



ROBIN.

BIG BROTHER.

(By Annie Fellows-Johnston.)

Every coach on the long western-bound train was crowded with passengers. Dust and smoke poured in at the windows, and even the breeze seemed hot as it blew across the prairie cornfields burning in the July sun.

It was a relief when the engine stopped at last in front of a small village depot. There was a rush for the lunch counter and the restaurant door, where a noisy gong announced dinner.

'Blackberries! blackberries!' called a shrill little voice on the platform. A bare-foot girl, wearing a sun-bonnet, passed under the car windows, holding up a basket full, that shone like great black beads. A gentleman who had just helped two ladies to alight from the steps of a parlor car, called to her, and began to fumble in his pockets for the right change.

'Blackberries! blackberries!' sang another voice mockingly. This time it came from a roguish looking child, hanging half-way out of a window in the next car. He was a little fellow, not more than three years old. His hat had fallen off, and his sunny tangle of curls shone around a face so unusually beautiful, that both ladies uttered an exclamation of surprise.

'Look, papa! Look, Mrs. Estel!' exclaimed the younger of the two. 'Oh, isn't he a perfect picture! I never saw such eyes, or such delicate coloring. It is an ideal head.'

'Here, Grace,' exclaimed her father laughingly. 'Don't forget your berries in your enthusiasm. It hasn't been many seconds since you were going into raptures over them. They certainly are the finest I ever saw.'

The girl took several boxes from her basket, and held them up for the ladies to choose. Grace took one mechanically, her eyes still fixed on the child in the window.

'I'm going to make friends with him!' she exclaimed impulsively. 'Let's walk

down that way. I want to speak to him.'

'Blackberries!' sang the child again, merrily echoing the cry that came from the depths of the big sunbonnet as it passed on.

Grace picked out the largest, juiciest berry in the box, and held it up to him with a smile. His face dimpled mischievously, as he leaned forward and took it between his little white teeth.

'Do you want some more?' she asked. His eyes shone, and every little curl bobbed an eager assent.

'What's your name, dear?' she ventured, as she popped another one into his mouth.

'Robin,' he answered, and leaned farther out to look into the box. 'Be careful,' she cautioned; 'you might fall out.'

He looked at her gravely an instant, and then said in a slow, quaint fashion: 'Why, no; I can't fall out, 'cause big brother's a holdin' on to my feet.'

She drew back a little, startled. It had not occurred to her that anyone else might be interested in watching this little episode. She gave a quick glance at the other windows of the car, and then exclaimed: 'What is it, papa,—a picnic or a travelling orphan asylum? It looks like a whole carload of children.'

Yes, there they were, dozens of them, it seemed; fair faces and freckled ones, some dimpled and some thin; all bearing the marks of a long journey on soot-streaked features and grimy hands, but all wonderfully merry and good-natured.

Just then a tired-looking man swung himself down the steps, and stood looking around him, knitting his brows nervously. He heard the girl's question, and then her father's reply: 'I don't know, my dear, I am sure; but I'll inquire if you wish.'

The man's brows relaxed a little and he answered them without waiting to be addressed. 'They are children sent out by an aid society in the East. I am taking them to homes in Kansas, mostly in the country.'

'You don't mean to tell me,' the old gentleman exclaimed in surprise, 'that you have the care of that entire car full of children! How do you ever manage them all?'

The man grinned. 'It does look like a case of the old woman that lived in a shoe, but there are not as many as it would seem. They can spread themselves over a good deal of territory, and I'm blessed if some of 'em can't be in half-a-dozen places at once. There's a little English girl in the lot—fourteen years or thereabouts—that keeps a

pretty sharp eye on them. Then they're mostly raised to taking care of themselves.' Some one accosted him, and he turned away. Grace looked up at the bewitching little face, still watching her with eager interest.

'Poor baby!' she said to herself. 'Poor little homeless curly head! If I could only do something for you! Then she realized that even the opportunity she had was slipping away, and held up the box. 'Here, Robin,' she called, 'take it inside so that you can eat them without spilling them.'

'All of 'em?' he asked with a radiant smile. He stretched out his dirty, dimpled fingers. 'All of 'em,' he repeated with satisfaction, as he balanced the box on the sill. 'All for Big Brother and me!'

Another face appeared at the window beside Robin's, one very much like it; grave and sweet, with the same delicate moulding of features. There was no halo of sunny curls on the finely shaped head, but the persistent wave of the darker, closely cut hair, showed what it had been at Robin's age. There was no color in the face either. The lines of the sensitive mouth had a pathetic suggestion of suppressed trouble. He was a manly-looking boy, but his face was far too sad for a child of ten.

'Gracie,' said Mrs. Estel, 'your father said the train will not start for fifteen minutes. He has gone back to stay with your mother. Would you like to go through the car with me, and take a look at the little waifs?'

'Yes, indeed,' was the answer. 'Think how far they have come. I wish we had found them sooner.'

A lively game of tag was going on in the aisle. Children swarmed over the seats and under them. One boy was spinning a top. Two or three were walking around on their hands, with their feet in the air. The gayest group seemed to be in the far end of the car, where two seats full of children were amusing themselves by making faces at each other. The uglier the contortion, and more frightful the grimace, the louder they laughed.

In one corner the English girl whom the man had mentioned, sat mending a little crocheted jacket, belonging to one of the children. She was indeed keeping a sharp eye on them.

'Enry,' she called authoritatively, 'stop teasing those girls, Hi say. Pull the 'airs from your own 'ead, and see 'ow you like that naow! Sally, you shall not drink the 'ole enjuring time. Leave the cup be! No, Maggie, Hi can tell no story naow. Don't you see Hi must be plying my needle? Go play, whilst the car stops.'

Robin smiled on Grace like an old friend when she appeared at the door, and moved over to make room for her on the seat beside him. He had no fear of strangers, so he chattered away in confiding baby fashion, but the older boy said nothing. Sometimes he smiled when she told some story that made Robin laugh out heartily, but it seemed to her that it was because the little brother was pleased that he laughed, not because he listened.

Presently Mrs. Estel touched her on the shoulder. 'The time is almost up. I am going to ask your father to bring my things in here. As you leave at the next station, I could not have your company much longer, anyhow. I have all the afternoon ahead of me, and I want something to amuse me.'

'I wish I could stay with you,' answered Grace, 'but mamma is such an invalid I cannot leave her that long. She would be worrying about me all the time.'

She bade Robin an affectionate goodbye, telling him that he was the dearest little fellow in the world, and that she could never forget him. He followed her with big, wistful eyes as she passed out, but smiled happily when she turned at the door to look back and kiss her hand to him.

At the next station, where they stopped for a few minutes, he watched for her anxiously. Just as the train began to pull out he caught a glimpse of her. There was a flutter of a white handkerchief, and a bundle came flying in through the window.

He looked out quickly, just in time to see her stepping into a carriage. Then a long line of freight cars obstructed the view. By the time they had passed

them they were beyond even the straggling outskirts of the village, with wide cornfields stretching in every direction, and it was of no use to look for her any longer.

Mrs. Estel lost no time in making the young English girl's acquaintance. She was scarcely settled in her seat before she found an opportunity. Her umbrella slipped from the rack, and the girl sprang forward to replace it.

'You have had a tiresome journey,' Mrs. Estel remarked pleasantly, after thanking her.

'Yes, indeed, ma'am!' answered the girl, glad of someone to talk to instead of the children, whose remarks were strictly of an interrogative nature. It was an easy matter to draw her into conversation, and in a short time Mrs. Estel was listening to little scraps of history that made her eyes dim and her heart ache.



'Do you mind telling me your name?' she asked at length.

'Ellen, ma'am.'

'But the other,' continued Mrs. Estel. 'We're not to tell, ma'am.' Then seeing the look of inquiry on her face, explained, 'Sometimes strangers make trouble, hasking the little ones all sorts of questions; so we've been told not to say where we're going, nor how they think haise.'

'I understand,' answered Mrs. Estel quickly. 'I ask only because I am so much interested. I have a little girl at home that I have been away from for a week, but she has a father and a grandmother and a nurse to take care of her while I am gone. It makes me feel so sorry for these poor little things turned out in the world alone.'

'Bless you, ma'am!' exclaimed Ellen cheerfully. 'The 'omes they're going to be a sight better than the 'omes they've left behind. Naow there's 'Enry; 'is mother died him a drunken fit. 'E never knew nothink hall 'is life but beating and starving, till the Haid Society took 'im in 'and.'

'Then there's Sally. Why, Sally's living 'igh naow—hoff the fat hof the land, has you might say. Heverybody knows 'ow 'er hold huncle treated 'er!'

Mrs. Estel smiled as she glanced at Sally, to whom the faucet of the water-cooler seemed a never-failing source of amusement. Ellen had put a stop to her drinking, which she had been doing at intervals all the morning, solely for the pleasure of seeing the water stream out when she turned the stop-cock. Now she had taken a tidy spell. Holding her bit of a handkerchief under the faucet long enough to get it dripping wet, she scrubbed herself with the ice-water, until her cheeks shone like rosy winter apples.

Then she smoothed the wet, elfish-looking hair out of her black eyes, and proceeded to scrub such of the smaller children as could not escape from her relentless grasp. Some submitted dumbly, and others struggled under her vigorous application of the icy rag, but all she attacked came out clean and shining.

Her dress was wringing wet in front, and the water was standing in puddles around her feet, when the man who had them in charge came through the car again. He whisked her impatiently into a seat, setting her down hard. She made a saucy face behind his back, and began to sing at the top of her voice.

(To be continued.)