

Our Story.

BARBARA STREET.

A FAMILY STORY OF TO-DAY. BY THE AUTHOR OF "OUR NELL," "A SAILOR'S DAUGHTER," ETC.

CHAPTER XII.—Continued.

"THAT is very humble-minded of you," said Waterhouse; and they both laughed. And Grace was in a gayer mood when Waterhouse had gone than she had been before. As for Waterhouse, he grudged those three days that he had wasted in indulging his morbid feelings, for instinct told him that as soon as she resumed her duties Grace would freeze again. This was not a state of things which he was likely to enjoy in the future, this in which he heard her laugh, watched her tricks of gesture, saw her eyes flash fun, listened to the caressing-mocking tones in which she addressed her mother and sisters: in which also he made the discovery that she was not perfect, that she was something of an autocrat, that she had impatient ways, that she would not be advised, and that in spite of this no one could be vexed with her. She was not an exemplary invalid; the imprisonment was unbearably irksome to her, and in consequence she persisted in trying her ankle frequently to see if she could walk, though Waterhouse, as her doctor for the time being, forbade it.

"If you felt in rude health, Mr. Waterhouse, and were tied by the leg, as I am, and all your work cried out to be done," she said one day, "I put it to your honour, would you exercise the lamb-like patience you recommend to me? But, oh!" she continued, lightly, "I forgot that you don't do any work."

Waterhouse winced. "That is my misfortune," he said, gravely.

Grace looked up wonderingly. "You would like to work?" she said. "Then I wonder why you don't."

"Because my work was taken from me, six months ago, when my father died."

Grace did not reply. She felt rebuked, and looked at Mr. Waterhouse with earnest eyes. When he went away, she gave him her hand for the first time, and it may be imagined that he felt the touch of that small supple hand for some time afterwards.

In consequence of Grace's willfulness, she did not walk at the end of a week. A few days after that period, she began to get about a little, and at the end of a fortnight she could use her ankle as usual.

Waterhouse had written to Denston when the accident happened, telling him he should be out in the evenings at present. He now sent a note to the effect that he would be glad to see him any night he liked to come. It was some days before he did come. When he presented himself, Waterhouse exclaimed—

"My dear fellow! what on earth have you been doing to yourself? You look frightfully ill."

"Do I?" said Denston, walking over to the chimney-glass languidly. "Rather white about the gills, I suppose."

"You have been working too hard, haven't you? Too much of that desk work, which I am convinced in time destroys body and soul. I wish you could do something better."

"One must live," said Denston, throwing himself into a chair, and running his hand through his hair with a weary air.

"Does your sister support herself?" Waterhouse asked, abruptly, after regarding Denston for a few moments critically.

"No—oh no."

"Not with that writing of hers?"

"She buys her own nicknacks. One does not expect a woman to do more."

"Why haven't you been in before? I suppose you've been at that dreadful copying."

"Yes, I bring it home now, and get a good deal done in an evening."

"Oh, you bring it home do you? Come, now, I'll tell you what; bring some of it over here for me, and give yourself some rest, man. I have nothing to do; I should be glad of the occupation."

"Nonsense." The bluntness of the reply was softened by one of Denston's infrequent smiles.

"I am perfectly serious," said Waterhouse.

"I never met such a fellow as you Waterhouse. You seem to regard the world as created for the special purpose of owing you obligations."

"Bother your obligations!" Waterhouse burst out in a rage. "I'm sick of this unceasing chime."

He strode across the room furiously, and then returned to poke the fire.

"How is Miss Norris?" asked Denston, after a time.

Waterhouse looked at him sharply, as though suspecting him of the same mental association as his own.

"Oh, she's all right again. Shall we have some chess?"

The two men were soon absorbed in their game. Denston's coolness generally acted like oil on the troubled waters of Waterhouse's impetuosity.

But on the floor below all was not right that evening. The waters there were sorely troubled, and there was no oil likely to still them. The growing sense of peace and harmony, which had deepened much of late in presence of the happy change noticeable in Hester, had been that afternoon destroyed in a few short moments.

Not many hours before Denston came to pay his visit up-stairs, Mrs. Norris, Grace, and Hester being at work in the dining-room, the postman's knock came to the door. Hester, being nearest went to fetch the letter, but there was a little discussion heard at the door, and she came back without anything in her hand.

"What is it, my dear?" asked her mother.

"A wrong address, mamma; but oddly enough, the letter was directed to Mrs. Norris Fleetwood at our number."

As Hester spoke, she saw every vestige of colour leave her mother's face.

"Grace!" she cried in a hoarse frightened voice. Grace had already risen, and was on her way to the door. She stopped, and said, soothingly—

"Yes, mother; it is probably a misdirected circular. What was the handwriting, Hester?"

"It was certainly not a circular," said Hester, looking from one to the other in bewilderment.

"But how could it be for us?"

But Grace was already gone, and Mrs. Norris went after her, and Hester saw the former hurry past the window in the direction from whence came the sound of the postman's now distant rat-tat, and soon afterwards return to the house. But neither Grace nor her mother came back to the dining-room to explain the mystery, and when they

all met again not a word was uttered referring to it. Grace alone looked and spoke as usual. Mrs. Norris was silent and nervous, with compressed lips and trembling hands, while Hester seemed as if turned to stone. Never had she experienced so desperate, so forlorn a situation as this. Almost as soon as she had turned with a rush of loyal feeling to cling to the love she believed she had misjudged, she had been met by a confirmation of all those judgments, nay, by a revelation which allowed them up as utterly inadequate to gauge the truth. The sweet waters of that fountain of love which had so lately sprung up within her heart had been turned in a moment as bitter as gall to the taste. She would ask no questions—no, not though she were kept in ignorance to her dying day. She moved about cold and passive and pale, and as soon as she could, bade her mother and sister good-night, and went to her room.

If Kitty should not be asleep! Kitty was asleep, or appeared to be, but appearances might be deceitful; so Hester took her light up to the small bed, and, shading it with her hand, gazed for a few moments on the closed eyes and parted lips, and listened to the regular breathing. Yes, Kitty was asleep. Tears rushed to Hester's eyes as she looked, and a softer feeling stole over her. Kitty, at least, was innocent of this unnatural bewildering concealment and mysterious under-current of family affairs, from which she was to be shut out. Kitty, too, was in the dark, poor child! and they two ought to cling together. But bitter thoughts followed in the train of that; for Kitty was only a child, and could not be admitted to a share in Hester's experience, and she must submit to watch daily the child's devotion to Grace.

But now there was nothing to be done but to sit down, and with a sickening sense of insecurity, and a bewildered imagination, to piece out that puzzle whose separate bits were floating here and there before her in vague recollections and isolated bits of fact, and in larger conditions which had never gathered meaning in the natural acceptance of habit, but all of which now began to take shape—the occurrence of that afternoon having wrought upon them as though with some chemical action, bringing out latent meaning.

There was, first of all, the singularly isolated position which they as a family held. They had literally no friends. They could not have been always so. Was it possible that there could be no relations living on either father's or mother's side? The family life for the last fourteen years seemed to have been always just what it was now, except that the little children had gradually grown up. The mystery belonged to the time before that, which was all shrouded in darkness for Hester. Grace was the only one whose memory could be of service here, and, apart from memory, there was little to help the imagination in constructing theories. Their father's name never came into the family talk, and now the omission (which had formerly seemed natural after so many years' interval, and in the absence of any personal feeling towards her father on Hester's part) began to gather significance. Mrs. Norris would refer sometimes to some childish memory or girlish experience, but of her wedded life Hester could gather nothing from recollection of her mother's talk. She knew that they had been rich, and that at their father's death they became poor, and that was really all she knew. She guessed, too, that they had not lived in London, but it was only a guess. She now marvelled much that she had not questioned her mother in the days when such curiosity would have been spontaneous and unsuspecting; perhaps she had done so in very early days, and had been so often met by evasive answers or rebuffs, that ignorance had long ago become a matter of course.

"Mrs. Norris Fleetwood." Hester began to search in the brain—that storehouse of odds and ends—for some connection with the name Fleetwood. First she conjured up the vision of a linen wrapper, laid over the contents of a certain drawer, which she remembered noticing that name marked in the corner, at the time supposing it to have been sent from the wash in exchange for one of their own. Then there was the monogram on the tea-caddy, which as a child she had often tried to decipher, and which was full of flourishes that might be almost anything, but which she had never been able to reduce to anything but G. M. F., the first two initials being those of her mother's Christian names, Grace Mary. The last was the crux, for it should have been N., and she had always felt vexed at her own stupidity in not being able to make it so. If the initial stood for Fleetwood the difficulty was no longer remarkable. But what a labyrinth of conjecture the supposition would lead to! It was not the way out of, but rather into mystery. That the family should have lived under two names was a terrible conclusion to be forced to, for the explanation, be it what it might, must inevitably bear with it some disgrace, or shame, or sorrow.

Then she thought it was perhaps only her own imagination which had thus distorted quite explicable facts; and yet, apart from reasoning, she felt an oppressive atmosphere of mystery around her which would not disperse, and she could not shake off the conviction that there was a hidden side to the family history. But, oh, whatever it might be, Hester felt that she could have borne it bravely had the knowledge come to her as it ought to have done, through the willing confidence of her mother and sister. There was the sting. If they loved her as she loved them, would they leave her thus to painful lonely perplexity and distress? A thousand times no. Hester declared to herself that it was all true that she had often felt before—there was no place for her in this home. It was well, indeed, that one person loved her, and would think it happiness to live with her: perhaps Miss Denston's wish would some day be fulfilled, and Hester would go to her friend and devote her life to her.

But this consideration did not appear to carry with it the comfort that might have been expected. Hester began to cry, and cried so long and so heartily that she awoke the sleeping Kitty. Kitty at first was only drowsily conscious of a noise in the room; and when she became aware gradually of the light, and that the sound was that of Hester's sobs, the little girl was very frightened, quite too frightened to speak, or to show herself awake. She curled right down under the bed-clothes and listened in wondering awe to this strange outbreak of grief on the part of her dignified sister.

CHAPTER XIII. GRACE'S FAILURE.

With the morning light Hester awoke from a troubled sleep. Morning did not bring with it, as it often does, the feeling that the fears and griefs of the night before were unfounded or even exaggerated. She went downstairs with a heavy heart,

which was not lightened by the sight of her mother's face. The conclusion inevitably was that the letter, whatever it had been, had brought trouble with it. Her mother looked abstracted and pale, and so haggard that it was evident she had not slept. Grace was cheerful, as usual, but she gave many an anxious glance towards her mother, and soon announced that they two were going out for a time, and would not be back till afternoon. Hester's heart gave a great jump when this was said. She had not before connected these journeys, whose object was never announced, with the mystery of the letter, and the connection seemed further evidence of its importance. Grace and Mrs. Norris gone, lessons began, and then came a walk and a lonely dinner, during which Hester was so absorbed in her own thoughts that she almost forgot Kitty was present, and bestowed very few words upon her. After dinner Hester felt relieved from the care of her pupil, and leaving her to amuse herself as she pleased, she took up a book and sat down by the fire, but the book was not read, for Hester's thoughts were employed in turning over and over again the problem to whose existence she had just awakened. She did not think of confiding in Miss Denston, as might have been expected. Was it pride that forbade the discussion of a problematical family disgrace; or was it that her confidence with that lady had been rather on sentimental matters than real? This was, indeed, the first time that Hester had faced practical troubles or difficulties, and the experience was surprising as well as unpleasant. Her principal sensation was that of indignation at the injustice that kept her in the dark. She had every right to know, and she felt no doubt that her position of ignorance was due to Grace, who seemed at all points to meet her with a determination to keep her subordinate and to treat her as a child. But the afternoon was wearing away, and a visit to Miss Denston, who would most certainly expect it, must be paid; yet she did not proceed to pay it with the usual alacrity. Since that memorable afternoon, when Miss Denston had drawn from her her confidence, she had been less and not more ready to confide her feelings to her friend, one reason being that she had latterly been more in accord with Grace; but besides this, without being quite conscious of it, a slight element of dread had that day entered into the relationship, and since then she had an occasionally recurrent sensation of being tied in a way that no free-born creature relishes, with whatever docility they may submit to it. Miss Denston had on that occasion drawn the bonds just so much tighter as that Hester had felt them for the first time, and though afterwards the fetters had been silken and ungalling, it could not be quite the same with the girl as though she had never felt them.

When Hester reached Miss Denston's room, to her great surprise she found that lady was not alone. Her brother was at home, and not in his usual seat far away from the fire, but sitting close to it in an easy-chair. Miss Denston was on the sofa.

"You are not alone, Georgie," said Hester, bowing to Mr. Denston, "and you will not need me. I will come in to-morrow."

But Mr. Denston rose, and placed a chair for her. He even smiled as he said—

"Pray, take compassion on my sister, Miss Norris. I am boring her to death. I am not an amusing companion at any time, and to-day I am less so than usual."

Hester looked at him for the first time in their acquaintance as if he were a living man and fellow-creature, and not a stock or stone. He had never before addressed her with so much interest and cordiality in his manner, and that he should do so now was a surprise. And then there was that about him this afternoon which will excite any woman's interest, for it was evident to even a superficial observation that he was suffering.

"I am sure Philip is ill," said Miss Denston. "I have been urging him all day to see the doctor, but it is of no use. I think he ought to give way, if only to relieve my anxiety."

"If you can bear your anxiety to-day, Georgina, I promise to relieve you of it to-morrow at eight o'clock, by taking myself out of sight, and by that means out of mind."

Miss Denston at this only sighed, and Hester felt an access of indignation against this ungracious brother.

Denston continued, turning to Hester—

"I have never been ill in my life, Miss Norris, and it is too late to begin now—don't you think so?"

"I am afraid that is not logic," said Hester, gravely.

"Logic! Do you believe in logic? You surprise me. The most illogical things are the truest."

"Philip," said his sister, "pray don't talk so wildly, or I shall certainly think you are in a high fever."

"I believe I am feverish, by-the-by," said he; "but I shall be all right to-morrow. I think I must take more sleep for a few nights. I have been burning the candle at both ends lately."

Hester, with disgust, thought of the continual pleasure-seeking of this young man, and hardened her heart against the little creeping-in of sympathy which she had been experiencing, as she observed his flushed face and languid air, which convinced her that he ought to be in bed, and that he needed care and nursing, which he was not likely to get.

Hester rose to go, having sat for a few minutes for mere form's sake. But Miss Denston said—

"Sit down again, and read something, Hester, for pity's sake; the day is unutterably long."

"Cheer up, Georgina; it will be shorter to-morrow, for I shall be in town."

Through the usual dryness of Mr. Denston's tone Hester's ear caught an undeniable ring of bitterness. She looked at him. He was leaning his head on his hands, and looking down; but, as if attracted by her eyes, he lifted his, and their eyes fairly met for the first time. "However worthless he may be, he is clearly very unhappy," was Hester's instant reflection. Was it possible that he, too, felt himself isolated and unloved? Hester shuddered: the world seemed made up of such unhappy creatures. Miss Denston forbore any answer to her brother's speech. She handed Hester the book she held in her hand in silence. Hester had blushed when the request was made. She disliked reading before this young man, but to refuse a request from Miss Denston was not to be thought of. To hurt that lady's feelings was a proceeding not lightly to be entered upon. So, without any protest, she took the book, and began to read where Miss Denston directed her. When she had read for half an hour she stopped.

(To be continued.)

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Sabbath School Work.

LESSON HELPS.

SECOND QUARTER.

JESUS AND NICODEMUS

LESSON IV., April 25th, John III., 1-18; memorize verses 14-16

GOLDEN TEXT.—"Ye must be born again."—John III., 7

TIME.—April 9, A.D. 27. Five or six weeks after the last lesson.

JESUS.—30 31 years of age. About three months after his baptism, and just beginning his public ministry at Jerusalem.

PLACE.—Jerusalem. The guest-chamber in a private house, perhaps John's.

RULERS.—Tiberius Cæsar, emperor of Rome. Pontius Pilate, governor of Judea. Herod Antipas, tetrach of Galilee.

INTERVENING HISTORY.—Soon after the wedding at Cana, Jesus and his mother's family went to Capernaum on the Sea of Galilee. After remaining here a short time he went up to Jerusalem to the Passover (April 9). Here he drove the cattle-dealers and money-changers from the temple, and, by his teaching and miracles, won a large number of believers. Among them was Nicodemus, the teachings of Jesus to whom form the subject of our lesson.

HELPS OVER HARD PLACES.—1. Nicodemus: a Pharisee, a member of the Sanhedrim, a learned man, a teacher of the law. We hear nothing more of him, except a defence of Jesus (John VII., 50), till the time of Jesus' death, three years later, when he seems to have become a true convert (John XIX., 39). 2. Came by night: not from fear, but because he could converse more quietly than he. And it was prudent not to commit himself till he had learned more. Rabbi: i. e., an honorary title, teacher, master. 3. Jesus answered: his implied question. Born again: or anew, or from above. He needed a new life of holiness, a new principle, a life like God's. 5. Born of water and of the Spirit: born of water refers back to John's baptism of repentance, saying that he must be cleansed from his past sins, and confess publicly his renunciation of his past life. Born of the Spirit refers to a new spiritual life. Without public confession he cannot enter the visible kingdom; without a new heart he cannot become a real member of the kingdom of God. 11. We speak: Jesus and all who have experienced the new birth. 12. If I have: here Jesus returns to the singular number, because he alone knew about heaven. 13. Which is in heaven: is ever in communion with heaven. It was ever plain and open before him. As God he was always there. 14. As Moses, etc.: see Num. XXI., 4-9. 16. Only begotten Son: God's son in a close and peculiar sense, different from that in which we are all God's children. 18. Condemned: judged. Condemned already: he is judged for his sins, and they have not been forsaken or forgiven: he remains in condemnation. His choice of sin itself judges and condemns him.

SUBJECTS FOR SPECIAL REPORTS.—The intervening history.—Nicodemus.—Why he came by night.—The kingdom of God.—Born of the water and the Spirit.—The Spirit's work compared to the wind.—Christ's knowledge of heavenly things.—The serpents in the wilderness.—God's love.—Eternal life.—The condition of receiving it.

LEARN BY HEART the whole lesson, or vs. 5, 8, 13-16.

QUESTIONS.

INTRODUCTORY.—Where did Jesus go after the miracle at Cana? How long after did he go to Jerusalem? Why? How old was he? How long was it since entering upon his mission at his baptism? What did he do at this Passover? Did he make many disciples?

SUBJECT: HOW TO BELONG TO THE KINGDOM OF GOD.

I. THE INQUIRER (vs. 1, 3).—Who was Nicodemus? What hints as to his after history? (John VII., 50, 51; XIX., 39.) Why did he go to Jesus by night? Of what was he convinced? How was he convinced? Are miracles a proof of the divine mission of a teacher?

II.—INSTRUCTION AS TO THE NECESSARY CONDITION OF ENTERING THE KINGDOM OF GOD (vs. 3-8).—What is the kingdom of God? On what condition only can any one enter, or even see this kingdom? What is meant by "born of the water"? What by "born of the Spirit"? Why cannot one enter God's kingdom without this new birth? What illustration does Jesus give of the method of conversion? (v. 8.) What is the argument in v. 6? Do most people know the exact time when they are converted? How can one know whether he is born of the Spirit? (Gal. V., 22, 23.)

III. THE AUTHORITY OF THE INSTRUCTOR (vs. 9-13).—How did Jesus know all about heaven and heavenly things? Is that good authority? How does the fact that Jesus was divine make this authority more sure? How did Jesus come down from heaven? How is he "in heaven"?

IV. HOW TO OBTAIN THIS ETERNAL LIFE (vs. 14-18).—What comparison does Jesus use? Relate the story from Num. XXI., 4-9. Why is an like the bite of these serpents? How was Christ lifted up like the brazen serpent? Was faith required in both cases in order to be saved? What is saving faith? How has God shown his love? What will become of those who refuse to believe? What will be given to those who do believe? Why is faith necessary to eternal life? What is eternal life? Is it offered to all? How are those who do not believe condemned already?

PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS.

I. Let us ever go to Jesus for light and help.

II. The Gospel is proved by the marvellous things it does for men.

III. The great need of men is new life, new hearts.

IV. Without this no one can enter God's kingdom.

V. Jesus is the true teacher about heaven because he has been there, and as the Son of God knows all about it.

VI. Jesus has come to bring us eternal life.

VII. We can obtain it by believing on him with all our heart.

VIII. God has shown his infinite love by what he has done for men.—Peloubet.

In vain we call old notions fudge, And bend our conscience to our dealing; The ten commandments will not budge, And straying will continue stealing.