

BARBARA STREET CHAPTER V. CONFIDENCES.

MISS DENSTON did not see Hester that evening. The next morning, as she sat at her window in order to gain what benefit she might from the gleams of wintry sun that found entrance there, she saw Grace and her mother come out of No. 47, and go up the street together. Miss Denston had the microscopic sight which results from long confinement to a circumscribed space, and she deduced from certain small differences in attire, and from the fact that they walked away from the direction of the shops, that the two were bent on an expedition by rail. Therefore she felt she might expect a visit from Hester before very long; and the expectation helped her to get through the long lonely morning. Miss Denston's nature was not one that held many possibilities of nobleness; nevertheless, it had some tragic elements which were none the less tragic because they were not extraordinary. She had by nature faculties and cravings for enjoyment of passionate force; and her life had for long past been mere deprivation. Many years before, her family had been ruined by the failure of a provincial bank, and she and her brothers had fallen from present luxury and good prospects to penury and dependence upon their own exertions. She had quarrelled with her elder brother, and now lived entirely with the younger, eking out his small salary as lawyer's clerk with the earnings of her pen. She had once been a fascinating girl, and in those days had been brilliantly gay; but ill-health, poverty, and loneliness had found her defenceless, and robbed her of all her high spirits. Hester's young vigour and tenderness had come as new life to her. She had absorbed them as greedily as a sun-scorched plant drinks in the dew. She had a hundred tentacles to grasp the girl with, and she had put out one here and one there till she held her fast and close. It was not done of deliberate calculation, but was rather the fruit of a passionate instinct. But instinct has a cunning superior to that of calculation; and it was with means finely adapted to their ends, and by a process imperceptibly advancing and encroaching, that the present result had been won. It must be added also that Hester had met her half way. The girl was in that half-questioning, half-rebelling, but altogether morbid stage of growth which often accompanies the waking-up from the child's all-accepting acquiescence of its environment. At this point she was met by a strong influence, which at once drew her wavering will. At first, Miss Denston was content to merely attract; and for this purpose drew a veil of reserve around her, which should kindle curiosity and deepen awe, like a curtain hanging before some sacred shrine. She encouraged the girl to talk to her by delicate touches of comprehending sympathy, so delicate that Hester was never startled into consciousness of disloyalty to her friends, and had only of late gradually awakened to that consciousness. And she had not, during the earlier stages of the intimacy, allowed Hester to perceive how eagerly she was longed for, and how urgently needed, but had fostered the girl's young reverence for the friend, who from so far above her stooped to give the boon of her friendship. Then was tied the last knot in the cords, by the revealing of her own clinging dependence on Hester's love and services. So that by her generosity, her vanity, her craving for sympathy, and her youthful hero-worship, Hester was bound as by cords to the altar. It was late afternoon before Miss Denston's expectations were fulfilled. She was sitting by her fire in the twilight when she heard the well-known sound of the opening and shutting of the door across the way. Hester came in, looking pale and calm, as usual, and after greeting her friend, sat down by her side, and relapsed into silence. "I had hoped to see you before, dearest," said Miss Denston; "was I not right in concluding that your mother and Grace had been out to-day?" "Yes," replied Hester, looking away from her friend. "There is something the matter," said Miss Denston, softly, and laid her hand upon Hester's. She had perceived several times of late signs of a self-repression in the girl, which was as new as it was unwelcome, but she felt that when she chose to exert it, her power to overcome that reserve would be irresistible. The effect of her slight expression of sympathy did not tend to the shaking of this conviction. Hester, after a momentary struggling with great agitation, burst into tears, and sobbed unrestrainedly. Miss Denston merely tightened the clasp of her hand, and waited in silence. At last she said, in a gentle reproachful tone, "Why did you not come to me sooner?" "Because I feared I should break down, and tell you all I had resolved I would not," Hester, smiling through her tears, looked up at Miss Denston. "What is it about you makes me cry when I come to you? However strong I may feel at home, I always find myself weak when I get here." "It is the constraint of love, dearest. Did I not feel that I could trust your love to prevent such treason, I should feel sorely hurt." "I should not think you could feel hurt, Georgie, after the exhibition I have made of myself to-day. But do you think it would be treason to keep from expressing to you some of my unhappy, discontented feelings?" "Assuredly I do. Friendship has been defined to be one soul in two bodies. Therefore, should we not each expect that the other will lay bare all her inner experience?" Hester looked up gratefully. "It is so good of you to feel all that for me. And now, since you think like that, I must make a confession to you. Do you know, I have lately been feeling it treason—not to keep things back from you, as your feeling would have been, but to speak slightly or complacently of my home people to you, who are a comparative stranger. Oh! I do not look so pained, dear Georgie! I do not mean a stranger, except in the sense that I have known you so short a time, and, therefore, however much I love you, I cannot owe you so much as I do those who have lived with me all my life." Miss Denston's brow had, while Hester spoke, gathered a frown, not so much of anger as of pain, and the hand which Hester held grew lax, and trembled. She did not speak for a moment; then she said:—"I do not think you know how much you have hurt me, Hester. I thought I had the love of one human being—I believed that." Hester threw herself on her knees before her friend, and clasped both her hands firmly in her own. "So you have, Georgie—you have, indeed. What have I said to hurt you so? I must be a brute! Oh! I do tell me!" Miss Denston tried to take her hands away. She looked very pale. "If I loved any one, Hester, as you have pro-

fessed to love me," she said, "the mere ties of relationship—the accidental juxtaposition of circumstances, compared with the sacred affinity of nature, by which one soul is drawn to another—would be trifles light as air." Miss Denston's tones were so impressive, her eyes so solemn, that Hester felt a certain sense of oppression. She seemed in the grasp of something awful and inevitable, but whether for good or for evil, her mind was not calm enough to consider. The two looked at each other, and Miss Denston's eyes fascinated her, shining, as they did, out of the dark, for the room was only lighted by the fire. Suddenly Miss Denston took her by the shoulders with a nervous grasp. Hester was doubly alarmed—vaguely on her own account, and more definitely for her friend; for she was apprehensive that this agitation would end in one of the attacks of faintness from which Miss Denston suffered. She felt an impulse to jump up, and light the lamp, but at the same time she felt unable to move. "Hester, Hester!" broke from Miss Denston. "They have been trying to take you from me." "No, indeed, Georgie; nor would I let them." "You promise that?" "Of course I do, dear. How can you think such a thing? I am afraid you are ill. Do let me get you some sal-volatile." "No, no; not until you tell me again that you love me better than any one else in the world." Hester felt an odd restriction at the heart. It was true that she had more than once, in moments of emotion, declared that she loved her friend better than all the world beside; but for some reason she felt a distinct repugnance to asseverating it now, in answer to a question asked so solemnly. Yet how could she hesitate, or, indeed, why should she? "You know I do." "And promise me again that you will never desert me—that you will always cleave to me, your spiritual friend, instead of to those with whom you have only the material ties of blood." "What do you mean, Georgie? You know I could never desert you, and never will." Miss Denston relaxed her grasp of Hester's shoulder, and sank back in her chair, looking exhausted, and so white, that Hester, full of compunction and alarm, lost sight of her personal feelings in the effort to soothe and restore her. She fetched sal-volatile and eau de Cologne, and applied these restoratives, together with loving words and caresses. But Miss Denston's agitation, of which Hester had not seen the like in her friend before, was over. Her face even wore a smile, weary but triumphant. As Hester hovered near her, she perceived the girl was looking pale and distressed, and as she felt that Hester must not be allowed to go home with a painful impression remaining on her mind, she smiled more cheerfully, and bade her sit down again. "I shall not be ill, my dear. It is all over now. I am afraid I frightened you. But you see how much I love you when the thought of losing you is so intolerable. Do you know that line of the poet? 'Friendship hath passed me like a ship at sea?' That experience would be too painful for me to bear. But come, let us resume our talk. My Hester, will tell me all she has to trouble her?" "Since you think it right, dear Georgie, I cannot resist, for you know where my own wishes lead me." Hester was silent, gazing into the fire, and Miss Denston narrowly watched her. "I suppose, dear, I can guess from what quarter the pain comes?" "No," said Hester, in a proudly indignant tone, "you cannot guess the new indignity and misery that has come upon us. It is intolerable. I feel as if I could not admit the fact to be true even to myself, and it is dreadful to speak of it. We are going to let lodgings to a gentleman." "My dear Hester?" "Yes, indeed it is so. It is the gentleman who brought Grace home in the fog the day before yesterday. He called yesterday morning. Kitty and I were at lessons in the dining-room, and I heard Grace ask some one in and show him into the drawing-room. By-and-by, mother went up, and when he was gone away they came to us to tell us of it, and make it appear as though it were mother's doing, which I am quite sure it was not. For why did Grace ask him in, in the first place, when she heard that he had made a mistake in the house, and why was she in the wildest spirits, and mother so anxious and disturbed?" "What can be your sister's motive?" "I do not know, I am sure; but—" Hester coloured and hesitated. "Well, Hester, but what?" "I do not like to speak ill of Grace. She is the best and kindest little sister; but there is a want of depth and feeling in her. She is all energy and gaiety; but I cannot help feeling that she is superficial. She sees this affair now, I believe, simply from the side of its fun and novelty. She cannot realize the social degradation and loss of dignity it involves." "This is very sad for you, Hester, for no character could be so opposed to your own. The very delicacy of your perceptions and intensity of your feelings tend to sadden you, and the thoughtless gaiety of an irresponsible nature must jar on you fearfully. Surely your feelings would have weight with your mother, but I suppose there is an infatuation in that direction." "Oh, Georgie, Georgie!" and Hester began to cry again, "do not speak of that. I have been so upset by something else to-day. I am so torn by conflicting feelings. I cannot but love Grace dearly, and yet I feel sometimes most bitterly against her. She is so charming and bright, everybody is fascinated by her. Sarah adores her, and so does Kitty; she follows her like a dog. And mother, oh, she is all the world to mother. I do not wonder at it—oh! no, for I am fascinated myself!" Hester gave a laugh, which ended in a sob—"but I do think it is hard that she should be the elder, and that mother should depend on her, and consult her, and I who, though I am not charming, may surely claim to have more gravity and depth, am left out of everything because I am six years younger. I am a great deal older than Grace in everything but years, and they treat me as though I were a child. And that is why I feel this affair so much. Why was not I consulted? We might have gone as governesses—that would have been far less degrading." Hester poured out her complaints unhesitatingly now she had broken the ice, for the expression was an infinite relief, though it was not unaccompanied by a consciousness of Nemesis standing in the background. Miss Denston contented herself with an occasional gesture or word, which conveyed to Hester the impression of an atmosphere of sympathy, in which no word could fall coldly. The atmosphere was there, doubtless—so far Hester's impression answered to fact. She was not likely to divine that, as she poured out her troubles, Miss

Denston was filled with a growing exultation rather than with responding affliction. "Of course I know," continued Hester, "that we do not sink morally by it, and that goodness and self-respect, and so on, are the most important things; but there is something important besides which we ought to feel, or else we might as well go and be servants at once. Grace does not seem to possess that sense at all, but mother does. Only, of course, she is entirely guided by Grace. Now, to-day, see what they have done—it does distress and puzzle me so! Every now and then—about once in three months—they go off together without saying where they are going, and Kitty and I never know. They go in the morning, and do not come home till the afternoon." "That is very strange, Hester; and if I were you I would find out the meaning of it." "My pride would not let me try to do that, if they do not choose to tell me, Georgie; it is the want of confidence that distresses me." Miss Denston sighed. "Perhaps you are right, dearest; when you come to live with me, which I trust will some day be managed, now I have had your assurance that you would like it, we shall lead a life of perfect confidence and repose, each being at rest in the affection of the other. We shall then both of us escape the cold looks of misapprehension." This speech gave Hester a little shock, something like that of a cold bath which the bather is expecting to find warm—not so much painful as bewildering. She had certainly to her knowledge never given such an assurance. She could not all at once tell whether she was ready to do so. She did not know what to say; and in the meantime Miss Denston had resumed the discourse, so there was no need for her to say anything. "You must not think, dear Hester, that you have a monopoly of these trials. Your position and mine are indeed wonderfully similar; alike in the misfortunes of poverty and the anomalous social position we hold, without friends or enjoyments, and each at present dependent for sympathy on people antipathetic to ourselves." "Your brother," said Hester, in a comprehending tone, and pressing Miss Denston's hand. "Yes; though I believe conscientious, and in the main hot unkindly disposed, he is, like your friends, not of my own kind. But come, my dear, we have had enough melancholy talk. Ring the bell, and we will have some tea." Hester soon after parted with her friend and went home. Mrs. Norris and Grace had already returned; but the former, as was usual after these excursions, had retired to her room, and Grace was in attendance on her. By-and-by Grace came down looking pale and weary, and without the abandon of good spirits which had kept the household alive since the advent of the prospective lodger. "I have left mother to sleep," she said, taking possession of the rocking chair; "her head is aching very badly. Kitty, get me 'Through the Looking-glass'—that's all I'm equal to just now." Hester was seated in her mother's chair working and thinking, and her thoughts were far from pleasant ones. Now and then she glanced at her sister, and could not but be sorry to see a cloud on the usually bright face. She felt softened towards her by the reaction that generally follows the expression of resentment, and was just about to ask sympathetically whether her head did not ache, when she heard a ripple of amused laughter, and saw Grace's face again all gaiety and fun. "Oh, this delightful book!" she exclaimed, observing Hester look up at her; "I could laugh at this on a desert island." Hester said nothing, and Grace was soon lost to a recollection of her presence in the funny and delightful world where she was wandering with Alice and the March hare. Hester saw this and watched her unconscious smile of amusement with a heart hardening against this sister, who showed a nature only capable of light impressions. By-and-by there was heard a single knock at the front door; it was the time of day when Sarah might be looked upon to open it, but Sarah had been sent out, so Kitty ran to do duty, and presently returned hugging a large parcel. The direction upon it was "Miss Grace Norris." "What is it, Grace?" asked Kitty, not yet excited. "I'm sure I don't know," said Grace, rising, but apparently taking but a languid interest in it. Kitty, however, had by this time cut the cord, and was prepared to go into hysterics of astonishment when at length were revealed the soft, deep, luxurious folds of a sealskin jacket. "Well, whatever can be the meaning of this?" she exclaimed. "I can satisfy your little mind as far as assuring you it is a mistake, but the how and the why thereof is a riddle I cannot read." "Well, I don't see what can be the meaning of it," reiterated Kitty, holding up the jacket, and turning over and over the wrappings which had enclosed it. "Here not to question why, here not to make reply, not though Grace Norris knew some one had blundered," said Grace, going back to her chair. "Then, Grace, you will wear it? Oh, fancy!" "Really, Grace," interrupted Hester, "you have an opportunity now of putting into practice your views concerning anonymous good fortune." The girls had a favourite topic of discussion as to whether they would accept or refuse a fortune if it were offered to them, as it had been to Pip in "Great Expectations." Hester had decided she would decline, Grace that she would accept, feeling a high-handed confidence in her power to avert evil destiny. "I only wish I had the chance, but there certainly is no opening here. The messenger will be here before you can pack it up, Mustardseed, so I advise you to be quick." "I don't care," said Kitty; "I am sure it is not a mistake, for all you say. It could only be a mistake if there were two Grace Norrises, and that's impossible." "Why, you silly child, what can it be but a mistake?" said Hester, who was a little addicted to lecturing Kitty. "And, what is more, I can guess who it comes from. I am nearly sure of it." The sisters looked up astonished. "Yes, I know you always think my opinions silly, but I am almost positive I'm right this time. Mr.—what's his name—the lodger, has sent it to Grace for a present, and doesn't want her to know. He is evidently very rich and generous, and we don't know anybody else who is." Hester said, "Oh, you very silly romantic child!" Grace had coloured deeply. The moment the theory was presented to her she felt certain it was well founded. But she said, with a laugh—"The child is only in fun, Hester, of course. Pack it up, Kitty, there's a duck, and put the parcel in the passage, ready for the messenger."

Sabbath School Work.

LESSON HELPS.

(Selected from Pelouset.) NEHEMIAH'S PRAYER.

LESSON IX, Feb 28, Nehemiah 1, 1-11; memorize verses 3, 9.

GOLDEN TEXT "Give us help from trouble; for rain is the help of man."—Ps. cviii. 12. DATE.—B.C. 445 Seventy years after the completion of the second temple, and ninety years after the return.

PLACE.—Susa (Shushan), the chief capital of the Persian Empire, 250 miles east of Babylon. Daniel was here part of the time (Dan viii. 2), and Queen Esther lived here.

RULERS.—Artaxerxes Longimanus (long-handed), son of Ahasuerus. Pericles was King of Athens. Herodotus, Socrates, Plato, and Xenophon were living. Between the date of the last lesson and the date of this were fought the famous battles of Marathon, Salamis, and Thermopylae.

NEHEMIAH, son of Hachaliah, probably of the tribe of Judah; cup-bearer to Artaxerxes, living in Susa; made governor of Judah for twelve years (444-433). He was self-sacrificing, religious, prayerful, keen-sighted, patriotic.

BOOK OF NEHEMIAH.—Written chiefly by Nehemiah. It is a continuation of Ezra.

INTERVENING HISTORY.—The second temple was finished B.C. 515 (see last lesson). Then comes an interval of fifty-seven years, in which occurred the story of Esther. Then Ezra the Scribe came to Jerusalem, B.C. 457, with 1,500 more men from Babylon (over 5,000 including women and children) (Ezra viii. 1-20). He made great reforms. After thirteen more years Nehemiah went up to Jerusalem, according to his prayer in this lesson.

HELPS OVER HARD PLACES.—1. Chasten ninth month, Nov.-Dec. Twentieth year of Artaxerxes. 2. Hananiah, probably brother of Nehemiah (Neh. vii. 2). 3. Walls broken down by Nebuchadnezzar, 140 years before this. They had been partially rebuilt (Ezra iv. 12), and were destroyed again (Ezra iv. 24; Neh. ii. 11-15). 4. Certain days: three or four months, December to April. (Compare chap. i, 1 with ii, 1.) Fasted: (1) to express his deep sorrow, and (2) to keep the mind clear for devotions. 5. Terrible God: to his enemies. Able to overcome them. Kepteth covenant: his promises to them if they would obey. 7. We have dealt corruptly: wickedly; their wickedness was the cause of their captivity (2 Chron. xxxvi. 14-17; Ezra ix. 1; Neh. v. 1-7). 8. If ye increase, etc.: Lev. xxvi. 27-39; Deut. xxviii. 45-52, 62-67. 9. But if ye turn: see Lev. xxviii. 40-45; Deut. xxx. 1-10. 11. Cup-bearer: one of those who pressed the wine and brought it to the king. It brought him in close contact with the king, and gave him great power and wealth.

SUBJECTS FOR SPECIAL REPORTS.—The intervening history.—Nehemiah, the state of Judea at this time.—The qualities of true prayer found in the prayer of Nehemiah.—How the good man could say "we have dealt corruptly."—The answer to the prayer.

LEARN BY HEART Matt. vii. 7-11; James i. 5-7. QUESTIONS.

INTRODUCTORY.—How much time intervenes between the last lesson and this? What were some of the events during this time? To what date do we now come? Who was King of Persia? What great men lived about this time?

SUBJECT - A PRAYER AND ITS ANSWER.

I. THE NEED OF PRAYER (VS. 1-3).—How long was it since the Jews began to return to Jerusalem? Where did Nehemiah live? How did he learn about the state of things in Judea? What was the condition there? (2 Kings xxv. 10, Ezra iv. 8-24; Neh. ii. 11-15.)

Why should such a state of things lead to prayer? II. THE SPIRIT OF PRAYER (V. 4).—What was the effect of this report on Nehemiah? In what other ways did he show his sorrow? What is the meaning and use of fasting? What does Christ say about fasting? (Mark ix. 29; Matt. vi. 16-18. See also Matt. ix. 1, 2.)

III. THE CHARACTERISTICS OF HIS PRAYER (VS. 5-11).—(1) ADORATION. What qualities does Nehemiah here ascribe to God? When is God terrible? Meaning of "that keepeth covenant." With whom? Who alone has a right to expect His good gifts?

Is there any danger of dwelling too much on God's greatness, so long as we see that His love is as great as His power? What comfort in His greatness then?

(II) CONFESSION. Whose sins did Nehemiah confess? (vs. 7, 8.) What were some of these sins? (2 Chron. xxxvi. 14-17; Ezra ix. 1.) How could good Nehemiah speak as if he were guilty of these sins? How far are we guilty of national sins?

(III) PLEADING THE PROMISES. Of what words of God was the present condition of the Jews a fulfillment? (v. 8. Lev. xxvi. 27-39; Deut. xxviii. 45-52, 62-67.) How would the fulfilment of this give assurance that the promises would also be fulfilled? What promises had been made to them? (v. 9; Lev. xxvi. 40-45; Deut. xxx. 1-10.) Name some of God's promises that we can plead in prayer?

(IV) ASSURANCE FROM FORMER MERCIES. To what in their past history does Nehemiah refer? (v. 10; Ex. xii. 51; Joshua ii. 15, 16, Heb. xi. 32-34.) How do God's former mercies give us assurance in present need?

(V) PETITION. What did Nehemiah ask of God? (v. xi.; see chap. ii, 3-5.)

(VI) PERSISTENCE. How long did Nehemiah pray before the answer came? (Compare i, 1 with ii, 1. See Helps, v. 4.)

IV. THE ANSWER. How was the prayer first answered? (ii, 1-6.) Through whom did it come? What did Nehemiah do toward the answer? (ii, 7-9.) What did he do when he arrived at Jerusalem? (ii, 11-15.) Should churches make a like examination of the needs around them? How did the people help? (iv, 6.) In what way did they work? (iii, 28.) What command of Christ did they fulfil? (Chap. iv., 13-22.)

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