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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK BIG BROTHER ***

BIG BROTHER



ROBIN

"Cosy Corner Series"

BIG BROTHER

BY

ANNIE FELLOWS-JOHNSTON



**BOSTON
JOSEPH KNIGHT COMPANY
1894**

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BIG BROTHER.

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 barefoot girl, wearing a sunbonnet, 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.



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"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.

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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 her 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 any one 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. [4]

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. [5]

"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 hown '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 good-by, 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 some one 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.

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"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 hall sorts hof questions; so we've been told not to say where we're going, nor hany think helse."

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"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 'Enery; 'is mother died hin a drunken fit. 'E never knew nothink hall 'is life but beating and starving, till the Haid Society took 'im hin '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.

One little tot had fallen and bumped its head as the train gave a sudden lurch. It was crying pitifully, but in a subdued sort of whimper, as if it felt that crying was of no use when nobody listened and nobody cared. He picked it up, made a clumsy effort to comfort it, and, not knowing what else to do, sat down beside it. Then for the first time he noticed Mrs. Estel.

She had taken a pair of scissors from her travelling-bag, and had cut several newspapers up into soldiers and dolls and all kinds of animals for the crowd that clamored around her.

They were such restless little bodies, imprisoned so long on this tedious journey, that anything with a suggestion of novelty was welcome.

When she had supplied them with a whole regiment of soldiers and enough animals to equip a menagerie, she took another paper and began teaching them to

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fold it in curious ways to make boxes, and boats, and baskets.

One by one they crowded up closer to her, watching her as if she were some wonderful magician. They leaned their dusty heads against her fresh gray travelling-dress. They touched her dainty gloves with dirty, admiring fingers. They did not know that this was the first time that she had ever come in close contact with such lives as theirs.

They did not know that it was the remembrance of another child,—one who awaited her home-coming,—a petted little princess born to purple and fine linen, that made her so tender towards them. Remembering what hers had, and all these lacked, she felt that she must crowd all the brightness possible into the short afternoon they were together.

Every one of them, at some time in their poor bare lives, had known what it was to be kindly spoken to by elegant ladies, to be patronizingly smiled upon, to be graciously presented with gifts.

But this was different. This one took the little Hodge girl right up in her lap while she was telling them stories. This one did not pick out the pretty ones to talk to, as strangers generally did. It really seemed that the most neglected and unattractive of them received the most of her attention.

From time to time she glanced across at Robin's lovely face, and contrasted it with the others. The older boy attracted her still more. He seemed to be the only thoughtful one among them all. The others remembered no past, looked forward to no future. When they were hungry there was something to eat. When they were tired they could sleep, and all the rest of the time there was somebody to play with. What more could one want?

The child never stirred from his place, but she noticed that he made a constant effort to entertain Robin. He told him stories and invented little games. When the bundle came flying in through the window he opened it with eager curiosity.

Grace had hurried into the village store as soon as the train stopped and had bought the first toy she happened to see. It was a black dancing bear, worked by a tiny crank hidden under the bar on which it stood. Robin's pleasure was unbounded, and his shrieks of delight brought all the children flocking around him.

"More dancin', Big Brother," he would insist, when the animal paused. "Robin wants to see more dancin'."

So patient little "Big Brother" kept on turning the crank, long after every one save Robin was tired of the black bear's antics.

Once she saw the restless 'Enry trying to entice him

into a game of tag in the aisle. Big Brother shook his head, and the fat little legs clambered up on the seat again. Robin watched Mrs. Estel with such longing eyes as she entertained the others that she beckoned to him several times to join them, but he only bobbed his curls gravely and leaned farther back in his seat.

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Presently the man strolled down the aisle again to close a window, out of which one fidgety boy kept leaning to spit at the flying telegraph poles. On his way back Mrs. Estel stopped him.

"Will you please tell me about those two children?" she asked, glancing towards Robin and his brother. "I am very much interested in them, and would gladly do something for them, if I could."

"Certainly, madam," he replied deferentially. He felt a personal sense of gratitude towards her for having kept three of his most unruly charges quiet so long. He felt, too, that she did not ask merely from idle curiosity, as so many strangers had done.

"Yes, everybody asks about them, for they *are* uncommon bright-looking, but it's very little anybody knows to tell."

Then he gave her their history in a few short sentences. Their father had been killed in a railroad accident early in the spring. Their mother had not survived the terrible shock more than a week. No trace could be found of any relatives, and there was no property left to support them. Several good homes had been offered to the children singly in different towns, but no one was willing to take both. They clung together in such an agony of grief, when an attempt was made at separation, that no one had the heart to part them.

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Then some one connected with the management of the Aid Society opened a correspondence with an old farmer of his acquaintance out West. It ended in his offering to take them both for a while. His married daughter, who had no children of her own, was so charmed with Robin's picture that she wanted to adopt him. She could not be ready to take him, though, before they moved into their new house, which they were building several miles away. The old farmer wanted the older boy to help him with his market gardening, and was willing to keep the little one until his daughter was ready to take him. So they could be together for a while, and virtually they would always remain in the same family.

Mr. Dearborn was known to be such an upright, reliable man, so generous and kind-hearted in all his dealings, that it was decided to accept his offer.

"Do they go much farther?" asked the interested listener, when he had told her all he knew of the desolate little pilgrims.

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"Only a few miles the other side of Kenton," he answered.

"Why, Kenton is where I live," she exclaimed. "I am glad it will be so near." Then as he passed on she thought to herself, "It would be cruel to separate them. I never saw such devotion as that of the older boy." His feet could not reach the floor, but he sat up uncomfortably on the high seat, holding Robin in his lap. The curly head rested heavily on his shoulder, and his arms ached with their burden, but he never moved except to brush away the flies, or fan the flushed face of the little sleeper with his hat.

Something in the tired face, the large appealing eyes, and the droop of the sensitive mouth, touched her deeply. She crossed the aisle and sat down by him.

"Here, lay him on the seat," she said, bending forward to arrange her shawl for a pillow.

He shook his head. "Robin likes best for me to hold him."

"But he will be cooler and so much more comfortable," she urged. Taking the child from his unwilling arms, she stretched him full length on the improvised bed.

Involuntarily the boy drew a deep sigh of relief, and leaned back in the corner.

"Are you very tired?" she asked. "I have not seen you playing with the other children."

"Yes'm," he answered. "We've come such a long way. I have to amuse Robin all the time he's awake, or he'll cry to go back home."

"Where was your home?" she asked kindly. "Tell me about it."

He glanced up at her, and with a child's quick instinct knew that he had found a friend. The tears that he had been bravely holding back all the afternoon for Robin's sake could no longer be restrained. He sat for a minute trying to wink them away. Then he laid his head wearily down on the window sill and gave way to his grief with great choking sobs.

She put her arm around him and drew his head down on her shoulder. At first the caressing touch of her fingers, as they gently stroked his hair, made the tears flow faster. Then he grew quieter after a while, and only sobbed at long intervals as he answered her questions.

His name was Steven, he said. He knew nothing of the home to which he was being taken, nor did he care, if he could only be allowed to stay with Robin. He told her of the little white cottage in New Jersey, where they had lived, of the peach-trees that bloomed around the house, of the beehive in the garden.

He had brooded over the recollection of his lost home so long in silence that now it somehow comforted him to talk about it to this sympathetic listener.

Soothed by her soft hand smoothing his hair, and exhausted by the heat and his violent grief, he fell asleep at last. It was almost dark when he awoke and sat up.



"I must leave you at the next station," Mrs. Estel said, "but you are going only a few miles farther. Maybe I shall see you again some day." She left him to fasten her shawl-strap, but presently came back, bringing a beautifully illustrated story-book that she had bought for the little daughter at home.

"Here, Steven," she said, handing it to him. "I have written my name and address on the fly-leaf. If you ever need a friend, dear, or are in trouble of any kind, let me know and I will help you."

He had known her only a few hours, yet, when she kissed him good-bye and the train went whirling on again, he felt that he had left his last friend behind him.

When one is a child a month is a long time. Grandfathers say, "That happened over seventy years ago, but it seems just like yesterday." Grandchildren say, "Why, it was only yesterday we did that, but so much has happened since that it seems such a great while!"

One summer day can stretch out like a lifetime at life's beginning. It is only at threescore and ten that we liken it to a weaver's shuttle.

It was in July when old John Dearborn drove to the station to meet the children. Now the white August lilies were standing up sweet and tall by the garden fence.

"Seems like we've been here 'most always," said Steven as they rustled around in the hay hunting eggs. His face had lost its expression of sadness, so pathetic in a child, as day after day Robin's little feet pattered through the old homestead, and no one came to take him away.

Active outdoor life had put color in his face and energy into his movements. Mr. Dearborn and his wife were not exacting in their demands, although they found plenty for him to do. The work was all new and pleasant, and Robin was with him everywhere. When he fed the turkeys, when he picked up chips, when he drove the cows to pasture, or gathered the vegetables for market, Robin followed him everywhere, like a

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happy, dancing shadow.

Then when the work was done there were the kittens in the barn and the swing in the apple-tree. A pond in the pasture sailed their shingle boats. A pile of sand, left from building the new ice-house, furnished material for innumerable forts and castles. There was a sunny field and a green, leafy orchard. How could they *help but be happy?* It was summer time and they were together.



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Steven's was more than a brotherly devotion. It was with almost the tenderness of mother-love that he watched the shining curls dancing down the walk as Robin chased the toads through the garden or played hide-and-seek with the butterflies.

"No, the little fellow's scarcely a mite of trouble," Mrs. Dearborn would say to the neighbors sometimes when they inquired. "Steven is real handy about dressing him and taking care of him, so I just leave it mostly to him."

Mrs. Dearborn was not a very observing woman or she would have seen why he "was scarcely a mite of trouble." If there was never a crumb left on the doorstep where Robin sat to eat his lunch, it was because Big Brother's careful fingers had picked up every one. If she never found any tracks of little bare feet on the freshly scrubbed kitchen floor, it was because his watchful eyes had spied them first, and he had wiped away every trace.

He had an instinctive feeling that if he would keep Robin with him he must not let any one feel that he was a care or annoyance. So he never relaxed his watchfulness in the daytime, and slept with one arm thrown across him at night.

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Sometimes, after supper, when it was too late to go outdoors again, the restless little feet kicked thoughtlessly against the furniture, or the meddlesome fingers made Mrs. Dearborn look at him warningly over her spectacles and shake her head.

Sometimes the shrill little voice, with its unceasing questions, seemed to annoy the old farmer as he dozed over his weekly newspaper beside the lamp. Then, if it was too early to go to bed, Steven would coax him over in a corner to look at the book that Mrs. Estel had given him, explaining each picture in a low voice that could not disturb the deaf old couple.

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It was at these times that the old feeling of loneliness came back so overwhelmingly. Grandpa and Grandma, as they called them, were kind in their way, but even to their own children they had been undemonstrative and cold. Often in the evenings they seemed to draw so entirely within themselves, she with her knitting and he with his paper or accounts, that Steven felt shut out, and apart. "Just the strangers within thy gates," he sometimes thought to himself. He had heard that expression a long time ago, and it often came back to him. Then he would put his arm around Robin and hug him up close, feeling that the world was so big and lonesome, and that he had no one else to care for but him.



Sometimes he took him up early to the little room under the roof, and, lying on the side of the bed, made up more marvellous stories than any the book contained.

Often they drew the big wooden rocking-chair close to the window, and, sitting with their arms around each other, looked out on the moonlit stillness of the summer night. Then, with their eyes turned starward, they talked of the far country beyond; for Steven tried to keep undimmed in Robin's baby memory a living picture of the father and mother he was so soon forgetting.

"Don't you remember," he would say, "how papa used to come home in the evening and take us both on his knees, and sing 'Kingdom Coming' to us? And how mamma laughed and called him a big boy when he got down on the floor and played circus with us?"

"And don't you remember how we helped mamma make cherry pie for dinner one day? You were on the doorstep with some dough in your hands, and a greedy old hen came up and gobbled it right out of your fingers."

Robin would laugh out gleefully at each fresh reminiscence, and then say: "Tell some more r'members, Big Brother!" And so Big Brother would go on until a curly head drooped over on his shoulder and a sleepy voice yawned "Sand-man's a-comin'."

The hands that undressed him were as patient and deft as a woman's. He missed no care or tenderness.

When he knelt down in his white gown, just where the patch of moonlight lay on the floor, his chubby

hands crossed on Big Brother's knee, there was a gentle touch of caressing fingers on his curls as his sleepy voice repeated the evening prayer the far away mother had taught them.

There was always one ceremony that had to be faithfully performed, no matter how sleepy he might be. The black dancing bear had always to be put to bed in a cracker box and covered with a piece of red flannel.



One night he looked up gravely as he folded it around his treasure and said, "Robin tucks ze black dancin' bear in bed, an' Big Brother tucks in Robin. Who puts Big Brother to bed?"

"Nobody, now," answered Steven with a quivering lip, for his child's heart ached many a night for the lullaby and bedtime petting he so sorely missed.

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"Gramma Deebun do it?" suggested Robin quickly.

"No: Grandma Dearborn has the rheumatism. She couldn't walk up-stairs."

"She got ze wizzim-tizzim," echoed Robin solemnly. Then his face lighted up with a happy thought. "Nev' mind; Robin'll put Big Brother to bed *all* ze nights when he's a man." And Big Brother kissed the sweet mouth and was comforted.

During the summer Mr. Dearborn drove to town with fresh marketing every morning, starting early in order to get home by noon. Saturdays he took Steven with him, for that was the day he supplied his butter customers.

The first time the boy made the trip he carried Mrs. Estel's address in his pocket, which he had carefully copied from the fly-leaf of the book she had given him. Although he had not the remotest expectation of seeing her, there was a sense of companionship in the mere thought that she was in the same town with him.

He watched the lamp-posts carefully as they went along, spelling out the names of the streets. All of a sudden his heart gave a bound. They had turned a

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corner and were driving along Fourth Avenue. He took the slip of paper from his pocket. Yes, he was right. That was the name of the street. Then he began to watch for the numbers. 200, 300, 400; they passed on several more blocks. Mr. Dearborn drove up to the pavement and handed him the reins to hold, while he took the crock of butter into the house. Steven glanced up at the number. It was 812. Then the next one—no, the one after that—must be the place.

It was a large, elegant house, handsomer than any they had passed on the avenue. As long as it was in sight Steven strained his eyes for a backward look, but saw no one.

Week after week he watched and waited, but the blinds were always closed, and he saw no signs of life about the place. Then one day he saw a carriage stop at the gate. A lady all in black stepped out and walked slowly towards the house. Her long, heavy veil hid her face, but he thought he recognized her. He was almost sure it was Mrs. Estel. He could hardly resist the inclination to run after her and speak to her; but while he hesitated the great hall door swung back and shut her from sight. He wondered what great trouble had come to her that she should be dressed in deep black.

The hope of seeing her was the only thing about his weekly trips to town that he anticipated with any pleasure. It nearly always happened that some time during the morning while he was gone Robin got into trouble. Nobody seemed to think that the reason the child was usually so good was due largely to Steven's keeping him happily employed. He always tried to contrive something to keep him busy part of the morning; but Robin found no pleasure very long in solitary pursuits, and soon abandoned them.

Once he took a ball of yarn from the darning-basket to roll after the white kitten. He did not mean to be mischievous any more than the white kitten did, but the ball was part of Grandma Dearborn's knitting work. When she found the needles pulled out and the stitches dropped, she scolded him sharply. All her children had been grown up so long she had quite forgotten how to make allowances for things of that sort.



There was a basket of stiff, highly colored wax fruit on the marble-topped table in the parlor. Miss Barbara Dearborn had made it at boarding-school and presented it to her sister-in-law many years before. How Robin ever managed to lift off the glass case

without breaking it no one ever knew. That he had done so was evident, for in every waxen red-cheeked pear and slab-sided apple were the prints of his sharp little teeth. It seemed little short of sacrilege to Mrs. Dearborn, whose own children had regarded it for years from an admiring distance, fearing to lay unlawful fingers even on the glass case that protected such a work of art.

He dropped a big white china button into the cake dough when Molly, "the help," had her back turned. It was all ready to be baked, and she unsuspectingly whisked the pan into the oven. Company came to tea, and Grandpa Dearborn happened to take the slice of cake that had the button in it. Manlike, he called everyone's attention to it, and his wife was deeply mortified.

He left the pasture gate open so that the calves got into the garden. He broke Grandpa Dearborn's shaving-mug, and spilled the lather all over himself and the lavender bows of the best pin-cushion. He untied a bag that had been left in the window to sun, to see what made it feel so soft inside. It was a bag of feathers saved from the pickings of many geese. He was considerably startled when the down flew in all directions, sticking to carpet and curtains, and making Molly much extra work on the busiest day in the week.

But the worst time was when Steven came home to find him sitting in a corner, crying bitterly, one hand tied to his chair. He had been put there for punishment. It seemed that busy morning that everything he touched made trouble for somebody. At last his exploring little fingers found the plug of the patent churn. The next minute he was a weebegone spectacle, with the fresh buttermilk pouring down on him, and spreading in creamy rivers all over the dairy floor.

These weekly trips were times of great anxiety for Steven. He never knew what fresh trouble might greet him on his return.

One day they sold out much earlier than usual. It was only eleven o'clock when they reached home. Grandma Dearborn was busy preparing dinner. Robin was not in sight. As soon as Steven had helped to unhitch the horses he ran into the house to look for him. There was no answer to his repeated calls. He searched all over the garden, thinking maybe the child was hiding from him and might jump out any moment from behind a tree.

He was beginning to feel alarmed when he saw two little bare feet slowly waving back and forth above the tall orchard grass. He slipped over the fence and noiselessly along under the apple-trees. Robin was lying on his stomach watching something on the ground so intently that sometimes the bare feet forgot to wave over his back and were held up motionless.

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With one hand he was pulling along at a snail's pace a green leaf, on which a dead bumble-bee lay in state. With the other he was keeping in order a funeral procession of caterpillars. It was a motley crowd of mourners that the energetic forefinger urged along the line of march. He had evidently collected them from many quarters,—little green worms that spun down from the apple boughs overhead; big furry brown caterpillars that had hurried along the honeysuckle trellis to escape his fat fingers; spotted ones and striped ones; horned and smooth. They all straggled along, each one travelling his own gait, each one bent on going a different direction, but all kept in line by that short determined forefinger.

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Steven laughed so suddenly that the little master of ceremonies jumped up and turned a startled face towards him. Then he saw that there were traces of tears on the dimpled face and one eye was swollen nearly shut.

"O Robin! what is it now?" he cried in distress. "How did you hurt yourself so dreadfully?"

"Ole bumble!" answered Robin, pointing to the leaf. "He flied in ze kitchen an' sat down in ze apple peelin's. I jus' poked him, nen he flied up and bit me. He's dead now," he added triumphantly. "Gramma killed him. See all ze cattow-pillows walkin' in ze p'cession?"

So the days slipped by in the old farmhouse. Frost nipped the gardens, and summer vanished entirely from orchard and field. The happy outdoor life was at an end, and Robin was like a caged squirrel. Steven had his hands full keeping him amused and out of the way.

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"Well, my lad, isn't it about time for you to be starting to school?" Mr. Dearborn would ask occasionally. "You know I agreed to send you every winter, and I must live up to my promises."

But Steven made first one pretext and then another for delay. He knew he could not take Robin with him. He knew, too, how restless and troublesome the child would become if left at home all day.

So he could not help feeling glad when Molly went home on a visit, and Grandma Dearborn said her rheumatism was so bad that she needed his help. True, he had all sorts of tasks that he heartily despised,—washing dishes, kneading dough, sweeping and dusting,—all under the critical old lady's exacting supervision. But he preferred even that to being sent off to school alone every day.

One evening, just about sundown, he was out in the corncrib, shelling corn for the large flock of turkeys they were fattening for market. He heard Grandma Dearborn go into the barn, where her husband was milking. They were both a little deaf, and she spoke

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loud in order to be heard above the noise of the milk pattering into the pail. She had come out to look at one of the calves they intended selling.

"It's too bad," he heard her say, after a while. "Rindy has just set her heart on him, but Arad, he thinks it's all foolishness to get such a young one. He's willing to take one big enough to do the chores, but he doesn't want to feed and keep what 'ud only be a care to 'em. He always was closer'n the bark on a tree. After all, I'd hate to see the little fellow go."

"Yes," was the answer, "he's a likely lad; but we're gettin' old, mother, and one is about all we can do well by. Sometimes I think maybe we've bargained for too much, tryin' to keep even *one*. So it's best to let the little one go before we get to settin' sech store by him that we can't."

A vague terror seized Steven as he realized who it was they were talking about. He lay awake a long time that night smoothing Robin's tangled curls, and crying at the thought of the motherless baby away among strangers, with no one to snuggle him up warm or sing him to sleep. Then there was another thought that wounded him deeply. Twist it whichever way he might, he could construe Mr. Dearborn's last remark to mean but one thing. They considered him a burden. How many plans he made night after night before he fell asleep! He would take Robin by the hand in the morning, and they would slip away and wander off to the woods together. They could sleep in barns at night, and he could stop at the farmhouses and do chores to pay for what they ate. Then they need not be a trouble to any one. Maybe in the summer they could find a nice dry cave to live in. Lots of people had lived that way. Then in a few years he would be big enough to have a house of his own. All sorts of improbable plans flocked into his little brain under cover of the darkness, but always vanished when the daylight came.

The next Saturday that they went to town was a cold, blustering day. They started late, taking a lunch with them, not intending to come home until the middle of the afternoon.

The wind blew a perfect gale by the time they reached town. Mr. Dearborn stopped his team in front of one of the principal groceries, saying, "Hop out, Steven, and see what they're paying for turkeys today."

As he sprang over the wheel an old gentleman came running around the corner after his hat, which the wind had carried away.

Steven caught it and gave it to him. He clapped it on his bald crown with a good-natured laugh. "Thanky, sonny!" he exclaimed heartily. Then he disappeared inside the grocery just as Mr. Dearborn called out, "I believe I'll hitch the horses and go in too; I'm nearly

frozen."

Steven followed him into the grocery, and they stood with their hands spread out to the stove while they waited for the proprietor. He was talking to the old gentleman whose hat Steven had rescued.

He seemed to be a very particular kind of customer.

"Oh, go on! go on!" he exclaimed presently. "Wait on those other people while I make up my mind."

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 sailboat 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 corncob 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-by!"

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."

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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 snowdrifts had changed the landscape.

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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 away 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.

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"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 some one 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 any one 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 some one 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 hers 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 be only 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 any one 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.

It was a happy group that gathered around the breakfast table early on Thanksgiving morning.

"All here but Rindy," said Mr. Dearborn, looking with smiling eyes from his wife to his youngest grandchild. "It's too bad she couldn't come, but Arad invited all his folks to spend the day there; so she had to give up and stay at home. Well, we're all alive and well, anyhow. That's my greatest cause for thankfulness. What's yours, Jane?" he asked, nodding towards his wife.

As the question passed around the table, Steven's thoughts went back to the year before, when their little family had all been together. He remembered how pretty his mother had looked that morning in her dark-blue dress. There was a bowl of yellow chrysanthemums blooming on the table, and a streak of sunshine, falling across them and on Robin's hair, seemed to turn them both to gold. Now he was all alone. The contrast was too painful. He slipped from the table unobserved, and stole noiselessly up the back stairs to his room. The little checked apron was hanging on a chair by the window. He sat down and laid his face against it, but his eyes were dry. He had not cried any since that first dreadful night.

There was such a lively clatter of dishes downstairs and babel of voices that he did not hear a sleigh drive up in the soft snow.

"Steven," called Mr. Dearborn from the foot of the stairs, "I promised Mrs. Estel to let you spend the day with her, but there was so much goin' on I plum forgot to tell you. You're to stay all night too, she says."

The ride to town seemed endless to the impatient boy. He was burning with a feverish anxiety to know about Robin, but the driver whom he questioned could not tell.

"Mrs. Estel will be down presently," was the message with which he was ushered into the long drawing-room. He sat down uncomfortably on the edge of a chair to wait. He almost dreaded to hear her coming for fear she might tell him that the Piersons would not give Robin up. Maybe her husband had not come home when she expected him. Maybe he had been too busy to attend to the matter. A dozen possible calamities presented themselves.

Unconsciously he held himself so rigid in his expectancy that he fairly ached. Ten minutes dragged by, with only the crackle of the fire on the hearth to disturb the silence of the great room.

Then light feet pattered down the stairs and ran across the broad hall. The *portière* was pushed aside and a bright little face looked in. In another instant Robin's arms were around his neck, and he was crying over and over in an ecstasy of delight, "Oh, it's Big Brother! It's Big Brother!"

Not far away down the avenue a great church organ was rolling out its accompaniment to a Thanksgiving anthem. Steven could not hear the words the choir chanted, but the deep music of the organ seemed to him to be but the echo of what was throbbing in his own heart.

There was no lack of childish voices and merry laughter in the great house that afternoon. A spirit of thanksgiving was in the very atmosphere. No one could see the overflowing happiness of the children without sharing it in some degree.

More than once during dinner Mrs. Estel looked across the table at her husband and smiled as she had not in months.

Along in the afternoon the winter sunshine tempted the children out of doors, and they commenced to build a snow man. They tugged away at the huge image, with red cheeks and sparkling eyes, so full of out-breaking fun that the passers-by stopped to smile at the sight.

Mrs. Estel stood at the library window watching them. Once, when Robin's fat little legs stumbled and sent him rolling over in the snow, she could not help laughing at the comical sight.

It was a low, gentle laugh, but Mr. Estel heard, and, laying aside his newspaper, joined her at the window. He had almost despaired of ever seeing a return to the old sunny charm of face and manner.



They stood there together in silence a few moments, watching the two romping boys, who played on, unconscious of an audience.

"What a rare, unselfish disposition that little 'Big Brother' has!" Mr. Estel said presently. "It shows itself even in their play." Then he added warmly, turning to his wife, "Dora, it would be downright cruel to send him away from that little chap."

He paused a moment. "We used to find our greatest pleasure in making Dorothy happy. We lavished everything on her. Now we can never do anything more for her."

There was another long pause, while he turned his head away and looked out of the window.

"Think what a lifelong happiness it is in our power to give those children! Dora, can't we make room for both of them for her sake?"

Mrs. Estel hesitated, then laid both her hands in his, bravely smiling back her tears. "Yes, I'll try," she said, "for little Dorothy's sake."

That night, as Steven undressed Robin and tucked him up snugly in the little white bed, he felt that nothing could add to his great happiness. He sat beside him humming an old tune their mother had often sung to them, in the New Jersey home so far away.

The blue eyes closed, but still he kept on humming softly to himself, "Oh, happy day! happy day!"

Presently Mrs. Estel came in and drew a low rocking-chair up to the fire. Steven slipped from his place by Robin's pillow and sat down on the rug beside her.

Sitting there in the fire-light, she told him all about her visit to the Piersons. They had found Robin so unmanageable and so different from what they expected that they were glad to get rid of him. Mr. Estel had arranged matters satisfactorily with the Society, and they had brought Robin home several days ago.

"I had a long talk with Mr. Dearborn the other day," she continued. "He said his wife's health is failing, and their son is trying to persuade them to break up housekeeping and live with them. If she is no better in the spring, they will probably do so."

"Would they want me to go?" asked Steven anxiously.

"It may be so; I cannot tell."

Steven looked up timidly. "I've been wanting all day to say thank you, the way I feel it; but somehow, the right words won't come. I can't tell you how it is, but it seems 'most like sending Robin back home for you and Mr. Estel to have him. Somehow, your ways and everything seem so much like mamma's and papa's, and when I think about him having such a lovely home, oh, it just seems like this is a Thanksgiving Day that will last *always!*"

She drew his head against her knee and stroked it tenderly. "Then how would you like to live here yourself, dear?" she asked. "Mr. Estel thinks that we need two boys."

"Oh, does he really want me, too? It's too good to be true!" Steven was kneeling beside her now, his eyes shining like stars.

"Yes, we both want you," answered Mrs. Estel. "You shall be our own little sons."

Steven crept nearer. "Papa and mamma will be so

glad," he said in a tremulous whisper. Then a sudden thought illuminated his earnest face.

"O Mrs. Estel! Don't you suppose they have found little Dorothy in that other country by this time, and are taking care of her there, just like you are taking care of us here?"

She put her arm around him, and drew him nearer, saying: "My dear little comfort, it may be so. If I could believe that, I could never feel so unhappy again."

Robin and "ze black dancin' bear" were not the only ones tucked tenderly away to sleep that night.

The sleigh bells jingled along the avenue. Again the great church organ rolled out a mighty flood of melody, that ebbed and flowed on the frosty night air.

And Big Brother, with his head pillowed once more beside Robin's, lay with his eyes wide open, too happy to sleep—lay and dreamed of the time when he should be a man, and could gather into the great house he meant to own all the little homeless ones in the wide world; all the sorry little waifs that strayed through the streets of great cities, that crowded in miserable tenements, that lodged in asylums and poorhouses.

Into his child's heart he gathered them all, with a sweet unselfishness that would have gladly shared with every one of them his new-found home and happiness.

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*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK BIG BROTHER ***

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