

BIG BROTHER.

(By Annie Fellows-Johnston.)

(Continued.)

While Mr. Dearborn was settling the price of his turkeys, the old gentleman poked around like an inquisitive boy, thumping the pumpkins, smelling the coffee, and taking occasional picks at the raisins. Presently he stopped in front of Steven with a broad, friendly smile on his face.

'You're from the country, ain't you?' he asked.

'Yes, sir,' answered Steven in astonishment.

'Came from there myself, once,' he continued with a chuckle. 'Law, law! You'd never think it now. Fifty years makes a heap o' difference.'

He took another turn among the salt barrels and cracker boxes, then asked suddenly, 'What's your name, sonny?'

'Steven,' answered the boy, still more surprised.

The old fellow gave another chuckle and rubbed his hands together delightedly. 'Just hear that, will you?' he exclaimed. 'Why, that's my name, my very own name, sir! Well, well, well, well!'

He stared at the child until he began to feel foolish and uncomfortable. What image of his own vanished youth did that boyish face recall to the eccentric old banker?

As Mr. Dearborn turned to go, Steven started after him.

'Hold on, sonny,' called the old gentleman, 'I want to shake hands with my namesake.'

He pressed a shining half-dollar into the little mittened hand held out to him.

'That's for good luck,' he said. 'I was a boy myself, once. Law, law! Sometimes I wish I could have stayed one.'

Steven hardly knew whether to keep it or not, or what to say. The old gentleman had resumed conversation with the proprietor, and waved him off impatiently.

'I'll get Robin some candy and save all the rest till Christmas,' was his first thought; but there was such a bewildering counter full of toys on one side of the confectioner's shop, that he couldn't make up his mind to wait that long.

He bought some shining sticks of red and white peppermint, and turned to the toys. There was a tiny sail-boat with a little wooden sailor on deck; but Robin would always be dabbling in the water if he got that. A tin horse and cart caught his eye. That would make such a clatter on the bare kitchen floor.

At last he chose a gay yellow jumping-jack. All the way home he kept feeling the two little bundles in his pocket. He could not help smiling when the gables of the old house came in sight, thinking how delighted Robin would be.

He could hardly wait till the horses were put away and fed, and he changed impatiently from one foot to another, while Mr. Dearborn searched in the straw of the wagon-bed for a missing package of groceries. Then he ran to the house and into the big, warm kitchen, all out of breath.

'Robin,' he called, as he laid the armful of groceries on the kitchen table, 'look what Brother's brought you. Why, where's Robin?' he asked of Mrs. Dearborn, who was busy stirring something on the stove for supper. She had her back turned and did not answer.

'Where's Robin?' he asked again, peering all around to see where the bright curls were hiding.

She turned around and looked at him over her spectacles. 'Well, I s'pose I may's well tell you one time as another,' she said reluctantly. 'Rindy came for him to-day. We talked it over and thought, as long as there had to be a separation, it would be easier for you both, and save a scene, if you wasn't here to see him go. He's got a good home, and Rindy'll be kind to him.'

Steven looked at her in bewilderment, then glanced around the cheerful kitchen. His slate lay on a chair where Robin had been scribbling and making pictures. The old cat that Robin had petted and played with that very morning, purred comfortably under the stove. The corn-cob house he had built was still in the corner. Surely he could not be so very far away.

He opened the stair door and crept slowly up the steps to their little room. He could scarcely distinguish anything at first, in the dim light of the winter evening, but he saw enough to know that the little straw hat with the torn brim that he had worn in the summer time, was not hanging on its peg behind the door. He looked in the washstand drawer, where his dresses were kept. It was empty. He opened the closet door. The new copper-toed shoes, kept for best, were gone, but hanging in one corner, was the little checked gingham apron he had worn that morning.

Steven took it down. There was the torn place by the pocket, and the patch on the elbow. He kissed the ruffle that had been buttoned under the dimpled chin, and the little sleeves that had clung around his neck so closely that morning. Then, with it held tight in his arms, he threw himself on the bed, sobbing over and over, 'It's too cruel! It's too cruel! They didn't even let me tell him good-bye!'

He did not go down to supper when Mrs. Dearborn called him, so she went up after a while with a glass of milk and a doughnut.

'There, there!' she said soothingly; 'don't take it so hard. Try and eat something; you'll feel better if you do.'

Steven tried to obey, but every mouthful choked him. 'Rindy'll be awful good to him,' she said after a long pause. 'She thinks he's the loveliest child she ever set eyes on, but she was afraid her husband would think he was too much of a baby if she took him home with those long curls on. She cut 'em off before they started, and I saved 'em. I knew you'd be glad to have 'em.'

She lit the candle on the washstand and handed him a paper. He sat up and opened it. There lay the soft, silky curls, shining like gold in the candle-light, as they twined around his fingers. It was more than he could bear. His very lips grew white.

Mrs. Dearborn was almost frightened. She could not understand how a child's grief could be so deep and passionate.

He drew them fondly over his wet cheeks, and pressed them against his quivering lips. Then laying his face down on them, he cried till he could cry no longer, and sleep came to his relief.

Next morning, when Steven pulled the window curtain aside, he seemed to be looking out on another world. The first snow of the winter covered every familiar object, and he thought, in his childish way that last night's experience had altered his life as the snow-drifts had changed the landscape.

He ate his breakfast and did up the morning chores mechanically. He seemed to be in a dream, and wondered dully to himself why he did not cry when he felt so bad.

When the work was all done, he stood idly looking out of the window. He wanted to get a way from the house, where everything he saw made his heart ache with the suggestion of Robin.

'I believe I'd like to go to church to-day,' he said in a listless tone.

'Yes, I'd go if I were you,' assented Mr. Dearborn, readily. 'Mother and me'll have to stay by the fire to-day, but I've no doubt it'll chirk you up a bit to get outdoors a spell.'

He started off, plodding through the deep snow.

'Takes it easier than I thought he would,' said Mr. Dearborn. 'Well, troubles never set very hard on young

shoulders. He'll get over it in a little while.'

As Steven emerged from the lane into the big road, he saw a sleigh coming towards him, driven by the doctor's son. As it drew nearer, a sudden thought came to him like an inspiration.

'O Harvey!' he cried, running forward. 'Will you take me with you as far as Simpson's?'

'Why, yes, I guess so,' answered the boy good-naturedly.

He was not surprised at the request, knowing that Mrs. Dearborn and Mrs. Simpson were sisters, and supposing that Steven had been sent on some errand.

It was three miles to the Simpson place, but they seemed to have reached it in as many minutes. Harvey turned off towards his own home, while Steven climbed out and hurried along the public road.

'Half-way there!' he said to himself. He was going to town to find Mrs. Estel.

He was a long time on the way. A piercing wind began to blow, and a blinding snow-storm beat in his face. He was numb with cold, hungry, and nearly exhausted. But he thought of little Robin fifteen miles away, crying at the strange faces around him; and for his sake he stumbled bravely on.

He had seen Mrs. Dearborn's daughter several times. She was a kind, good-natured woman, half-way afraid of her husband. As for Arad Pierson himself, Steven had conceived a strong dislike. He was quick-tempered and rough, with a loud, coarse way of speaking, that always startled the sensitive child.

Suppose Robin should refuse to be comforted, and his crying annoyed them. Could that black-browed, heavy-fisted man be cruel enough to whip such a baby? Steven knew that he would.

The thought spurred him on. It seemed to him that he had been days on the road when he reached the house at last, and stood shivering on the steps while he waited for someone to answer his timid ring.

'No, you can't speak to Mrs. Estel,' said the pompous colored man who opened the door, and who evidently thought that he had come on some beggar's mission. 'She never sees anyone now, and I'm sure she wouldn't see you.'

'Oh, please!' cried Steven desperately, as the door was about to be shut in his face. 'She told me to come, and I've walked miles through the storm, and I'm so cold and tired! Oh, I can't go back without seeing her.'

His high, piercing voice almost wailed out the words. Had he come so far only to be disappointed at last?

'What is it, Alec?' he heard someone call gently.

He recognized the voice, and in his desperation darted past the man into the wide reception hall.

He saw the sweet face of the lady, who came quickly forward, and heard her say, 'Why, what is the matter, my child?'

Then, overcome by the sudden change from the cold storm to the tropical warmth of the room, he dropped on the floor, exhausted and unconscious.

It was a long time before Mrs. Estel succeeded in thoroughly reviving him. Then he lay on a wide divan with his head on her lap, and talked quietly of his trouble.

He was too worn out to cry, even when he took the soft curls from his pocket to show her. But her own recent loss had made her vision keen, and she saw the depth of suffering in the boy's white face. As she twisted the curls around her finger and thought of her own fair-haired little one, with the deep snow drifting over its grave, her tears fell fast.

She made a sudden resolution. 'You shall come here,' she said. 'I thought when my little Dorothy died I could never bear to hear a child's voice again, knowing that her's was still. But such grief is selfish. We will help each other bear ours together. Would you like to come, dear?'

Steven sat up, trembling in his great excitement.

'O Mrs. Estel!' he cried, 'couldn't you take Robin instead? I could be happy anywhere if I only knew he was taken

care of. You are so different from the Piersons. I wouldn't feel bad if he was with you, and I could see him every week. He is so pretty and sweet you couldn't help loving him!'

She stooped and kissed him. 'You dear, unselfish child, you make me want you more than ever.'

Then she hesitated. She could not decide a matter involving so much in a moment's time. Steven, she felt, would be a comfort to her, but Robin could only be a care. Lately she had felt the mere effort of living to be a burden, and she did not care to make any exertion for anyone else.

All the brightness and purpose seemed to drop out of her life the day that little Dorothy was taken away. Her husband had tried everything in his power to arouse her from her hopeless despondency, but she refused to be comforted.

Steven's trouble had touched the first responsive chord. She looked down into his expectant face, feeling that she could not bear to disappoint him, yet unwilling to make a promise that involved personal exertion.

Then she answered slowly, 'I wish my husband were here. I cannot give you an answer without consulting him. Then, you see, the society that sent you out here, probably has some written agreement with these people, and if they do not want to give him up, we might find it a difficult matter to get him. Mr. Estel will be home in a few days, and he will see what can be done.'

That morning when Steven had been seized with a sudden impulse to find Mrs. Estel, he had no definite idea of what she could do to help him. It had never occurred to him for an instant that she would offer to take either of them to live with her. He thought only of that afternoon on the train, when her sympathy had comforted him so much, and of her words at parting: 'If you ever need a friend, dear, or are in trouble of any kind, let me know and I will help you.' It was that promise that lured him on all that weary way through the cold snow-storm.

With a child's implicit confidence he turned to her, feeling that in some way or other she would make it all right. It was a great disappointment when he found she could do nothing immediately, and that it might be weeks before he could see Robin again.

Still, after seeing her and pouring out his troubles, he felt like a different boy. Such a load seemed lifted from his shoulders. He actually laughed while repeating some of Robin's queer little speeches to her. Only that morning he had felt that he could not even smile again.

Dinner cheered him up still more. When the storm had abated, Mrs. Estel wrapped him up and sent him home in her sleigh, telling him that she wanted him to spend Thanksgiving Day with her. She thought she would know by that time whether she could take Robin or not. At any rate, she wanted him to come, and if he would tell Mr. Dearborn to bring her a turkey on his next market day, she would ask his permission.

All the way home Steven wondered nervously what the old people would say to him. He dreaded to see the familiar gate, and the ride came to an end so very soon. To his great relief he found that they had scarcely noticed his absence. Their only son and his family had come unexpectedly from the next State to stay over Thanksgiving, and everything else had been forgotten in their great surprise.

The days that followed were full of pleasant anticipations for the family. Steven went in and out among them, helping busily with the preparations, but strangely silent among all the merriment.

Mr. Dearborn took his son to town with him the next market day, and Steven was left at home to wait and wonder what message Mrs. Estel might send him.

He hung around until after his usual bedtime, on their return, but could not muster up courage to ask. The hope that had sprung up within him, flickered a little fainter each new day, until it almost died out.

(To be continued.)

