

## A THORNY PATH.

(By Hesba Stretton, author of "Jessica's First Prayer," Etc.)

## CHAPTER VIII. — THE CARES OF THIS LIFE.

On the evening of old Lister's funeral Mrs. Clack sat alone and idle at her fireside. She had no heart to set to work on the mending and refurbishing the cast-off clothes about her. It was a real grief of mind to her that the only man she had ever had to do with should have been buried in a pauper's grave; but she could not prudently afford to give him any other burial. Her hoard of savings was small, and her stock had been seriously damaged by the rough mode of disinfecting them which had been gone through as soon as the worn-out body of the blind old man had been carried away to the dead-house. Poor Don was down with the fever, and had sent off immediately by the doctor to the fever hospital. No one but herself and Dot had been left to follow the old man's coffin, and little Dot had enjoyed the trip to the cemetery. She was gone to play with some neighbor's children now, and Mrs. Clack sat tearful and down-hearted by her solitary fire.

What made it seem so solitary? For many a long year she had lived alone, and no face met her eyes when she looked round her little room, and no voice had fallen on her ear. She had chosen to live alone, priding herself upon keeping aloof from the fellow-creatures among whom her lot had been cast. She was one who kept herself to herself, was her boast. What good came of gossiping and neighboring? As long as she could take care of herself she would be beholden to nobody, and nobody had any claim upon her. So for many years she had lived alone, and people had died, and children been born into the world, and sorrow and sickness had befallen her neighbors living thickly around her, and joy and gladness had shone upon their homes for a brief season, and she had neither wept with them nor rejoiced with them. Why should she feel solitary and sad now?

It was Don that had done it. She could remember how the lonely, homeless boy, when he was a little lad of ten, had met her one day, bending and staggering under an unusually heavy load, and how he had insisted upon hoisting it on his own little shoulders, and tottering beneath it till he reached her door. From that day to this he had made himself so useful to her that it was but a small return to let him sleep at night on the old mattress in the room below. He had seldom taken a piece of bread from her, but had picked up his own living she scarcely knew how; only turning in for shelter each night,

and serving her as if he could not do enough to repay her. What had she done for Don? What trouble had she taken for him? She, who had been well-taught in her youth, who could read and write better than nineteen out of every twenty folks like them, what had she taught Don? For nearly four years he had attached himself to her, and he knew nothing yet of God, nothing of any life beyond this; nothing of Jesus Christ and his death upon the cross. He was as dark and ignorant as when she first knew him.

Suppose Don died in the fever hospital! He might as well have lived in a heathen land, for all he

many cares of this world and the hard struggle for a livelihood had choked the good seed sown in her childhood. It was many a long year now since she had given a single thought to her Father in Heaven, or to her Saviour, who had lived on earth a life of toil and care like her own.

Then as she sat there, sad and lonely, she seemed in her own mind almost to see Jesus Christ, in all His goodness and holiness, passing His time, not in solitude like herself, selfishly holding himself aloof from the rough, ignorant people about Him, but dwelling like a neighbor in the midst of them; walking with them in the fields, sitting with them in the

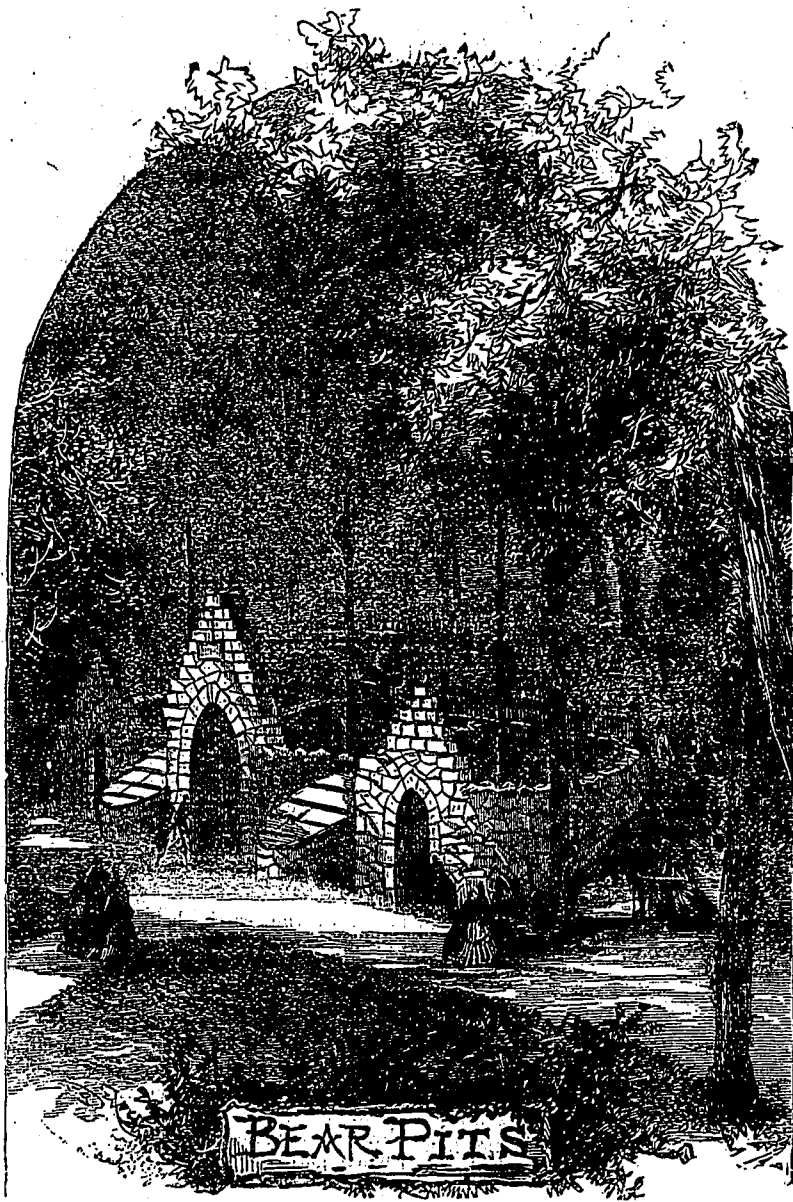
minutes' trouble. Jesus had born their sins, sorrows and sicknesses; but she had done nothing until Don had brought old Lister and little Dot to her door, and her heart, thank God, had not been hard enough to turn them away to starve. But that was Don's doing; and, oh, she was glad she had taken them in, and borne with them, and learned to love them a little. She fell down on her knees, and hid her tearful face in her hands, praying to God to pardon her long forgetfulness of His love, and to help her to live no longer to herself. It was a long time before she rose from her knees. She was not praying so much as remembering what Jesus Christ had done for her; His love and sorrow that had been so sinfully neglected by her all these years. What He required of her to do was to go out amongst her fellow creatures, and follow in His steps. It would be a great trial, but she must do it.

When Don came back she would teach him diligently all she knew. Poor old Lister had died in gloom and darkness when she ought to have been ready with a blessed light to shine upon his way to the grave. Dying like a dog. Yes, it would be dying like a dog if there was no Father in heaven, and no home there to go to.

It would be worse than that, for a dog dies with no such thought of such a thing, with no longing wish to go home to God, and feel His love. But to die lying with that darkness all about one, and think that there might have been hope, and joy, and a blessed entrance into another life, and dear friends' faces smiling a welcome, and Jesus Christ Himself to receive the soul—to think all this might have been, yet was not, would make a man's death a thousand times worse than a dog's.

And this life! What a poor, miserable, wretched thing that was—at any rate, for poor folks—if this world were all. Toiling and striving and scraping and going without comforts, almost without necessaries, seldom eating quite enough, scarcely ever warm in winter, or cool in summer, wearing rags, and walking almost barefoot—if this were all, better a thousands times be a dog than a man or a woman, with a heart to feel for the little children growing up in misery, and for the old people passing out of it in darkness. How was it she could have gone on so long without a thought of God and the Heaven He dwelt in, and the love He felt for the world, when He sent His only Son to save it? What a foolish, selfish, sinful woman she had been all these years!

She was so deep in thought that she scarcely heard a low and timid knock at the outer door at the foot of the staircase, but when



knew about death and what comes after death. The heathen knew more than he did, for they have Gods and prayed to them, though they were false. But Don had no knowledge of any God. Why had she never taught him?

The tears stole slowly down Mrs. Clack's cheeks. She knew all about God and His Son Jesus Christ. All the wondrous story of God's love to the world had been familiar to her in her girlhood; she could have answered any question about the life of Jesus Christ. Somewhere she had a Bible that had been given to her as a reward for her Scriptural knowledge. But she had lost all thought of such things; she had forgotten them altogether. The

house; rowing with them in their boats; feasting with them; going to their funerals; being so pressed by them that He could scarcely make His way along the streets and lanes. Did Jesus never hear the neighbors gossiping? Did nobody run to tell Him when a baby was born in the same street, or when two young folks were going to be married? And did He turn a deaf ear to all this common news, and pass by as if it had nothing to do with Him?

Her own heart answered that the Lord Jesus Christ the Son of God, must have led a very different life from hers, or He could never have been the Saviour of men. Why! she had saved no one, not even saved them a few