, and many people flock to hear you till I’m hard put to it to find seats for them at times; but all the while, hearkening to you every blessed Sabbath, I was losing my soul, and you never once said to me, though you saw me scores and scores of times, ‘Standring, are you a saved man?’”

“Standring,” said the minister in a tone of great distress and regret, “I always took it for granted that you were a Christian.”

“Ah,” continued Daniel, thoughtfully, “but God wanted somebody to ask me that question, and he did not find anybody in the congregation, so he sent this poor little lass to me. Well, I don’t mind telling now, even if I lose the place; but for a long time, nigh upon ten years, I’ve kept a coffee-stall on week-days in the city, and cleared, one week with another, about ten shillings: but I was afraid the chapel-wardens wouldn’t approve of the coffee business, as low, so I kept it a close secret, and always shut up early of a morning. It’s me that sold Jessica her cup of coffee, which you paid for, sir.”

“There’s no harm in it, my good fellow,” said the minister kindly; “you need make no secret of it.”

“Well,” resumed Daniel, “the questions this poor little creature has asked me have gone quicker and deeper down to my conscience than all your sermons, if I may make so free as to say it. She’s come often and often of a morning, and looked into my face with those clear eyes of hers, and said, ‘Don’t you love Jesus Christ, Mr. Daniel?’ ‘Doesn’t it make you very glad that God is your Father, Mr. Daniel?’ ‘Are we getting nearer heaven every day, Mr. Daniel?’ And one day says she, ‘Are you going to give all your money to God, Mr. Daniel?’ Ah, that question made me think indeed, and it’s never been answered till this day. While I’ve been sitting beside the bed here I’ve counted up all my savings: £397 18s. it is; and I’ve said, ‘Lord, it’s all thine; and I’d give every penny of it rather than lose the child, if it be thy blessed will to spare her life.’”

Daniel’s voice quavered at the last words, and his face sank upon the pillow where Jessica’s feeble and motionless head lay. There was a very sweet yet surprised smile upon her face, and she lifted her wasted fingers to rest upon the bowed head beside her, while she shut her eyes and shaded them with her other weak hand.

She lifted her wasted fingers

“Our Father,” she said in a faint whisper, which still reached the ears of the minister

and the beadle, “I asked you to let me come home to heaven; but if Mr. Daniel wants me, please to let me stay a little longer, for Jesus Christ’s sake. Amen.”

For some minutes after Jessica’s prayer there was a deep and unbroken silence in the room, Daniel still hiding his face upon the pillow, and the minister standing beside them with bowed head and closed eyes, as if he also were praying. When he looked up again at the forsaken and desolate child he saw that her feeble hand had fallen from her face, which looked full of rest and peace, while her breath came faintly but regularly through her parted lips. He took her little hand into his own with a pang of fear and grief; but instead of the mortal chillness of death he felt the pleasant warmth and moisture of life. He touched Daniel’s shoulder, and as he lifted up his head in sudden alarm he whispered to him, “The child is not dead, but is only asleep.”

Before Jessica was fully recovered Daniel rented a little house for himself and his adopted daughter to dwell in. He made many inquiries after her mother, but she never appeared again in her old haunts, and he was well pleased that there was nobody to interfere with his charge of Jessica. When Jessica grew strong enough, many a cheerful walk had they together, in the early mornings, as they wended their way to the railway bridge, where the little girl took her place behind the stall and soon learned to serve the daily customers; and many a happy day was spent in helping to sweep and dust the chapel, into which she had crept so secretly at first, her great delight being to attend to the pulpit and the vestry, and the pew where the minister’s children sat, while Daniel and the woman he employed cleaned the rest of the building. Many a Sunday also the minister in his pulpit, and his little daughters in their pew, and Daniel treading softly about the aisles, as their glance fell upon Jessica’s eager, earnest, happy face, thought of the first time they saw her sitting among the congregation, and of Jessica’s first prayer.

Jessica’s Mother

Hesba Stretton

CONTENTS.

Jessica’s Mother

CHAPTER I. GREAT PLANS.

It was a gloomy Sunday in the gloomiest part of the year, when the fog hung over London day and night, only lifting itself off a little for two or three hours about noon time. The bells which rang from the church towers might have been chiming from some region above the clouds, so distant they sounded and so hidden were the belfries in which they hung.

In the early part of the day the congregations went to and from their various places of worship with a feeling of sombre depression at the long continuance of the gloom; but after nightfall the darkness was only natural, and though the lamps gave but little light, and shone merely like yellow balls in the fog, the passengers in the street moved more briskly and talked more cheerfully than in the morning. Here and there the brilliantly illuminated windows of some church or chapel cast a pleasant gleam upon the pavement, and the open doors seemed to invite any cold or weary passer-by to enter into its light and warmth; but as if these buildings, the temples of God, were designed only for the rich, and for those who had comfort enough in their own dwellings, it was noticeable that but a very scanty sprinkling of worshippers dressed in vile raiment were to be seen among the congregations, though there was no lack of those who wore goodly apparel and gay clothing.

The fashionable chapel of which Daniel Standring was the chapel-keeper was no exception to the general rule, for there were no poor to be found in it. There was within it every appliance of comfort and style such as could give satisfaction to a wealthy congregation. The oak pews were high enough for the head of an occasional

slumberer to repose in quiet indulgence, and they were well lined and carpeted and cushioned. The shades for the lamps toned down their light to a clear yet soft lustre, and the apparatus for heating the building was of the most efficient kind.

The crowds who flocked to hear the minister were increasing every Sunday, and Daniel Standring had, with some reluctance, yielded to the necessity of sharing his office of pew-opener with a colleague; a man, however, of less dignity and solemnity of deportment than himself, and who was quite willing to look up to him as a superior. Moreover, the old members of the church, the “carriage people” especially, recognized him only as their chapel-keeper, and entrusted any message or any commission to him alone; and he also retained the charge of attending upon the vestry. The other man was no more than a subordinate; and after a while he was reconciled to this division of the office.

There had been two things much talked about among the people for some time past: the first, that the minister himself should have a colleague found for him, and the second, that a large and still more fashionable chapel should be built.

As to the colleague there were several difficulties in the way, the chief one being to find such a preacher as would attract the same congregations as those which came in crowds to listen to the minister; for it was found that whenever it was known that he would be absent from his pulpit the numbers dwindled away, until during his yearly holiday the chapel would seem almost empty, compared to the throng of curious and eager listeners who hung upon his words, and scarcely dared to sigh over his representations of their misery and peril lest they should miss hearing a single syllable of the eloquence which described it.

Still every member of the congregation said it was essential that a colleague should be found for their beloved pastor before he had quite worn himself out; and great blame was thrown back upon the small provincial church which five-and-twenty years ago had thrust him, a mere youth of twenty, upon the exhausting duties of the

ministry. As for the second subject, it was settled without much difficulty, for only money, not a man, was wanted; and upon the vestry table there was a subscription-list already promising some thousands of pounds, and beside it lay the plans for the new chapel, drawn up by an eminent architect.

The chapel doors had been opened by Daniel, and the gas toned down to precisely the brilliance and softness which the congregation loved, especially the lamps on each side of the pulpit, which shed a revealing light upon the minister's thoughtful face and upon his dark hair just tinged with grey. In the vestry Jessica had just given a final and delicate stroke of dusting, and was wiping the large pulpit Bible and hymn-book with her clean pocket-handkerchief ready for Daniel to carry up into the pulpit while the organist was playing the opening voluntary, which he did with so solemn and ministerial an aspect that a stranger, not accustomed to the etiquette of the place, might be betrayed into the supposition that he was the minister himself.

Daniel was waiting now in the porch like some faithful steward ready to receive his master's guests; and as carriage after carriage rolled up almost a smile of satisfaction softened his rigid features. The minister's children had passed him with a smile and a nod, and he had shut the door of their pew in the corner, so he knew the minister was come, and putting a little additional briskness in his manner he looked out for seats for the strangers who were filling the aisles, at the same time listening for the first notes of the organ.

The minister had entered the vestry just as Jessica had finished wiping the imaginary dust off the Bible and hymn-book, and he drew his chair up close to the fire, as if coming through the fog had chilled him. He looked sad and downcast, and his head sank forward upon his breast. For a minute Jessica stood behind his chair in silence, and then she stretched out her hand, a small thin hand still, and laid it timidly upon his arm.

"Jessica," said the minister, covering her small palm with his scholarly hand, "I am

sorrowful to-night, and I have great heaviness of heart. Tell me, my child, do you understand what I preach about in my pulpit?"

"Oh, no, no!" answered Jessica, shaking her head deprecatingly, "only when you say God, and Jesus Christ, and heaven! I know what you mean by them."

"Do you?" said the minister, with a very tender smile; "and do I say them often, Jessica?"

"Sometimes they come over and over again," replied Jessica, "and then I feel very glad, because I know what you are preaching about. There is always God in your sermon, but sometimes there isn't Jesus Christ and heaven."

"And what do I mean by God, and Jesus Christ, and heaven?" he asked.

"I don't know anything but what you've taught me," said Jessica, folding her brown hands meekly over one another; "you've told me that God is the Father of our souls, and Jesus Christ is our elder brother, who came down from heaven to save us, and heaven is the home of God, where we shall all go if we love and serve him. I don't know any more than that."

"It is enough!" said the minister, lifting up his head with a brighter look; "one soul has learned the truth from me. God bless you, Jessica, and keep you in his fear and love for evermore."

As he spoke the deep tones of the organ fell upon their ears, and the vestry door was opened by Daniel, coming for the pulpit books. There was an air of solemn pride upon his face, and he bowed lower than usual to his minister.

"There's a vast crush of people to-night, sir," he said; "the aisles and the galleries are all full, and there's a many standing at the door yet who will have to go away, for there's no room for them."

The minister covered his face with his hands and shivered, with the cold no doubt; and Daniel and Jessica were leaving the vestry when they were called back by his

voice speaking in husky and agitated tones.

“Standring,” he said, “I have something of importance to say to you after the service this evening, so come back here as soon as the congregation is gone. And, Jessica, take care to sit in your own place, where I can see you; for I will preach about Jesus Christ and heaven to-night.”

Jessica answered only by a little nod, and left the vestry by a door which did not open into the chapel. In a minute or two afterwards she was making her way up the crowded aisles to her usual seat at the foot of the pulpit steps, where, with her head thrown back, her face lifted itself up to the minister’s gaze.

She had just time to settle herself and glance at the minister’s children, who were looking out for her, when the last quiet notes of the organ ceased, and the vestry door opened. The minister mounted the stairs slowly, and with his head bent down, but as soon as he was in the pulpit he looked round upon the faces whose eyes were all fastened upon him.

Many of the faces he knew, and had seen thus upraised to him for scores of Sundays, and his eyes passed from one to another swiftly, but with a distinguishing regard of which he had never been conscious before, and their names swept across his memory like sudden flashes of light. There sat his own children, and his eyes rested fondly upon them as they looked up to him; and he smiled tenderly to himself as his glance caught the flushed and fervent face of Jessica.

The sermon he had prepared during the week was one of great research and of studied oratory, which should hold his hearers in strained and breathless attention; but as he bowed down his head in silent supplication for the blessing of God he said to himself, “I will preach to this people from the saying of Christ, ‘He calleth His own sheep by name, and leadeth them out.’”

CHAPTER II. IT’S ONLY A STROKE.

The first part of the service passed by as usual, disturbed only by the occasional rustle of a silk dress, or the carefully hushed footstep up the aisles of some late comer, and the moment for the prayer before the sermon was come. Every head was bent, and a deep stillness prevailed, which grew more and more profound as the minister's voice still remained silent, as if he was waiting until there was no stir or rustle or movement to be heard throughout the congregation.

There was something awful in this solemn pause before his voice was lifted up to God; and, as it prolonged itself, a sigh, it might have been from the minister's inmost heart, was heard by those nearest to the pulpit. One or two looked up, and saw his head bowed down, with the softened light of the lamps falling upon the silvery streaks of his hair, and they dropped their faces again upon their hands, waiting. Then there ran a thrill and a shiver through all the congregation, and here and there a sob which could no longer be repressed broke the laboring silence.

After that there were whispers and murmurs, and faces lifted up with a vague dread upon them; and still the minister did not raise his face from the crimson cushion that his voice might allay the growing agitation. His children were looking up at last; and Jessica had risen from her knees and was gazing up with eager eyes to his drooping head.

There was a stir now, and the spell of silence was broken; while Jessica, forgetful of everything but her deep love for him, ran swiftly up the steps and touched him timidly with her hand. The minister neither spoke nor moved.

The great congregation was in a tumult instantly, standing up, and talking, and crying out with hysterical sobs, and pushing out of their pews, and thronging towards the pulpit. In a few minutes the minister was carried down into the vestry, and the crowd gathered about the door of it. Some of the chief men belonging to the chapel urged the congregation to disperse and return to their homes; but they were too much excited to leave before it was known what had befallen the minister.

Jessica pushed her way—being small and nimble, and used to crowds—to the very door of the vestry, where Daniel stood to guard it from being invaded by too many strangers; and she waited there beside him until the door was opened by a hand-breadth, and a physician whispered from within, “It is not death, but a stroke.”

More quickly than the words could be carried from lip to lip among the crowd Jessica glided through the midst to the pew where the minister’s children were kneeling, with arms about one another, sobbing out inarticulate prayers to God. She stood for a moment beside them, scarcely knowing what to say, and then she fell down on her knees by Winny, and put her lips close to her ear.

“Miss Winny,” she said with a trembling voice, “the doctor says it’s nothing but a stroke. He isn’t taken with death, Miss Jane; it’s only a stroke.”

The children started up eagerly and caught Jessica’s hands, clinging to her as some one older and wiser than themselves. They had had no bitter taste of life’s troubles before this, for their mother had been taken from them before they were old enough to understand their loss, and their lives had been tenderly smoothed and cared for. That Jessica should bring them some intelligence and consolation in their sudden panic of dread invested her with a kind of superiority; so now they looked to her as one who could help and counsel them.

“What is a stroke, Jessica?” asked Jane, looking imploringly towards her with her white face.

“I don’t hardly know,” answered Jessica. “I know what strokes used to be when I lived with mother; but this is different, Miss Jane; this stroke comes from God, and it cannot be very bad.”

The children were all three of them silent after Jessica had spoken: but each one of them was gathering comfort and strength from her words. It was a stroke which had come from God, and therefore it could not be very bad. No one had seen it fall; no one had known that the Father’s hand was lifted up to strike, and it had come down

softly and gently, only hushing the voice and shutting up the gateway of the senses. Now that it was known, the chapel was gradually emptying as the congregation went away, and Jane and Winny, feeling calmed and strengthened, were ready to listen to their nurse, who was now anxious to take them home.

“Let Jessica come home with us, nurse,” said Winny, who still held Jessica’s hand between both her own. The nurse consented willingly, and in a few minutes they were walking homewards, one on each side of Jessica. They felt strangely bewildered still; but Jessica was like a guide to them, leading them through the fog and over the slimy crossings with familiar confidence, until they reached the door of the minister’s house, when she hung back shyly, as if not meaning to go in with them.

“You mustn’t leave us yet,” cried Winny, impetuously. “Papa is not come home, and I’m a little bit afraid. Aren’t you afraid, Jessica?”

“No,” answered Jessica cheerfully. “It can’t be anything dreadful bad.”

“You must come in and stay with us,” said Jane, the calm sedateness of her manner a little shaken by her fears. “Nurse, we will take Jessica into papa’s study till he comes home.”

The three children went quietly up stairs to the study and sat down by the fire, which was burning brightly, as if waiting to welcome the minister’s return after the labors of the day. The minister had gathered about him many books, so that every part of the large room was filled with them.

On the table lay those which he had been studying during the week, while he was preparing his elaborate sermon which was to have astonished and electrified even his accustomed hearers; and upon the desk there were scattered about the slips of paper upon which he had jotted down some of the profound thoughts which only a few of his people could comprehend. But upon the chimney-piece, at the end where his easy-chair was placed, and close to his hand, lay a small pocket-Bible, so worn

with much reading that there was no book in his study like it.

The troubled children sitting on the hearth knew nothing of the profound and scholarly volumes on the table; but they were familiar with the little Bible, and Winny, taking it in her hand, lifted it to her lips and kissed it fondly.

“Papa always used to read and talk to us on a Sunday night after we had come home,” she said sorrowfully, speaking already as if the custom was one long past, which could never be resumed.

“Does a stroke last long, Jessica?” inquired Jane, with a look of deep anxiety.

“I’m not sure,” answered Jessica. “Mother’s strokes were sharp and soon over, but the smart lasted a long while. Maybe the stroke is now over, but perhaps the smart will last a little while. God knows.”

“Yes,” said Jane, the tears standing in her eyes, “and God knows what is best for papa and us. We’ve known that a long time, but now we must believe it with our hearts.”

“Believing is a deal harder than knowing,” remarked Winny, with a look wonderfully like her father’s, and the three children were silent again, their minds full of thought, while they listened for the minister’s return to his home.

CHAPTER III. JESSICA’S MOTHER.

They were heavy steps which the three listening children heard at last in the hall below, and upon the staircase the sounds of carrying a helpless burden up the stairs, and Jane and Winny pressed closer to Jessica, who looked from one to the other with an air of tender encouragement. As the sounds drew near, they crept by one impulse to the door, and opening it a little way they saw their father’s face as he was carried past them, pale but peaceful, with the eyelids closed as if he were in a deep sleep. Jessica’s quick eyes detected Daniel standing in the darkness at the end of the

passage, and as soon as the sad procession had passed into the minister's chamber, and the door was shut, she darted out and led him eagerly to the study.

"Oh, Standring!" cried Jane and Winny in one breath, "tell us everything about papa."

"Come, come, you needn't be frightened, my little ladies," answered Daniel soothingly. "Please God, your papa will be all right again in a week or two. The doctors say he's been studying too much to make his grand sermons, and he hasn't given his brain rest enough. But he'll come all right again by and by, or I don't know whatever will become of the chapel."

"He won't die?" murmured Jane, with quivering lips.

"Die!—oh, no!" said Daniel. "Why, my dears, you're all of a tremble. It would be the best for you to go to bed, for you can't do any good sitting up."

"Standring," said Winny, "I wish you'd let Jessica stay all night with us. She could sleep with nurse; and our room is inside nurse's, and if we leave the door open we could talk to one another."

"She may stay and welcome, if nurse likes, Miss Winny," answered Daniel; and as the nurse was anxious for her children to feel their new sorrow as lightly as possible she was glad to grant their request.

So after a while it happened that Daniel was wending his way alone, through the fog and the damp of the streets, towards a little house in a quiet and respectable sort of court, where for the last three years he had dwelt with his adopted child. His mind had been fully occupied with the strange events of the night and the paralysis of his stricken master; but now that he was alone, and his thoughts were free to return to his own affairs, they suddenly recalled to him the minister's last words to himself.

What could it be of importance that he had to say to him when the evening service was finished? His brain had been busy with guesses, in spite of his conscience, during the singing of the hymns, and even during the first prayer, when he stood at

the chapel-door to arrest the entrance of any late comer until it should be ended. Something of importance, and now the minister could not reveal it to him!

He knew that at a private committee meeting, during the past week, a plan had been proposed for erecting a small residence close to the new chapel and schoolrooms, where the chapel-keeper might dwell; and it had been suggested that his salary should be raised to such a sum as would free him from the necessity of seeking any other employment. In fact, the care of the chapel would be work enough, for it was to be very large and magnificent; and already his duties filled up four clear days of the week.

Could it be to speak about this the minister had desired him to come into his vestry immediately after the congregation had departed? But it was not so much the minister's business as that of the chief men belonging to the church. Could it be anything about Jessica? It did not seem very likely; yet the minister was very partial to Jessica, and always seemed pleased to see her about the vestry, and he was talking to her very kindly when Daniel went to fetch the pulpit books. It was a hard thing to pacify his awakened curiosity, and he supposed nobody could satisfy it but the minister himself. How long was the stroke likely to last?

Daniel was asking himself this question, which neither he nor any one else could answer, just as he reached the door of his dwelling. There was a dim light from a lamp at the entrance of the court, and there was the red gleam of his own fire shining upon the white window-blind within, so that he could distinguish pretty plainly the figure of a person, which looked more like a heap of rags, crouching upon his door-sill. A tattered coat was tied round the neck by the sleeves, and an old brimless hat was drawn over the back of the head; but the tangled hair, which hung in ragged locks over the face, was too long for a man's; and as he stooped down to look more closely it was certainly a woman's face which was turned towards him.

"Come, come," he said, "you've no business here, you know; so you'd better get up

and go home. You don't belong to this place, and you've made a mistake coming here. This is my house."

He had his key in his hand, ready to let himself in where the comfortable fire was waiting for him; but he could not open the door until the miserable creature had moved, and, though she raised herself a little, she did not get up on her feet.

"I don't belong to any place," she answered suddenly, yet fiercely; "and I haven't made a mistake in coming here. You're Daniel Standring, and I'm Jessica's mother."

Daniel reeled for a instant as if he had been struck by a very heavy blow. He had long ago ceased to trouble himself about Jessica's mother, or to dread her reappearance; and the minister had assured him that, if she should ever return to claim her daughter, he would use all his influence to protect Jessica from her, as being an unfit person to have the training of a child. The woman was standing up now, but leaning her back against his door, snapping her fingers at him with her face stretched out, with a glare of angry defiance in her bright eyes which sparkled through the gloom.

"I've nearly had the door down," she said, with a hoarse laugh, "till all your neighbors came out to see what was the matter; but I scared them in again. The police himself turned tail like a coward." And she laughed again so loud that the quiet court seemed to ring with the sound, and a door or two was cautiously opened, and Daniel saw his neighbors peeping out; all of them decent people, who held him in respect as the chapel-keeper of so fashionable a chapel.

"I want my daughter," she cried, in high, shrill notes; "my Jessica, my daughter. Where is she, you scoundrel?"

"Come, now, then," answered Daniel, emboldened by the advance of two or three of the men, who came up to form a flank of defence or resistance, "this behavior won't do. Jessica isn't here; so you'd better take yourself off. I wouldn't give her up to you

if she was here; but she isn't here, and there's an end of it."

The woman seated herself once more upon the sill and leaned her head against the door-post.

"If you go in, I go in," she said, doggedly; "and if I stay out, you stay out. I want my Jessica."

It was an embarrassing position for Daniel. He did not like to resort to force in order to enter his house, for several reasons. First, and chiefly, he was now too sincere a Christian to choose any violent or ungentle measures, but, besides this, the person before him was a woman, and the mother of Jessica; and he was himself in a softened mood, from the excitement and sorrow of the evening. He stretched out his arm and fitted the key into the lock, but before he turned it he looked as closely as he could through the gloom into the woman's face.

"You're not drunk, are you?" he said.

"Neither sup nor drop has passed my lips to-day," she answered, with a groan of suffering.

"Well, well!—come in," said Daniel; "and you too, Mr. Brookes, if you please. I'm not myself at all to-night; and it 'ud hearten me to have somebody to back me. Come in."

He opened the door into a comfortable and neat room, where everything was arranged with scrupulous order; for he was an orderly man by nature and Jessica had already the thrifty habits of a housekeeper. The fire had been well raked over with small coals before he and Jessica started for chapel, and now it was a bank of glowing embers.

The woman tottered across to the hearth and flung herself into Daniel's arm-chair. They could see now how wan and hollow her face was, with the cheeks fallen in and the burning eyes sunk deep into the head, while, as she stretched out her thin and yellow hands over the fire, the red gleam shone through them. The poor tatters she

wore were limp and dank with fog, and the slippers into which her naked feet were thrust were worn out at the toes, so as to give free inlet to the mud of the pavement.

Daniel regarded her in silence for a minute or two, and he then passed on into a small kitchen at the back and returned quickly with some bread and cheese and some coffee, which he warmed up in a little saucepan. She drank the coffee eagerly, but she could not swallow more than a mouthful or two of the bread.

“And this is Jessica’s home,” she said, when she was revived a little; “and a very comfortable home too. Eh! but I’m a lucky mother, and she’s a lucky girl. Will she be in to-night, Mr. Standring?”

“No,” answered Daniel, shortly.

“Well, I can make myself comfortable,” she said, with a laugh which made Daniel shiver. “I dare say her bed is softer than any I’ve slept on of late. Last night I slept under a scaffolding on some shavings. Don’t put yourself out about me. I can make myself comfortable.”

“But you cannot stay here all night,” replied Daniel decisively.

“And why not?” she rejoined. “I suppose I’m as good as my daughter. Ah, she’ll never be the woman I’ve been! I rode in my carriage once, man, I can tell you. And what should hinder me staying a night, or a week, or a month in your paltry little house? No, no! you’ll not see my back to-night, I promise you.”

“I wouldn’t give you a night’s lodging for five shillings,” said Daniel hastily.

“I not going to give you five farthings for it,” said the woman, settling herself in his arm-chair with an air of impudent defiance. “Jessica’s home is my home. If you turn me out, out she goes with me.”

Daniel drew his neighbor aside into the kitchen, where he consulted with him in whispers while he kept his eye upon his terrible visitor through the open door.

“What am I to do with her?” he asked. “I wouldn’t have her stop here for anything.

Jessica is staying all night with the minister's children; but she'll come back to-morrow. Whatever am I to do?"

"Give her some money to go away," answered Brookes; and after a little heavy-hearted hesitation Daniel resolved to act upon his advice. He returned into his comfortable little parlor, which in some way had never looked even to himself so comfortable and pleasant; and he addressed his visitor with a determined and resolute aspect.

"Now," he said, "if you won't go away peaceable I'll send for a policeman, as sure as I'm the chapel-keeper of St. John's Chapel. I don't want to be violent with you, for I'm a Christian man; but I don't know that a Christian man is bound to give you a lodging in his own house. I should rather think he wasn't. But if you will go away quiet, here is a shilling to pay for a bed and breakfast elsewhere. That's all I can do or say. It's that, or the police."

The woman deliberated for a few minutes, looking hard into Daniel's face; but there was no sign of irresolution or relenting upon his grave features; and at last she raised herself slowly and weariedly from the chair, and dragged her slip-shod feet across the floor towards him. She took the shilling sullenly from his hand and without a word passed into the cold and damp of the streets, while Daniel watched her unsteady steps down the court with a feeling of relief.

But when Brookes was gone, and the door was locked for the night, and the agreeable warmth of the glowing fire wrapped round him, he could not keep his thoughts from wondering where the wretched woman had found a shelter. His mind also looked onwards with misgiving to the future which lay immediately before him and Jessica; and again he lamented on his own account that he could not go for counsel to Jessica's other friend, the minister who had been stricken into silence and unconsciousness even concerning interests still nearer and dearer to his heart.

CHAPTER IV. JESSICA’S CHOICE.

Early the next morning Daniel went to the minister’s house, half hoping that he should hear that the malady of the night before had been only a temporary insensibility, from which he had recovered. But the minister lay in the same state of unconsciousness, and showed no sign of returning life. The nurse told him that a ragged and miserable woman, who called herself Jessica’s mother, had seen him during the Sunday afternoon, and held a long conversation with him, after which he had ordered some food to be given her in the kitchen.

This, then, no doubt, was the subject upon which the minister wished to speak to Daniel; and the latter felt more than ever lost in doubt as to what he ought to do, as it was now impossible to hear the advice which his master had intended to give to him.

He walked thoughtfully towards the chapel, with Jessica beside him, scarcely knowing how to break the news to her. She was a little sad, and less talkative than usual, and her small hand was thrust lovingly into his own, as if she felt that it was needful to assure herself that it could return her warm grasp. When they opened the vestry-door, and, going in, saw all the confusion which bore testimony of the last night’s calamity, Daniel drew the child closer to him with his arm, and bending down stiffly kissed her uplifted face.

“He isn’t going to die,” said Jessica, with a trembling voice; “he is only resting himself, the doctor says, and then he will know us again, and speak to us all.”

“To think,” cried Daniel, in a mournful amazement, “that he should have spoken thousands and thousands of words, ay! millions! and I scarce gave an ear to them; and now I’d almost offer a golden guinea for every word he could speak to me! Ay! Jessica, so that he spoke pretty short and simple, I’d give a guinea a word if he could tell me what I ought to do.”

“Do you want him to say something particular?” asked Jessica.

“Ay! very particular,” answered Daniel.

“Couldn’t you ask God?” suggested Jessica.

“Well,” he answered, doubtfully, “of course I could; but then there’s no direct answer, which I couldn’t mistake. My mother used to open her Bible and take the first words she set her eyes on for answer; and very queer answers they were sometimes. I’m not good enough yet to expect a very clear answer to my prayers.”

Jessica made no answer, for Daniel’s mode of reasoning was a little obscure to her; but she set to work to put the scattered chairs in order, while Daniel looked on with loving but troubled eyes.

“Jessica,” he said, “the trouble I’d like to talk to him about is that your mother’s come back again.”

She started, and looked at him with great, wide-open eyes of amazement and terror, while her face quivered, and she twitched her small shoulders a little, as if already shrinking from a blow. But the expression of pain and fear passed away quickly, and though her face was pale a smile came upon it.

“Doesn’t God know that mother’s come back?” she asked.

There was no need for Daniel to answer her question, but he turned it over and over again in his own mind with something very much like doubt. It seemed as if it would have been so much better, especially at this crisis, for Jessica’s mother to remain absent that it was as if God had given up His particular providence over the affairs of insignificant people like himself and Jessica. It would be no wonder if amid all the affairs of the hosts of angels, and the myriads of worlds of which he had a vague idea, that God should overlook a little matter like the tramping to and fro of a drunken woman. It was a saddening thought; but Daniel was in the mood to cherish it.

“Do you know where mother is?” asked Jessica.

“No, deary,” answered Daniel. “I gave her a shilling last night to pay for her lodging and breakfast. She told me she’d had nothing to eat or drink all day; but the nurse said she’d been to see the minister yesterday afternoon and had a good meal. She’s sure to come again.”

“Ay, she’s sure to come again,” echoed Jessica.

“And so,” continued Daniel, “nurse and me have agreed you’d better stay with the young ladies for a bit, out of the way like, till I can see how I can settle with your mother. You’d be glad to stay with Miss Jane and Winny, Jessica?”

“Yes,” she answered, her face quivering again, as if she could scarcely keep herself from crying, “but I’d like to see my mother.”

“See your mother!” repeated Daniel, with unfeigned astonishment; “whatever for, Jessica?”

“She’s my mother,” replied Jessica, “and the Lord Jesus Christ had a mother. Oh! I’d like to see her again, and tell her about God, and Jesus Christ, and heaven. Perhaps she’d become a good woman!”

She could control herself no longer, and throwing herself on her knees before the minister’s chair she hid her face in her hands, and Daniel heard that amid her sobs she was murmuring some prayer to God for her mother. This was a new perplexity, that Jessica should wish to see her cruel and hard-hearted mother; but there was something in it which he could neither blame nor gainsay. He would rather have kept Jessica in safety at the minister’s house than have her exposed to the frequent and violent visits of the drunken woman to his own little dwelling; but if Jessica decided otherwise he would not oppose her. His house did not seem the same place without her presence in it.

“Choose for yourself, deary,” he said, very gently: “come home with me, and run the chance of your mother coming again soon; or go back to Miss Jane and Winny, who are so fond of you, and where everything is fine, and you’ll be in such good

company. Choose for yourself."

"I'll go home with you," said Jessica, getting up from her knees with a cheerful smile. "I couldn't think this morning who'd sweep the kitchen, and get the breakfast. I'd rather go home with you, if you please."

It was impossible for Daniel not to be gratified at Jessica's choice, however troubled he might be with the idea of her mother's disturbance of their peace; for home was not home without her. They kept very near to one another all day at their work, and it was late at night before they returned home, where they found no one sitting upon the doorsteps, as Daniel timorously expected. But their neighbor Brookes informed them that Jessica's mother had been sobbing and crying before the closed door during a great part of the evening.

CHAPTER V. HOW A CHRISTIAN OUGHT TO ACT.

Daniel was very anxious that Jessica should not be exposed to her mother's violence at any time during his absence, when he would not be there to protect her from any ill-usage; and as he was almost constantly engaged with the chapel affairs for the next two or three days he and Jessica were never at home until late in the evening.

But upon Thursday night as they turned into the court Jessica's quick eye saw a woman's figure leaning against the door-post of their house. She stood still for an instant, clasping Daniel's hand with close and timid grasp and then, quitting him, she ran forward, and stretching out both her hands, almost as if she wished to throw herself into her mother's arms, she cried, "Mother! mother!"

The woman laughed loudly and shrilly, and flung her shriveled arms about Jessica, fondling her with a maudlin fondness; Jessica drew back sorrowfully, and lifted herself on tip-toe to whisper into Daniel's ear:

"She's a little drunk, you know," she said, "but she isn't very bad yet. She isn't furious. What shall we do?"

It was precisely the question Daniel was asking of himself, for he could not bear the idea of taking a drunken woman into his respectable and orderly house; and yet, could he turn out Jessica's mother before Jessica's eyes? He paused for some minutes before unlocking the door, while the woman continued to talk in a foolish strain to her child, but at last he felt compelled to open it, and she was the first to push her way in. She took possession again of his arm-chair, and tossed her old, tattered hat into a corner of the room, while he looked on in helpless and deep dismay.

"Mother," said Jessica, speaking to her in gentle but steady tones, "this isn't your house at all, and you can't stay here. It's Mr. Daniel's house: but I dare say he'll let me give you some supper, and then you'd better go away, and come to see me again when you're quite yourself."

The woman fastened her red and sunken eyes upon Jessica, and then burst into a fit of passionate lamenting, while she drew the child closer to her.

"Oh! I wish I was a better woman!" she cried. "I've been driven to it, Jessica. But I'm coming to live here with you now, and be decent like the rest of you. I'm going to turn over a new leaf, and you'll see how steady I'll be. I'll be no disgrace to any of you."

"But, mother," said Jessica, "you can't live here, because it's Mr. Daniel's house, and he only took me out of charity, when I was ill and you left me. We can't look for him to take you."

"If you stay, I stay," said her mother, in a tone of obstinacy, setting her elbows firmly upon the arms of the chair, and planting her feet on the floor; "or, if I go, you go. I'd like to know who'd have the heart to separate a mother from her own child!"

Jessica stood for a minute or two looking at her mother with eyes full of sadness and pity, and then she crept to Daniel's side, and whispered to him with an air of pleading:

“I don’t think she ever knew that God is our Father,” she said.

Daniel found himself at a complete loss as to what he ought to do. The miserable creature before him shocked every sense of decency and propriety, which had been firmly and rigidly rooted in his nature; and the very sight of her, drunken and disorderly, upon his hearth, was an abomination to him. Since she had last spoken she had fallen into a brief slumber, and her grey, uncovered head was shaking and nodding with an imbecile aspect. Jessica was going upstairs, for what he did not know, unless it was to make some arrangement for her mother’s accommodation; and he remained motionless, staring at the wretched woman with a feeling of abhorrence and disgust which increased every moment.

But presently he heard Jessica’s light steps descending the stairs, and started with surprise when she came into the room. She had changed her tidy dress for the poorest and oldest clothing in her possession, and she approached him with a sorrowful but patient look upon her face.

“Mr. Daniel,” she said, unconsciously falling back into speaking the old name by which she had first called him, “you mustn’t go to take mother in out of charity, as well as me. That ’ud never do. So I’ll go away with her to-night, and in the morning, when she’s sober, I’ll tell her all about God, and Jesus Christ, and heaven. She doesn’t know it yet, but maybe when she hears every thing she’ll be a different woman; like me, you know; and then we can all help her to be good. Only I must go away with her to-night, or she’ll get into a raging fury like she used to do.”

“No, no, no!” cried Daniel vehemently. “I couldn’t let you go, dear. Why, Jessica, I love you more than my money, don’t I? God knows I love you better. I’d rather lose all my money, ay, and my place as chapel-keeper, than lose you.”

“You aren’t going to lose me,” said Jessica, with the same patient but sorrowful light in her eyes, “I’m only going away for a little while with my mother. She’s my mother, and I want to tell her all I know—that she may go to heaven as well as us.

I'll come back to-morrow."

"She shall stay here," said Daniel, hesitatingly.

"No, no," answered Jessica, "that 'ud never do. She'll be for stopping always if you give in once. You'd better let me go with her this one night; and to-morrow morning, when she's all right, I'll tell her everything. She'll be very low then, and she'll hearken to me. Mother! I'm ready to go with you."

The woman opened her swollen eyelids and staggered to her feet, laying her hand heavily upon the slight shoulder of Jessica, who looked from her to Daniel with a clear, sad, brave smile, as she bent her childish shoulders a little under her mother's hand, as if they felt already the heavy burden that was falling upon her life. It was a hard moment for Daniel, and he was yet doubtful whether he should let them both go, or keep them both; but Jessica had led her mother to the door, and already her hand was upon the latch.

"Stop a minute, Jessica," he said; "I'll let you go with her this once, only there's a lodging-house not far off, and I'll come with you and see you safe for the night, and pay your lodgings."

"All right!" answered Jessica, with a quick, sagacious nod; and in a few minutes they were walking along the streets, Jessica between her mother and Daniel, all of them very silent, except when the woman broke out into a stave or two of some old, long-forgotten song. Before long they reached the lodging-house of which Daniel had spoken, and he saw them safely into the little, close, dark closet which was to be their bedroom.

"Good-night," said Daniel, kissing Jessica with more than usual tenderness; "you don't feel as if you'd like to come back with me, now we've seen your mother comfortable, do you?"

"No," answered Jessica, with a wistful look from him to her mother, who had thrown herself upon the bed and was fast asleep already. "I think I'm doing what

God would like me to do; aren't I? He knows she is my mother."

"Ay, God bless you, my dear," said Daniel, turning away quickly, and closing the door behind him. He stumbled down the dark stairs into the street, and returned to his desolate home, saying to himself, "I'm sure I don't know how a Christian ought to act in this case; and there's nobody to go and ask now."

CHAPTER VI. DANIEL'S PRAYER.

The two following days, Friday and Saturday, were always a busy time at the chapel, for the whole place had to be swept and dusted in preparation for the coming Sunday. Never had Daniel felt so depressed and downhearted as when he entered the chilly and empty chapel early in the morning and alone; for Jessica was to follow him by and by, when her mother had strolled away for the day to her old haunts.

Only a week ago he and Jessica had gone cheerfully about their work together, Jessica's blithe, clear young voice echoing through the place as she sang to herself, or called to him from some far-off pew, or down from the gallery. But now everything was upset and in confusion. He mounted the pulpit steps, and after shaking the cushions, and dusting every ledge and crevice, he stood upright in a strange and solemn reverie, as he looked round upon the empty pews, which were wont to be so crowded on a Sunday.

It would make a wonderful difference to the place, he thought, if anything worse should happen to his master; for even to himself Daniel could not bear to say the sad word, death. They could never find his like again. Never! he repeated, laying his hand reverently upon the crimson cushion, where the minister's grey head had sunk in sudden dumbness before God; and two large solemn tears forced themselves into Daniel's eyes, and rolled slowly down his cheeks.

He did not know who ever would fill the pulpit even on the coming Sabbath; but he felt that he could never bear to stay at the chapel after its glory was departed, and see

the congregation dwindling down, and growing more and more scanty every week, until only a few drowsy hearers came to listen sleepily to a lifeless preacher. No! no! That would go a good way towards breaking his heart.

Besides all this, how he longed to be able to ask the minister what he ought to do about Jessica's mother! But whether for instruction in the pulpit or for counsel in private the minister's voice was hushed; and Daniel's heart was not a whit lighter, as he slowly descended the pulpit steps.

It was getting on for noon before Jessica followed him, bringing his dinner with her in a little basket. Her eyes were red with tears, and she was very quiet while he ate with a poor appetite the food she set before him. He felt reluctant to ask after her mother; but when the meal was finished Jessica drew near to him, and took hold of his hand in both her own.

"Mr. Daniel," she said, very sorrowfully, "when mother awoke this morning I told her everything about Jesus Christ, and God, and heaven; and she knew it all before! Before I was born, she said!"

"Ah!" ejaculated Daniel, but not in a tone of surprise; only because Jessica paused and looked mournfully into his face.

"Yes," continued Jessica, shaking her head hopelessly, "she knew about it, and she never told me; never! She never spoke of God at all, only when she was cursing. I don't know now anything that'll make her a good woman. I thought that if she only heard what I said she'd love God, but she only laughed at me, and said it's an old story. I don't know what can be done for her now."

Jessica's tears were falling fast again, and Daniel did not know how to comfort her. There was little hope, he knew, of a woman so enslaved by drunkenness being brought back again to religion and God.

"If the minister could only see her!" said Jessica. "He speaks as if he had seen God, and talked to him sometimes; and she'd be sure to believe him. I don't know how to

say the right things."

"No, no!" answered Daniel. "She saw him on Sunday, before he had the stroke, and he talked a long time to her. No! she won't be changed by him."

"She's my mother, you know," repeated Jessica anxiously.

"Ay!" said Daniel, "and that puzzles me, Jessica; I don't know what to do."

"Couldn't we pray to God," suggested Jessica, again, "now, before we go on any farther?"

"Maybe it would be the best thing to do," agreed Daniel, rising from his chair and kneeling down with Jessica beside him. At first he attempted to pray like some of the church-members at the weekly prayer-meeting, in set and formal phrases; but he felt that if he wished to obtain any real blessing he must ask for it in simple and childlike words, as if speaking face to face with his Heavenly Father; and this was the prayer he made, after freeing himself from the ceremonial etiquette of the prayer-meetings:

"Lord, thou knowest that Jessica's mother is come back, and what a drunken and disorderly woman she is, and we don't know what to do with her, and the minister cannot give us his advice. Sometimes I'm afraid I love my money too much yet, but, Lord, if it's that, or anything else that's hard in my heart, so as to hinder me from doing what the Saviour, Jesus Christ, would do if he was in my place, I pray thee to take it away, and make me see clearly what my Christian duty is. Dear Lord, I beseech thee, keep both me and Jessica from evil."

Daniel rose from his knees a good deal relieved and lightened in spirit. He had simply, with the heart of a child, laid his petition before God; and now he felt that it was God's part to direct him. Jessica herself seemed brighter, for if the matter had been laid in God's hands she felt that it was certain to come out all right in the end.

They went back to their work in the chapel, and though it was melancholy to remember that their own minister would be absent from the pulpit on the Sunday

which was drawing near, they felt satisfied with the thought that God knew all, and was making all things work together for the good of those who loved him.

CHAPTER VII. A BUSY DAY FOR DANIEL.

Daniel went home with Jessica, still disturbed a little with the dread of finding his unwelcome visitor awaiting their arrival; but she was not there, and there was no interruption to their quiet evening together, though both of them started and looked towards the door at every sound of a footstep in the court.

After they had had their tea, and while Jessica was putting away the tea-things in the kitchen, Daniel unlocked his desk, and took out his receipts for the money he had out on interest. Since he had adopted Jessica he had not added much to his savings; for besides the cost of her maintenance there had also been the expenses of housekeeping. In former times he had scarcely cared how uncomfortable his lodgings were, provided that they were cheap; and he had found that to have a tidy and comfortable house of his own involved a great outlay of money.

Sometimes a thought had crossed his mind, of which he was secretly ashamed, that the minister, who seemed so fond of Jessica, or at least some of the rich members of the congregation, might have borne part of the charge of her living; but no one had ever offered to do anything for her. He had spent his money with a half grudge, and now the question upon his mind was, did God require him to waste—he said "waste" to himself—his hardly-earned savings upon a drunken and wicked woman?

It was a hard trial. He loved Jessica, as he had said, more than his money, and had never really regretted taking her into his home; she was like a daughter to him, and he was a happier and a better man for her companionship. But this woman was an abhorrence to him, a disgust and disgrace. She had no more claim upon him than any other of the thousands of lost men and women who thronged the streets of London.

Surely God did not require him to take this money, which was the sole provision for his old age; and now that the minister was so stricken there would be no new chapel built for him, and no house for the chapel-keeper, and no increase of salary. That was already a settled point, for the physicians who were attending the minister declared positively that never again would his over-worked brain be capable of sustaining any long strain of thought, such as had drawn together his eager and attentive congregations.

It was scarcely even a question whether he would be able to resume his position as pastor of this old church; and under a new minister it was probable the place might be half emptied, and his emoluments as chapel-keeper be considerably lessened. He was getting older, too, and there was not more than ten years' work in him. He looked at his treasured receipts, and asked himself, Could it be possible that God required him to sacrifice his past gains and risk his future comforts upon Jessica's mother?

Then another question, in the very depths of his conscience, was whispered to his heart, which at first was willing to remain deaf to the small and quiet voice; but it grew louder and more clamorous, until Daniel found that it must be heard and answered.

"What think you Christ would have done with this woman?" it asked. If God had brought her to that door where He dwelt as a poor carpenter, would He have thrust her back upon the misery of the life which drove her again and again to the vilest of her sins? Would Jesus, who came to seek as well as to save those who are lost, have balanced a book of savings against the hope, faint though it was, of rescuing the woman's soul?

"Daniel, Daniel," answered the quiet voice to his inmost heart, "what would thy Lord have done?" He tried to set it aside, and hush it up, while he turned the key upon his receipts, telling himself that he had done all that his duty as a Christian

demanded of him when he rescued and adopted Jessica. But the Spirit of God has a gracious tyranny which requires more and more from the soul which begins to sacrifice itself. He had mastered his love of money for the sake of a child whom he loved; now he must conquer it to rescue a wretched woman whom he shrank from.

The struggle seemed to last long, but it was ended before Jessica came back to the fireside. Daniel's prayer in the afternoon had been too sincere for him to be left in darkness to grope along a wrong path. His face wore a smile as Jessica took her sewing and sat down opposite to him; such a smile as rarely lit up his rigid features.

"Jessica," he said, "God has shown me what to do."

"Perhaps it'll be better than the minister himself," answered Jessica.

"Ay!" answered Daniel. "I don't think the minister could have told me plainer. Why, Jessica, suppose the Lord had been living here, and your mother had come to his door, wouldn't he have cared for her, and grieved over her, and done everything he could to prevent her going on in sin? Well, dear, it seems to me it wouldn't be altogether right to take her to live with us all at once, because you are a young girl and ought not to see such ways, and I might get angry with her; but I'll hire a room for her somewhere, that shall be always kept for her, and whenever she comes to it there will be a bed, and a meal for her; and we'll be very kind to her, and see if by any means we can help to make her good."

Jessica had dropped her sewing and drawn near to Daniel; and now she flung her arms round his neck, and hid her face upon his breast, crying.

"Why, now, now, my dear!" said Daniel, "what ails you, Jessica? Wouldn't the Lord Jesus have made a plan something like that? Come, come; we'll pray to him to make her a good woman, and then—who knows?—she may come here to live with us."

"She's my own mother, you know," sobbed Jessica, as if these words alone were thoughts in her heart.

"Yes!" answered Daniel, "and we must do our best for her. Jessica, I know now that

I love God more than aught else in this world or the next.”

It was a knowledge worth more than all the riches of earth; and as Daniel sat in his chimney-corner he could hardly realize his own happiness. To be sure that he loved God supremely, and to have the witness in himself that he did so! He felt as if he could take all the world of lost and ruined sinners to his heart, and, like Christ himself, lay down his life for them. There was only one shadow, if it could be called a shadow, upon his joy unspeakable, and full of comfort—it was that he could not gladden the heart of the minister by telling him of this change in his nature.

The next day was a very busy one for Daniel; for besides his ordinary duties he charged himself with finding a suitable place for Jessica’s mother. He met with a room at last in the dwelling of a poor widow, who was glad to let him have it on condition that he paid the rent of the house.

He and Jessica bought a bed and a chair and a table, and put everything in readiness for their expected visitor. Scanty as was the furniture, it was a warm and certain shelter for the poor vagrant, who spent half her nights shivering under archways or in unfinished buildings; and never had Daniel felt so pure a gratification as when he gave a last look at the room, and taking Jessica by the hand went back to his own home, no longer afraid of meeting the woman on his threshold.

CHAPTER VIII. HOPES OF RECOVERY.

It was a happy Sunday for Daniel, in spite of the minister’s absence and the downcast looks of the congregation as they occupied their accustomed seats. The chapters read out of the Bible had new meaning for him, and the singing brought happy tears to his eyes. It seemed as if he had never truly known God before; and though the sermon, by a student merely, was one which he would have criticised with contempt a week ago, now it was pleasant only to hear the names of his God and Saviour; just as one is pleased to hear even a stammering tongue speak the

praises of those we love.

During the evening service Jessica went to stay with the minister's children. Jane came down to her in the hall and told her they were to sit in their father's room while the strange nurse and their own nurse were having tea together in an adjoining room.

"Nurse thinks," said Jane, "that, if papa knew, he would like us to sit with him this Sunday evening; and sometimes we think he does know, though he never speaks, and he seems to be asleep all the time. We are to read our chapter and say our hymns just as if he could hear. And nurse says he told your mother only last Sunday that he loves you almost like one of his own little girls. So we said we should like you to come and read with us; for you are not a bit afraid, Jessica."

They had mounted the stairs while Jane was whispering these sentences; and now, hand in hand, they entered the minister's room.

There was a fire burning and a lamp lit upon a table, so that the minister's face could be plainly seen, as they stole with tender caution to his side.

It had been a pale face always, but it was very colorless now; the lids were closed lightly over the eyeballs, which seemed almost to burn and shine through them; and the lips, which might have been speaking words that seemed to bring his listeners almost into the presence of God, were locked in silence. Yet the face was full of life, which rippled underneath, as it were; as if the colorless cheeks, and thin eyelids, and furrowed forehead were only a light mask; and while the children gazed upon it the lips moved slowly, but soundlessly.

"He is talking to God," whispered Jessica, in a tone of awe.

"Jessica," said Winny, pressing close to her, "I can't help thinking about Paul, when he was caught up into the third heaven and heard unspeakable words. I think perhaps he looked like my father."

She had never called him father before, and she uttered it in a strangely solemn

voice, as if it was a more fitting title than the familiar one they had called him by on ordinary days. They stood beside him for a few minutes, and then they crept on tiptoe across to the hearth. The children read their chapter, and said their hymns, and sang a favorite one of their father's, in soft low tones which could scarcely have been heard outside the room; and the little timepiece over the fireplace chimed seven as they finished.

"It was just this time last Sunday," said Jane, "when papa had the stroke. He was just going to pray when the chapel-clock struck seven."

"I wonder what he was going to say?" said Winny, sorrowfully.

"Our Father!" murmured a voice behind them, very low and weak, like the voice of one who has only strength to utter a single cry; and turning quickly, with a feeling of fear, they saw their father's eyes opened, and looking towards them with inexpressible tenderness. Jessica laid her finger on her lips as a sign to them to be still, and with timid courage she went to the minister's side.

"Do you know us again?" she asked, trembling between fear and joy; "do you know who we are, minister?"

"Jessica, and my children," he whispered, with a feeble smile fluttering upon his face.

"He is come back!" cried Jessica, returning with swift but noiseless steps to Jane and Winny. "Let us make haste and tell the others. Maybe he is hungry and weak and faint. But he knows us—he is come back to us again."

In a few minutes the joyful news was known throughout the house, and was carried to the chapel before the evening service was over; and the congregation, as they dispersed, spoke hopefully of the minister's recovery. It was the crowning gladness of the day to Daniel, and he lingered at the minister's house, to which he hastened as soon as he had closed the chapel, until it was getting on for midnight; and then he left Jessica with the children and started off for his home with a heart in which joy

was full.

CHAPTER IX. THE GATE OF DEATH.

Daniel had a good way to go, for the minister’s house was in an opposite direction to his own from the chapel. The November fogs still hung about London, and the lamps gave only a dim light through the gloom. Those who were yet walking about the streets marched quickly, as if anxious to reach whatever shelter they called their own.

Daniel himself was making his way as fast as he could along the muddy pavement, when he came to a part of the streets where the drainage was being repaired, and where charcoal fires were burning in braziers here and there, at once to give warning to the passers-by and to afford warmth to the watchmen who stayed beside them all night. One of the watchmen had brought an old door and reared it up against a rude wall of stone and bricks so as to form some protection from the rain, which now and then fell in short showers.

He had quitted his shed, for some reason or other, and as Daniel drew near his steps were arrested; for crouching underneath it, and stretching out her shrivelled arms over the brazier full of charcoal, was Jessica’s mother. The fitful light was shining strongly upon her face, and showed the deep lines which misery and degradation had ploughed upon it and the sullenness and stupidity which were stamped upon her features.

He stood still, gazing at her with disgust; but very soon a feeling of profound pity took its place. He had been wondering what had become of her since Friday morning, and had even felt a kind of anxiety about her; and now, as he thought of the room with its comfortable bed which was waiting for her, instead of the brief shelter of the shed, he climbed over the heaps of rubbish which lay between them, calling to her, for he did not know her name, “Jessica’s mother!”

The woman started to her feet at the sound of his voice, and looked him full in the face with an expression of utter wretchedness. Her eyes were inflamed and swollen with tears, and every feature was quivering as if she had no control over them. She was so miserable a creature that Daniel did not know in what words to speak to her; but his heart was moved with an unutterable compassion, unknown to him till now.

He even felt a sympathy for her, as if he had once been in the same depths of degradation, as he looked down shudderingly into the deep abyss where she had fallen by her sins; and the sense of her misery touched him so closely that he would have given his life for her salvation. He stretched out his hand towards her, but she pushed it away, and with a groan of despair she fled from the light, and sought to hide herself in the darkness of the foggy streets.

But Daniel was not easily turned aside from his desire to bring some help to Jessica’s mother, even if it were no more than to rescue her from the chilliness of the November night. He followed her with steps as rapid as her own, and only that she had the first start he would have been quickly at her side. She fled swiftly along the streets to escape from him, and he pursued her, hoping that she would soon weary and would turn to speak to him.

But she kept on until Daniel found himself at the entrance of one of the old bridges of the city which span the wide waters of the river. Side by side with it a new bridge was being constructed with massive beams of timber, and huge blocks of stone, and vast girders of iron, lying like some giant skeleton enveloped in the fog, yet showing dimly through it by the glare of red lights and blazing torches, which were kindled here and there, and cast flickering gleams upon the black waters beneath, into which Daniel looked down with a shiver, as he paused for a moment in his pursuit.

But he had lost sight of the woman when he lifted up his eyes again, unless the strange dark figure on one of the great beams stretching over the river was the form of Jessica’s mother. He pressed towards it, quitting the safety of the old bridge; but,

as a wild and very mournful cry smote upon his ear, he missed his footing, and fell heavily upon a pile of masonry at some distance below him.

It could only have been a minute that he was unconscious, for the deep-toned clock of St. Paul's had chimed the first stroke of midnight as he lost footing, and the boom of the last stroke was still ringing through the air when he tried to raise himself and look again for the dark figure which he had seen hanging over the river; but he could not move, and he lay quietly, without making a second effort, and thinking clearly over what had happened.

There was little doubt that the wretched woman whom he had sought to save had hurried away from all salvation, whether of God or man; and yet how was it that, instead of the shock of horror, a perfect peace possessed his soul? For a moment it seemed to him that he could hear a voice speaking, through the dull and monotonous splashing of the cold water against the arches below him, and it said to him, "Because thou hast been faithful unto death, I will give thee a crown of life."

Was he going to die? he asked himself, as a pang of extreme agony ran through all his frame, and extorted a moan from his lips. He was ready and willing, if it was the will of God; but he would like to see his little Jessica again and tell her gently with his own lips that her mother was dead, and gone—he could say nothing gentler—to her own place, which God knew of.

The midnight hour was quieter than usual in the busy city, for it was Sunday and the night was damp; so Daniel lay for some time before he heard the tread of a passer-by upon the bridge above him. He could hear many sounds at a little distance; but he could not raise his voice loudly enough to be audible through the splash of the waters. But as soon as he heard footsteps on the bridge he cried, with a strong effort, "Help me, or I shall die before morning!"

It seemed a long time, and one of great suffering to him, before he was raised up and laid upon the smooth pathway of the bridge. But he did not cry out or groan; and as

the little crowd which gathered around him spoke in tones of commiseration and kindness he thanked them calmly, and with a cheerfulness which deceived them. They bore him to the nearest hospital, but as they would have laid him on a bed there he stopped them, with great energy and earnestness.

“Let the doctor see me first,” he said, “and tell me whether I am likely to die or live.”

The doctor’s hand touched him, and there were a few questions put to him, which he answered calmly; and then, as the doctor looked down upon him with a grave face, he looked back with perfect composure.

“I’m a Christian man,” said Daniel, “and I’m not afraid to die. But if you think there’s no chance for me I’d rather go home. I’ve a little girl at home who’d like to be with me all the time till I’m taken away from her. The key of my house is in my pocket. Let me be taken home.”

They could not refuse his request; but the doctor told him he might live yet for some days, though the injuries he had received gave no hope of his life; to which Daniel replied only by a solemn smile. It was nearly morning before he reached his house, under the care of a nurse and a student from the hospital; and thus he entered for the last time the home where he had spent the three happiest years of his life with Jessica.

CHAPTER X. SPEAK OF HIS LOVE.

For several days Daniel suffered great pain, but with such perfect peace and joy in his heart that it seemed as if he could scarcely realize or feel his bodily anguish. Jessica was with him constantly; and when he was free from pain she read aloud to him, or talked with him of the heaven to which he was going, and which seemed to be open to his gaze already, as one catches a glimpse from afar off of some beautiful country basking in the glory of a full noontide sunshine.

The chapel people came to see him, some of them in the carriages which of old set him pondering on their riches; and they left him, marveling that they had known so little of the religiousness of the man who had ushered them to their pews Sunday after Sunday. But as yet the minister had not visited him, though he had sent him word that as soon as it was possible he would come to see him.

The last day had arrived; both Daniel and Jessica knew that it was the last day, and she had not stirred from his side since morning; and still the minister had not come—had not been able to come to the death-bed of his old friend. For they were old friends, having met many times a week for a dozen years in the same chapel; and since Jessica had drawn them closer together the learned and eloquent preacher had cared for Daniel’s illiterate soul, and the chapel-keeper had learned to pick up some crumbs of nourishment from the great feast which the minister prepared week after week for his intellectual congregation. He had not been, but Daniel was undisturbed, and so, patient and peaceful, with a smile upon his lips when he met Jessica’s wistful eyes, he waited for the last hour and the last moment to come.

Yet before it was too late, and before his eye grew dim, and his tongue numbed with the chillness of death, the minister arrived, pale in face, and bowed down with weakness, and with a trembling voice which faltered often as he spoke. They clasped one another’s hands, and looked into one another’s face with a strange recognition, as if both had seen further into the other world than they had ever done before, and then the minister sank feebly into the chair beside Daniel’s pillow.

“I will rest here, and stay with you for an hour,” he said.

“It is the last hour,” answered Daniel.

“Be it so,” replied the minister. “I too have looked death in the face.”

They were silent for a while, while the minister rallied his strength, and then he bent his head, his head only, for he was too feeble yet to kneel beside the dying man, and he poured forth a prayer to God in his inmost heart, but with hesitating lips, which

no longer uttered with ready speech the thoughts which thronged to his brain. The Amen with which he ended was almost a groan.

“My power is taken from me,” he said; “the Almighty has stricken me in the pride of my heart. I shall never more speak as I used to do, of his glory and majesty, and the greatness of his salvation.”

“You can speak of his love,” murmured Daniel.

“Yes,” he answered despondently, “but only as a child speaks. I shall never stir the hearts of the congregation again. My speech will be contemptible.”

“Jessica, tell him what you and I have been talking about,” said Daniel.

Jessica lifted up her face from the pillow, and turned it towards the minister, a smile struggling through her tears; and though her voice was unsteady to begin it grew calm and clear before she had spoken many words.

“We were talking how he’d never be the chapel-keeper any more, and go up into the pulpit to carry the books before you; and then we thought it was true, maybe, what the doctor says, that you’d never be well enough again to preach in such a big chapel; and so we went on talking about the time when we shall all be in heaven. We said that perhaps God would give you more beautiful thoughts there, and grander words, and you’d still be our minister; and the angels ’ud all come thronging up in crowds all about you and us to hearken to what you’d thought about Jesus Christ and about God; and there’d be a great congregation again. Only whenever you were silent for a minute we could look up and see the Saviour himself listening to us all.”

Then the minister bowed his pale face upon his hands; but he did not answer a word.

“There is one thing still I want to say,” said Daniel. “I’ve made my will, and left all I had to Jessica; but I don’t know where she’ll find a home. If you’d look out for her—”

“Jessica shall come home to me,” interrupted the minister, laying his hand upon hers

and Daniel’s and clasping them both warmly.

“I’m a Christian man,” whispered Daniel. “I know that I love God, and that he has made me something like himself. There’s a verse about it in the Bible.”

“‘Beloved,’” said the minister, “‘now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is.’”

There was no stammering of the minister’s speech as he pronounced these words, and his face grew bright, as did the face of the dying man. Daniel’s mind wandered a little, and he groped about, as in the dark, for the Bible, which lay upon the bed; and he murmured,

“It’s time to take up the books, for the congregation is waiting, and the minister is ready. I will take them up to heaven.”

He spoke no more; but the Bible after a while fell from his hand, and Jessica and the minister, looking upon his face, saw that in heaven he was beholding the face of the Father.

It proved true that the minister could never again preach a sermon such as in former times, when the people listened with strained attention, and he was to them as a very lovely song of one that hath a pleasant voice, and playeth well on an instrument; but they heard his words and did them not. Yet he was a man of calmer happiness than before; and in his quiet country home, where sometimes of a Sunday he mounted the pulpit-steps of a little chapel, and taught a simple congregation simple truths, he drew nearer day by day in spirit to the great congregation who were waiting for him, and before whom his lips should never more be silenced.

Transcriber’s Note:

Spelling, punctuation and hyphenation have been retained as they appear in the original publication, including the use of “wont” for “won’t” in “Jessica’s First Prayer”, except as follows:

Jessica’s First Prayer

Page 17 ‘You make good coffee changed to “You make good coffee Page 26 sobs of pain and wearness changed to sobs of pain and weariness Page 27 through at the inside- changed to through at the inside. Page 43 looking round encourageingly changed to looking round encouragingly Page 54 CHAPTER IV. changed to CHAPTER VII. Page 70 often saying no more that changed to often saying no more than Page 89 minister and the beadle, ‘I asked changed to minister and the beadle, “I asked

Jessica’s Mother

Page 21 it with our hearts. changed to it with our hearts.” Page 31 the door into a comforttable changed to the door into a comfortable Page 35 in some away had never looked changed to in some way had never looked Page 50 when she hears every, thing changed to when she hears every thing Page 53 He knows she is my mother. changed to He knows she is my mother.” Page 58 on any farther? changed to on any farther?” Page 64 would he have thrust her would He have thrust her Page 74 caried to the chapel changed to carried to the chapel Page 79 like some giant skeletion changed to like some giant skeleton A Contents has been added for Jessica’s Mother.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK JESSICA'S FIRST PRAYER; AND, JESSICA'S MOTHER ***

Updated editions will replace the previous one—the old editions will be renamed.

Creating the works from print editions not protected by U.S. copyright law means that no one owns a United States copyright in these works, so the Foundation (and you!) can copy and distribute it in the United States without permission and without paying copyright royalties. Special rules, set forth in the General Terms of Use part of this license, apply to copying and distributing Project Gutenberg™ electronic works to protect the PROJECT GUTENBERG™ concept and trademark. Project

Gutenberg is a registered trademark, and may not be used if you charge for an eBook, except by following the terms of the trademark license, including paying royalties for use of the Project Gutenberg trademark. If you do not charge anything for copies of this eBook, complying with the trademark license is very easy. You may use this eBook for nearly any purpose such as creation of derivative works, reports, performances and research. Project Gutenberg eBooks may be modified and printed and given away—you may do practically ANYTHING in the United States with eBooks not protected by U.S. copyright law. Redistribution is subject to the trademark license, especially commercial redistribution.

START: FULL LICENSE

THE FULL PROJECT GUTENBERG™ LICENSE

PLEASE READ THIS BEFORE YOU DISTRIBUTE OR USE THIS WORK

To protect the Project Gutenberg™ mission of promoting the free distribution of electronic works, by using or distributing this work (or any other work associated in any way with the phrase “Project Gutenberg”), you agree to comply with all the terms of the Full Project Gutenberg License available with this file or online at www.gutenberg.org/license.

Section 1. General Terms of Use and Redistributing Project Gutenberg electronic works

1.A. By reading or using any part of this Project Gutenberg electronic work, you indicate that you have read, understand, agree to and accept all the terms of this license and intellectual property (trademark/copyright) agreement. If you do not agree to abide by all the terms of this agreement, you must cease using and return or destroy all copies of Project Gutenberg electronic works in your possession. If you paid a fee for obtaining a copy of or access to a Project Gutenberg electronic work and you do not agree to be bound by the terms of this agreement, you may obtain a

refund from the person or entity to whom you paid the fee as set forth in paragraph 1.E.8.

1.B. “Project Gutenberg” is a registered trademark. It may only be used on or associated in any way with an electronic work by people who agree to be bound by the terms of this agreement. There are a few things that you can do with most Project Gutenberg electronic works even without complying with the full terms of this agreement. See paragraph 1.C below. There are a lot of things you can do with Project Gutenberg electronic works if you follow the terms of this agreement and help preserve free future access to Project Gutenberg electronic works. See paragraph 1.E below.

1.C. The Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation (“the Foundation” or PGLAF), owns a compilation copyright in the collection of Project Gutenberg electronic works. Nearly all the individual works in the collection are in the public domain in the United States. If an individual work is unprotected by copyright law in the United States and you are located in the United States, we do not claim a right to prevent you from copying, distributing, performing, displaying or creating derivative works based on the work as long as all references to Project Gutenberg are removed. Of course, we hope that you will support the Project Gutenberg mission of promoting free access to electronic works by freely sharing Project Gutenberg works in compliance with the terms of this agreement for keeping the Project Gutenberg name associated with the work. You can easily comply with the terms of this agreement by keeping this work in the same format with its attached full Project Gutenberg License when you share it without charge with others.

1.D. The copyright laws of the place where you are located also govern what you can do with this work. Copyright laws in most countries are in a constant state of change. If you are outside the United States, check the laws of your country in addition to the terms of this agreement before downloading, copying, displaying,

performing, distributing or creating derivative works based on this work or any other Project Gutenberg work. The Foundation makes no representations concerning the copyright status of any work in any country other than the United States.

1.E. Unless you have removed all references to Project Gutenberg:

1.E.1. The following sentence, with active links to, or other immediate access to, the full Project Gutenberg License must appear prominently whenever any copy of a Project Gutenberg work (any work on which the phrase “Project Gutenberg” appears, or with which the phrase “Project Gutenberg” is associated) is accessed, displayed, performed, viewed, copied or distributed:

This eBook is for the use of anyone anywhere in the United States and most other parts of the world at no cost and with almost no restrictions whatsoever. You may copy it, give it away or re-use it under the terms of the Project Gutenberg™ License included with this eBook or online at www.gutenberg.org. If you are not located in the United States, you will have to check the laws of the country where you are located before using this eBook.

1.E.2. If an individual Project Gutenberg electronic work is derived from texts not protected by U.S. copyright law (does not contain a notice indicating that it is posted with permission of the copyright holder), the work can be copied and distributed to anyone in the United States without paying any fees or charges. If you are redistributing or providing access to a work with the phrase “Project Gutenberg” associated with or appearing on the work, you must comply either with the requirements of paragraphs 1.E.1 through 1.E.7 or obtain permission for the use of the work and the Project Gutenberg trademark as set forth in paragraphs 1.E.8 or 1.E.9.

1.E.3. If an individual Project Gutenberg electronic work is posted with the permission of the copyright holder, your use and distribution must comply with both paragraphs 1.E.1 through 1.E.7 and any additional terms imposed by the copyright

holder. Additional terms will be linked to the Project Gutenberg License for all works posted with the permission of the copyright holder found at the beginning of this work.

1.E.4. Do not unlink or detach or remove the full Project Gutenberg License terms from this work, or any files containing a part of this work or any other work associated with Project Gutenberg.

1.E.5. Do not copy, display, perform, distribute or redistribute this electronic work, or any part of this electronic work, without prominently displaying the sentence set forth in paragraph 1.E.1 with active links or immediate access to the full terms of the Project Gutenberg License.

1.E.6. You may convert to and distribute this work in any binary, compressed, marked up, nonproprietary or proprietary form, including any word processing or hypertext form. However, if you provide access to or distribute copies of a Project Gutenberg work in a format other than “Plain Vanilla ASCII” or other format used in the official version posted on the official Project Gutenberg website (www.gutenberg.org), you must, at no additional cost, fee or expense to the user, provide a copy, a means of exporting a copy, or a means of obtaining a copy upon request, of the work in its original “Plain Vanilla ASCII” or other form. Any alternate format must include the full Project Gutenberg License as specified in paragraph 1.E.1.

1.E.7. Do not charge a fee for access to, viewing, displaying, performing, copying or distributing any Project Gutenberg works unless you comply with paragraph 1.E.8 or 1.E.9.

1.E.8. You may charge a reasonable fee for copies of or providing access to or distributing Project Gutenberg electronic works provided that:

• You pay a royalty fee of 20% of the gross profits you derive from the use of Project Gutenberg works calculated using the method you already use to calculate

your applicable taxes. The fee is owed to the owner of the Project Gutenberg trademark, but he has agreed to donate royalties under this paragraph to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation. Royalty payments must be paid within 60 days following each date on which you prepare (or are legally required to prepare) your periodic tax returns. Royalty payments should be clearly marked as such and sent to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation at the address specified in Section 4, “Information about donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation.” • You provide a full refund of any money paid by a user who notifies you in writing (or by e-mail) within 30 days of receipt that s/he does not agree to the terms of the full Project Gutenberg™ License. You must require such a user to return or destroy all copies of the works possessed in a physical medium and discontinue all use of and all access to other copies of Project Gutenberg™ works. • You provide, in accordance with paragraph 1.F.3, a full refund of any money paid for a work or a replacement copy, if a defect in the electronic work is discovered and reported to you within 90 days of receipt of the work. • You comply with all other terms of this agreement for free distribution of Project Gutenberg™ works.

1.E.9. If you wish to charge a fee or distribute a Project Gutenberg™ electronic work or group of works on different terms than are set forth in this agreement, you must obtain permission in writing from the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, the manager of the Project Gutenberg™ trademark. Contact the Foundation as set forth in Section 3 below.

1.F.

1.F.1. Project Gutenberg volunteers and employees expend considerable effort to identify, do copyright research on, transcribe and proofread works not protected by U.S. copyright law in creating the Project Gutenberg™ collection. Despite these efforts, Project Gutenberg™ electronic works, and the medium on which they may be stored, may contain “Defects,” such as, but not limited to, incomplete, inaccurate

or corrupt data, transcription errors, a copyright or other intellectual property infringement, a defective or damaged disk or other medium, a computer virus, or computer codes that damage or cannot be read by your equipment.

1.F.2. LIMITED WARRANTY, DISCLAIMER OF DAMAGES - Except for the “Right of Replacement or Refund” described in paragraph 1.F.3, the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, the owner of the Project Gutenberg™ trademark, and any other party distributing a Project Gutenberg™ electronic work under this agreement, disclaim all liability to you for damages, costs and expenses, including legal fees. YOU AGREE THAT YOU HAVE NO REMEDIES FOR NEGLIGENCE, STRICT LIABILITY, BREACH OF WARRANTY OR BREACH OF CONTRACT EXCEPT THOSE PROVIDED IN PARAGRAPH 1.F.3. YOU AGREE THAT THE FOUNDATION, THE TRADEMARK OWNER, AND ANY DISTRIBUTOR UNDER THIS AGREEMENT WILL NOT BE LIABLE TO YOU FOR ACTUAL, DIRECT, INDIRECT, CONSEQUENTIAL, PUNITIVE OR INCIDENTAL DAMAGES EVEN IF YOU GIVE NOTICE OF THE POSSIBILITY OF SUCH DAMAGE.

1.F.3. LIMITED RIGHT OF REPLACEMENT OR REFUND - If you discover a defect in this electronic work within 90 days of receiving it, you can receive a refund of the money (if any) you paid for it by sending a written explanation to the person you received the work from. If you received the work on a physical medium, you must return the medium with your written explanation. The person or entity that provided you with the defective work may elect to provide a replacement copy in lieu of a refund. If you received the work electronically, the person or entity providing it to you may choose to give you a second opportunity to receive the work electronically in lieu of a refund. If the second copy is also defective, you may demand a refund in writing without further opportunities to fix the problem.

1.F.4. Except for the limited right of replacement or refund set forth in paragraph

1.F.3, this work is provided to you ‘AS-IS’, WITH NO OTHER WARRANTIES OF ANY KIND, EXPRESS OR IMPLIED, INCLUDING BUT NOT LIMITED TO WARRANTIES OF MERCHANTABILITY OR FITNESS FOR ANY PURPOSE.

1.F.5. Some states do not allow disclaimers of certain implied warranties or the exclusion or limitation of certain types of damages. If any disclaimer or limitation set forth in this agreement violates the law of the state applicable to this agreement, the agreement shall be interpreted to make the maximum disclaimer or limitation permitted by the applicable state law. The invalidity or unenforceability of any provision of this agreement shall not void the remaining provisions.

1.F.6. INDEMNITY - You agree to indemnify and hold the Foundation, the trademark owner, any agent or employee of the Foundation, anyone providing copies of Project Gutenberg™ electronic works in accordance with this agreement, and any volunteers associated with the production, promotion and distribution of Project Gutenberg™ electronic works, harmless from all liability, costs and expenses, including legal fees, that arise directly or indirectly from any of the following which you do or cause to occur: (a) distribution of this or any Project Gutenberg work, (b) alteration, modification, or additions or deletions to any Project Gutenberg work, and (c) any Defect you cause.

Section 2. Information about the Mission of Project Gutenberg

Project Gutenberg is synonymous with the free distribution of electronic works in formats readable by the widest variety of computers including obsolete, old, middle-aged and new computers. It exists because of the efforts of hundreds of volunteers and donations from people in all walks of life.

Volunteers and financial support to provide volunteers with the assistance they need are critical to reaching Project Gutenberg’s goals and ensuring that the Project Gutenberg collection will remain freely available for generations to come. In 2001, the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation was created to provide a secure

and permanent future for Project Gutenberg and future generations. To learn more about the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation and how your efforts and donations can help, see Sections 3 and 4 and the Foundation information page at www.gutenberg.org.

Section 3. Information about the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation

The Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation is a non-profit 501(c)(3) educational corporation organized under the laws of the state of Mississippi and granted tax exempt status by the Internal Revenue Service. The Foundation's EIN or federal tax identification number is 64-6221541. Contributions to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation are tax deductible to the full extent permitted by U.S. federal laws and your state's laws.

The Foundation's business office is located at 41 Watchung Plaza #516, Montclair NJ 07042, USA, +1 (862) 621-9288. Email contact links and up to date contact information can be found at the Foundation's website and official page at www.gutenberg.org/contact

Section 4. Information about Donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation

Project Gutenberg™ depends upon and cannot survive without widespread public support and donations to carry out its mission of increasing the number of public domain and licensed works that can be freely distributed in machine-readable form accessible by the widest array of equipment including outdated equipment. Many small donations ($1 to $5,000) are particularly important to maintaining tax exempt status with the IRS.

The Foundation is committed to complying with the laws regulating charities and charitable donations in all 50 states of the United States. Compliance requirements are not uniform and it takes a considerable effort, much paperwork and many fees to meet and keep up with these requirements. We do not solicit donations in locations

where we have not received written confirmation of compliance. To SEND DONATIONS or determine the status of compliance for any particular state visit www.gutenberg.org/donate.

While we cannot and do not solicit contributions from states where we have not met the solicitation requirements, we know of no prohibition against accepting unsolicited donations from donors in such states who approach us with offers to donate.

International donations are gratefully accepted, but we cannot make any statements concerning tax treatment of donations received from outside the United States. U.S. laws alone swamp our small staff.

Please check the Project Gutenberg web pages for current donation methods and addresses. Donations are accepted in a number of other ways including checks, online payments and credit card donations. To donate, please visit: www.gutenberg.org/donate.

Section 5. General Information About Project Gutenberg electronic works

Professor Michael S. Hart was the originator of the Project Gutenberg concept of a library of electronic works that could be freely shared with anyone. For forty years, he produced and distributed Project Gutenberg eBooks with only a loose network of volunteer support.

Project Gutenberg eBooks are often created from several printed editions, all of which are confirmed as not protected by copyright in the U.S. unless a copyright notice is included. Thus, we do not necessarily keep eBooks in compliance with any particular paper edition.

Most people start at our website which has the main PG search facility: www.gutenberg.org.

This website includes information about Project Gutenberg, including how to make donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, how to help

produce our new eBooks, and how to subscribe to our email newsletter to hear about new eBooks.