

BIG BROTHER.

By Annie Fellows-Johnston.

(Continued.)

Sometimes he took him up early to the little room under the roof, and, lying on the side of the bed, made up more marvellous stories than any the book contained.

Often they drew the big wooden rocking-chair close to the window, and, sitting with their arms around each other, looked out on the moonlit stillness of the summer night. Then, with their eyes turned starward, they talked of the far country beyond; for Steven tried to keep undimmed in Robin's baby memory, a living picture of the father and mother he was so soon forgetting.

'Don't you remember,' he would say, 'how papa used to come home in the evening and take us both on his knees, and sing "Kingdom Coming" to us? And how mamma laughed and called him a big boy when he got down on the floor and played circus with us?'

'And don't you remember how we helped mamma make cherry pie for dinner one day? You were on the doorstep with some dough in your hands, and a greedy old hen came up and gobbled it right out of your fingers.'

Robin would laugh out gleefully at each fresh reminiscence, and then say: 'Tell some more r'members, Big Brother!' And so Big Brother would go on until a curly head drooped over on his shoulder, and a sleepy voice yawned 'Sand-man's a-comin'.'

The hands that undressed him were as patient and deft as a woman's. He missed no care or tenderness.

When he knelt down in his white gown, just where the patch of moonlight lay on the floor, his chubby hands crossed on Big Brother's knee, there was a gentle touch of caressing fingers on his curls as his sleepy voice repeated the evening prayer the far away mother had taught them.

There was always one ceremony that had to be faithfully performed, no matter how sleepy he might be. The black dancing bear had always to be put to bed in a cracker box and covered with a piece of red flannel.

One night he looked up gravely as he folded it around his treasure and said, 'Robin tucks ze black dancin' bear in bed, an' Big Brother tucks in Robin. Who puts Big Brother to bed?'

'Nobody, now,' answered Steven with a quivering lip, for his child's heart ached many a night for the lullaby and bedtime petting he so sorely missed.

'Gramma Deebun do it?' suggested Robin quickly.

'No; Grandma Dearborn has the rheumatism. She couldn't walk upstairs.'

'She got ze wizzim-tizzim,' echoed Robin solemnly. Then his face lighted up with a happy thought. 'Nev' mind; Robin'll put Big Brother to bed all ze nights when he's a man.' And Big Brother kissed the sweet mouth and was comforted.

During the summer, Mr. Dearborn drove to town with fresh marketing every morning, starting early in order to get home by noon. Saturdays he took Steven with him, for that was the day he supplied his butter customers.

The first time the boy made the trip he carried Mrs. Estel's address in his pocket, which he had carefully copied from the fly-leaf of the book she had given him. Although he had not the remotest expectation of seeing her, there was a sense of companionship in the mere thought that she was in the same town with him.

He watched the lamp-posts carefully as they went along, spelling out the names of the streets. All of a sudden his heart gave a bound. They had turned a corner and were driving along Fourth avenue. He took the slip of paper from his pocket. Yes, he was right. That was the name of the street. Then he began to watch for the numbers. 200, 300, 400; they passed on several more blocks. Mr. Dearborn drove up to the pavement and handed him the reins to hold, while he took the crock of butter into the house. Steven glanced up at the number. It was 812. Then the next one—no, the one after that—must be the place.

It was a large, elegant house, hand-

somer than any they had passed on the avenue. As long as it was in sight, Steven strained his eyes for a backward look, but saw no one.

Week after week he watched and waited, but the blinds were always closed, and he saw no signs of life about the place. Then one day he saw a carriage stop at the gate. A lady all in black stepped out and walked slowly towards the house. Her long, heavy veil hid her face, but he thought he recognized her. He was almost sure it was Mrs. Estel. He could hardly resist the inclination to run after her and speak to her; but while he hesitated, the great hall door swung back and shut her from sight. He wondered what great trouble had come to her that she should be dressed in deep black.

The hope of seeing her was the only thing about his weekly trips to town that he anticipated with any pleasure. It nearly always happened that some time during the morning while he was gone, Robin got into trouble. Nobody



seemed to think that the reason the child was usually so good, was due largely to Steven's keeping him happily employed. He always tried to contrive something to keep him busy part of the morning; but Robin found no pleasure very long in solitary pursuits, and soon abandoned them.

Once he took a ball of yarn from the darning-basket to roll after the white kitten. He did not mean to be mischievous any more than the white kitten did, but the ball was part of Grandma Dearborn's knitting work. When she found the needles pulled out and the stitches dropped, she scolded him sharply. All her children had been grown up so long, she had quite forgotten how to make allowances for things of that sort.

There was a basket of stiff, highly colored wax fruit on the marble-topped table in the parlor. Miss Barbara Dearborn had made it at boarding-school and presented it to her sister-in-law many years before. How Robin ever managed to lift off the glass case without breaking it, no one ever knew. That he had done so was evident, for in every waxen, red-cheeked pear and slab-sided apple, were the prints of his sharp little teeth. It seemed little short of sacrilege to Mrs. Dearborn, whose own children had regarded it for years from an admiring distance, fearing to lay unlawful fingers even on the glass case that protected such a work of art.

He dropped a big white china button into the cake dough when Molly, 'the help,' had her back turned. It was all ready to be baked, and she unsuspectingly whisked the pan into the oven. Company came to tea, and Grandpa Dearborn happened to take the slice of cake that had the button in it. Man-like, he called everyone's attention to it, and his wife was deeply mortified.

He left the pasture gate open so that the calves got into the garden. He broke Grandpa Dearborn's shaving-mug, and spilled the lather all over himself and the lavender bows of the best pin-cushion. He untied a bag that had been left in the window to sun, to see what made it feel so soft inside. It was a bag of feathers saved from the pickings of many geese. He was considerably startled when the down flew in all directions, sticking to carpet and curtains, and making Molly much extra work on the busiest day in the week.

But the worst time was when Steven came home to find him sitting in a corner, crying bitterly, one hand tied to his chair. He had been put there for pun-

ishment. It seemed that busy morning that everything he touched made trouble for somebody. At last his exploring little fingers found the plug of the patent churn. The next minute he was a woe-begone spectacle, with the fresh buttermilk pouring down on him, and spreading in creamy rivers all over the dairy floor.

These weekly trips were times of great anxiety for Steven. He never knew what fresh trouble might greet him on his return.

One day they sold out much earlier than usual. It was only eleven o'clock when they reached home. Grandma Dearborn was busy preparing dinner. Robin was not in sight. As soon as Steven had helped to unhitch the horses he ran into the house to look for him. There was no answer to his repeated calls. He searched all over the garden, thinking maybe the child was hiding from him and might jump out any moment from behind a tree.

He was beginning to feel alarmed when he saw two little bare feet slowly waving back and forth above the tall orchard grass. He slipped over the fence and noiselessly along under the apple-trees. Robin was lying on his stomach watching something on the ground so intently, that sometimes the bare feet forgot to wave over his back and were held up motionless.

With one hand he was pulling along at a snail's pace, a green leaf, on which a dead bumble-bee lay in state. With the other he was keeping in order a funeral procession of caterpillars. It was a motley crowd of mourners that the energetic forefinger urged along the line of march. He had evidently collected them from many quarters,—little green worms that spun down from the apple boughs overhead; big furry brown caterpillars that had hurried along the honeysuckle trellis to escape his fat fingers; spotted ones and striped ones; borned and smooth. They all straggled along, each one travelling his own gait, each one bent on going a different direction, but all kept in line by that short, determined forefinger.

Steven laughed so suddenly that the little master of ceremonies jumped up and turned a startled face towards him. Then he saw that there were



traces of tears on the dimpled face and one eye swollen nearly shut.

'O Robin! what is it now?' he cried in distress. 'How did you hurt yourself so dreadfully?'

'Ole bumble!' answered Robin, pointing to the leaf. 'He flied in ze kitchen an' sat down in ze apple peelin's. I jus' poked him, nen he flied up an' bit me. He's dead now,' he added triumphantly. 'Gramma killed him. See all ze cattow-pillows walkin' in ze p'cession?'

So the days slipped by in the old farmhouse. Frost nipped the gardens, and summer vanished entirely from orchard and field. The happy outdoor life was at an end, and Robin was like a caged squirrel. Steven had his hands full keeping him amused and out of the way.

'Well, my lad, isn't it about time for you to be starting to school?' Mr. Dearborn would ask occasionally. 'You know I agreed to send you every winter, and I must live up to my promises.'

But Steven made first one pretext and then another, for delay. He knew he could not take Robin with him. He knew, too, how restless and troublesome the child would become if left at home all day.

So he could not help feeling glad when Molly went home on a visit, and Grandma Dearborn said her rheumatism was so bad that she needed his help. True, he had all sorts of tasks that he heartily despised,—washing dishes, kneading dough, sweeping and dusting,—all under the critical old lady's exacting supervision. But he preferred even that to being sent off to school alone every day.

One evening, just about sundown, he was out in the corncrib, shelling corn for the large flock of turkeys they were fattening for market. He heard Grandma Dearborn go into the barn, where her husband was milking. They were both a little deaf, and she spoke loud in order to be heard above the noise of the milk pattering into the pail. She had come out to look at one of the calves they intended selling.

'It's too bad,' he heard her say, after a while. 'Rindy has just set her heart on him, but Arad, he thinks it's all foolishness to get such a young one. He's willing to take one big enough to do the chores, but he doesn't want to feed and keep what 'ud only be a care to 'em. He always was closer'n the bark on a tree. After all, I'd hate to see the little fellow go.'

'Yes,' was the answer, 'he's a likely lad; but we're gellin' old, mother, and one is about all we can do well by. Sometimes I think maybe we've bargained for too much, tryin' to keep even one. So it's best to let the little one go before we get to settin' sech store by him that we can't.'

A vague terror seized Steven as he realized who it was they were talking about. He lay awake a long time that night smoothing Robin's tangled curls, and crying at the thought of the motherless baby away among strangers, with no one to struggle him up warm or sing him to sleep. There was another thought that wounded him deeply. Twist it whichever way he might, he could construe Mr. Dearborn's last remark to mean but one thing. They considered him a burden. How many plans he made night after night before he fell asleep! He would take Robin by the hand in the morning, and they would slip away and wander off to the woods together. They could sleep in barns at night, and he could stop at the farmhouses and do chores to pay for what they ate. Then they need not be a trouble to anyone. Maybe in the summer they could find a nice dry cave to live in. Lots of people had lived that way. Then in a few years he would be big enough to have a house of his own. All sorts of improbable plans flocked into his little brain under cover of the darkness, but always vanished when the daylight came.

The next Saturday that they went to town, was a cold, blustering day. They started late, taking a lunch with them, not intending to come home until the middle of the afternoon.

The wind blew a perfect gale by the time they reached town. Mr. Dearborn stopped his team in front of one of the principal groceries, saying, 'Hop out Steven, and see what they're paying for turkeys to-day.'

As he sprang over the wheel, an old gentleman came running around the corner after his hat, which the wind had carried away.

Steven caught it and gave it to him. He clapped it on his bald crown with a good-natured laugh. 'Thanky, sonny!' he exclaimed heartily. Then he disappeared inside the grocery, just as Mr. Dearborn called out, 'I believe I'll hitch the horses and go in too; I'm nearly frozen.'

Steven followed him into the grocery, and they stood with their hands spread out to the stove while they waited for the proprietor. He was talking to the old gentleman whose hat Steven had rescued.

He seemed to be a very particular kind of a customer.

'Oh, go on! go on!' he exclaimed presently. 'Wait on those other people while I make up my mind.'

(To be Continued.)

It is always a step upward to even think of giving the heart to God. It is the highest ground upon which the sinner has ever stood.