

BIG BROTHER.

(By Annie Fellows-Johnston.)

One little tot had fallen and bumped its head, as the train gave a sudden lurch. It was crying pitifully, but in a subdued sort of whimper, as if it felt that crying was of no use when nobody listened and nobody cared. He picked it up, made a clumsy effort to comfort it, and, not knowing what else to do, sat down beside it. Then for the first time he noticed Mrs. Estel.

She had taken a pair of scissors from her travelling-bag, and had cut several newspapers up into soldiers and dolls and all kinds of animals for the crowd that clamored around her.

They were such restless little bodies, imprisoned so long on this tedious journey, that anything with a suggestion of novelty was welcome.

When she had supplied them with a whole regiment of soldiers and enough animals to equip a menagerie, she took another paper and began teaching them to fold it in curious ways to make boxes, and boats, and baskets.

One by one they crowded up closer to her, watching her as if she were some wonderful magician. They leaned their dusty heads against her fresh gray travelling dress. They touched her dainty gloves with dirty, admiring fingers. They did not know that this was the first time that she had ever come in close contact with such lives as theirs.

They did not know that it was the remembrance of another child,—one who awaited her home-coming—a petted little princess born to purple and fine linen, that made her so tender towards them. Remembering what hers had, and all these lacked, she felt that she must crowd all the brightness possible into the short afternoon they were together.

Everyone of them, at some time in their poor, bare lives, had known what it was to be kindly spoken to by elegant ladies, to be patronizingly smiled upon, to be graciously presented with gifts.

But this was different. This one took the little Hodge girl right up in her lap while she was telling them stories. This one did not pick out the pretty ones to talk to, as strangers generally did. It really seemed that the most neglected and unattractive of them received the most of her attention.

From time to time she glanced across at Robin's lovely face, and contrasted it with the others. The older boy attracted her still more. He seemed to be the only thoughtful one among them all. The others remembered no past, looked forward to no future. When they were hungry there was something to eat. When they were tired they could sleep, and all the rest of the time there was somebody to play with. What more could one want?

The child never stirred from his place, but she noticed that he made a constant effort to entertain Robin. He told him stories and invented little games. When the bundle came flying in through the window, he opened it with eager curiosity.

Grace had hurried into the village store as soon as the train had stopped, and had bought the first toy she happened to see. It was a black dancing bear, worked by a tiny crank hidden under the bar on which it stood. Robin's pleasure was unbounded, and his shrieks of delight brought all the children flocking around him.

'More dancin', Big Brother,' he would insist, when the animal paused. 'Robin wants to see more dancin'.'

So patient little 'Big Brother' kept on turning the crank, long after everyone save Robin was tired of the black bear's antics.

Once she saw the restless 'Enery trying to entice him into a game of tag in the aisle. Big Brother shook his head, and the fat little legs clambered up on the seat again. Robin watched Mrs. Estel with such longing eyes as she entertained the others, that she beckoned to him several times to join them, but he only bobbed his curls gravely and leaned farther back in his seat.

Presently the man strolled down the aisle again, to close a window, out of which one fidgety boy kept leaning to spit at the flying telegraph poles. On his way back, Mrs. Estel stopped him.

'Will you please tell me about those

two children?' she asked, glancing towards Robin and his brother. 'I am very much interested in them, and would gladly do something for them, if I could.'

'Certainly, madam,' he replied deferentially. He felt a personal sense of gratitude towards her for having kept three of his most unruly charges quiet so long. He felt, too, that she did not ask merely from idle curiosity, as so many strangers had done.

'Yes, everybody asks about them, for they are uncommon bright-looking, but it's very little anybody knows to tell.'

Then he gave her their history in a few short sentences. Their father had been killed in a railroad accident early in the spring. Their mother had not survived the terrible shock more than a week. No trace could be found of any relatives, and there was no property left to support them. Several good homes had been offered to the children singly in different towns, but no one was willing to take both. They clung together in such an agony of grief, when an attempt was made at separation, that no one had the heart to part them.

Then someone connected with the management of the Aid Society opened a correspondence with an old farmer of his acquaintance out West. It ended in his offering to take them both for a while. His married daughter, who had no children of her own, was so charmed with Robin's picture, that she wanted to adopt him. She could not be ready to take him, though, before they moved into their new house, which they were building several miles away. The old farmer wanted the older boy to help him with his market-gardening, and was willing to keep the little one until his daughter was ready to take him. So they could be together for a while, and virtually, they would always remain in the same family.

Mr. Dearborn was known to be such an upright, reliable man, so generous and kind-hearted in all his dealings, that it was decided to accept his offer.

'Do they go much farther?' asked the interested listener, when he had told her all he knew of the desolate little pilgrims.

'Only a few miles the other side of Kenton,' he answered.

'Why, Kenton is where I live,' she exclaimed. 'I am glad it will be so near.' Then as he passed on, she thought to herself, 'It would be cruel to separate them. I never saw such devotion as that of the older boy.' His feet could not reach the floor, but he sat up uncomfortably on the high seat, holding Robin in his lap. The curly head rested heavily on his shoulder, and his arms ached with their burden, but he never moved, except to brush away the flies, or fan the flushed face of the little sleeper with his hat.

Something in the tired face, the large appealing eyes, and the droop of the sensitive mouth, touched her deeply. She crossed the aisle and sat down by him.

'Here, lay him on the seat,' she said, bending forward to arrange her shawl for a pillow.

He shook his head. 'Robin likes best for me to hold him.'

'But he will be cooler and so much more comfortable,' she urged. Taking the child from his unwilling arms, she stretched him full length on the improvised bed.

Involuntarily the boy drew a deep sigh of relief, and leaned back in the corner.

'Are you very tired?' she asked. 'I have not seen you playing with the other children.'

'Yes'm,' he answered. 'We've come such a long way. I have to amuse Robin all the time he's awake, or he'll cry to go back home.'

'Where was your home?' she asked kindly. 'Tell me about it.'

He glanced up at her, and with a child's quick instinct, knew that he had found a friend. The tears that he had been bravely holding back all the afternoon for Robin's sake, could no longer be restrained. He sat for a minute trying to wink them away. Then he laid his head wearily down on the window-sill and gave way to his grief with great choking sobs.

She put her arm around him and drew his head down on her shoulder.

At first the caressing touch of her fingers, as they gently touched his hair, made the tears flow faster. Then he grew quieter after a while, and only sobbed at long intervals as he answered her questions.

His name was Steven, he said. He knew nothing of the home to which he was being taken, nor did he care, if he could only be allowed to stay with Robin. He told her of the little white cottage in New Jersey, where they had lived, of the peach-trees that bloomed around the house, of the beehive in the garden.

He had brooded over the recollection of his lost home so long in silence, that now it somehow comforted him to talk about it to this sympathetic listener.

Soothed by her soft hand smoothing his hair, and exhausted by the heat and his violent grief, he fell asleep at last. It was almost dark when he awoke and sat up.

'I must leave you at the next station,' Mrs. Estel said, 'but you are going only a few miles farther. Maybe I shall see



you again some day.' She left him to fasten her shawl-strap, but presently came back, bringing a beautifully illustrated story-book that she had bought for the little daughter at home.

'Here, Steven,' she said, handing it to him. 'I have written my name and address on the fly-leaf. If you ever need a friend, dear, or are in trouble of any kind, let me know and I will help you.'

He had known her only a few hours, yet, when she kissed him good-bye, and the train went whirling on again, he felt that he had left his last friend behind him.

When one is a child, a month is a long time. Grandfathers say, 'That happened over seventy years ago, but it seems just like yesterday.' Grandchildren say, 'Why, it was only yesterday we did that, but so much has happened since that it seems such a great while!'

One summer day can stretch out like a lifetime at life's beginning. It is only at threescore and ten that we liken it to a weaver's shuttle.

It was in July when old John Dearborn drove to the station to meet the children. Now the white August lilies were standing up sweet and tall by the garden fence.

'Seems like we've been here 'most always,' said Steven, as they rustled around in the hay hunting eggs. His face had lost its expression of sadness, so pathetic in a child, as day after day Robin's little feet pattered through the old homestead, and no one came to take him away.

Active outdoor life had put color in his face and energy into his movements.



Mr. Dearborn and his wife were not exacting in their demands, although they found plenty for him to do. The work

was all new and pleasant, and Robin was with him everywhere. When he fed the turkeys, when he picked up chips, when he drove the cows to pasture, or gathered the vegetables for market, Robin followed him everywhere, like a happy, dancing shadow.

Then when the work was done, there were the kittens in the barn and the swing in the apple-tree. A pond in the pasture sailed their shingle boats. A pile of sand, left from building the new ice-house, furnished material for innumerable forts and castles. There was a sunny field and a green, leafy orchard. How could they help but be happy? It was summer time and they were together.

Steven's was more than a brotherly devotion. It was with almost the tenderness of mother-love that he watched the shining curls dancing down the walk as Robin chased the toads through the garden, or played hide-and-seek with the butterflies.

'No, the little fellow's scarcely a mite of trouble,' Mrs. Dearborn would say to the neighbors sometimes when they inquired. 'Steven is real handy about dressing him and taking care of him, so I just leave it mostly to him.'

Mrs. Dearborn was not a very observing woman, or she would have seen why he 'was scarcely a mite of trouble.' If there was never a crumb left on the doorstep where Robin sat to eat his lunch, it was because Big Brother's careful fingers had picked up everyone. If she never found any tracks of little bare feet on the freshly scrubbed kitchen floor, it was because his watchful eyes had spied them first, and he had wiped away every trace.

He had an instinctive feeling that if he would keep Robin with him, he must not let anyone feel that he was a care or annoyance. So he never relaxed his watchfulness in the daytime, and slept with one arm thrown across him at night.

Sometimes, after supper, when it was too late to go outdoors again, the restless little feet kicked thoughtlessly



against the furniture, or the meddling fingers made Mrs. Dearborn look at him warningly over her spectacles and shake her head.

Sometimes the shrill little voice, with its unceasing questions, seemed to annoy the old farmer as he dozed over his weekly newspaper beside the lamp. Then, if it was too early to go to bed, Steven would coax him over in a corner to look at the book that Mrs. Estel had given him, explaining each picture in a low voice that could not disturb the deaf old couple.

It was at these times that the old feeling of loneliness came back so overwhelmingly. Grandpa and Grandma, as they called them, were kind in their way, but even to their own children they had been undemonstrative and cold. Often in the evenings they seemed to draw so entirely within themselves, she with her knitting, and he with his paper or accounts, that Steven felt shut out, and apart. 'Just the strangers within thy gates,' he sometimes thought to himself. He had heard that expression a long time ago, and it often came back to him. Then he would put his arm around Robin and hug him up close, feeling that the world was so big and lonesome, and that he had no one else to care for but him.

(To be continued.)