

# **Jessica's First Prayer**

Hesba Stretton

# Table of Contents

<b><u>Jessica's First Prayer</u></b> .....	<b>1</b>
<u>Hesba Stretton</u> .....	1
<u>Chapter 1. THE COFFEE-STALL AND ITS KEEPER</u> .....	1
<u>Chapter 2. JESSICA'S TEMPTATION</u> .....	3
<u>Chapter 3. AN OLD FRIEND IN A NEW DRESS</u> .....	4
<u>Chapter 4. PEEPS INTO FAIRY-LAND</u> .....	6
<u>Chapter 5. A NEW WORLD OPENS</u> .....	8
<u>Chapter 6. THE FIRST PRAYER</u> .....	9
<u>Chapter 7. HARD QUESTIONS</u> .....	10
<u>Chapter 8. AN UNEXPECTED VISITOR</u> .....	11
<u>Chapter 9. JESSICA'S FIRST PRAYER ANSWERED</u> .....	13
<u>Chapter 10. THE SHADOW OF DEATH</u> .....	15

# Jessica's First Prayer

Hesba Stretton

This page copyright © 2002 Blackmask Online.

<http://www.blackmask.com>

- Chapter 1. THE COFFEE-STALL AND ITS KEEPER
- Chapter 2. JESSICA'S TEMPTATION
- Chapter 3. AN OLD FRIEND IN A NEW DRESS
- Chapter 4. PEEPS INTO FAIRY-LAND
- Chapter 5. A NEW WORLD OPENS
- Chapter 6. THE FIRST PRAYER
- Chapter 7. HARD QUESTIONS
- Chapter 8. AN UNEXPECTED VISITOR
- Chapter 9. JESSICA'S FIRST PRAYER ANSWERED
- Chapter 10. THE SHADOW OF DEATH

## Chapter 1. THE COFFEE-STALL AND ITS KEEPER

In a screened and secluded corner of one of the many railway-bridges which span the streets of London, there could be seen, a few years ago, from five o'clock every morning until half-past eight, a tidily set out coffee-stall, consisting of a trestle and a board, upon which stood two large tin cans, with a small fire of charcoal burning under each, so as to keep the coffee boiling during the early hours of the morning when the work-people were thronging into the city, on the way to their daily toil. The coffee-stall was a favourite one, for besides being under shelter, which was of great consequence upon rainy mornings, it was also in so private a niche that the customers taking their out-of-door breakfast were not too much exposed to notice; and moreover, the coffee-stall keeper was a quiet man, who cared only to serve the busy workmen, without hindering them by any gossip. He was a tall, spare, elderly man, with a singularly solemn face, and a manner which was grave and secret. Nobody knew either his name or dwelling-place; unless it might be the policeman who strode past the coffee-stall every half-hour, and nodded familiarly to the solemn man behind it. There were very few who cared to make any enquiries about him; but those who did could only discover that he kept the furniture of his stall at a neighbouring coffee-house, whither he wheeled his trestle and board and crockery every day, not later than half-past eight in the morning; after which he was wont to glide away with a soft footstep, and a mysterious and fugitive air, with many backward and sidelong glances, as if he dreaded observation, until he was lost among the crowds which thronged the streets. No one had ever had the persevering curiosity to track him all the way to his house, or to find out his other means of gaining a livelihood; but in general his stall was surrounded by customers, whom he served with silent seriousness, and who did not grudge to pay him his charge for the refreshing coffee he supplied to them.

For several years the crowd of work-people had paused by the coffee-stall under the railway-arch, when one morning, in a partial lull of his business, the owner became suddenly aware of a pair of very bright dark eyes being fastened upon him and the slices of bread and butter on his board, with a gaze as hungry as that of a mouse which has been driven by famine into a trap. A thin and meagre face belonged to the eyes, which was half hidden by a mass of matted hair hanging over the forehead, and down the neck; the only covering which the head or neck had, for a tattered frock, scarcely fastened together with broken strings, was slipping down over the shivering shoulders of the little girl. Stooping down to a basket behind his stall, he caught sight of two bare little feet curling

## Jessica's First Prayer

up from the damp pavement, as the child lifted up first one and then the other, and laid them one over another to gain a momentary feeling of warmth. Whoever the wretched child was, she did not speak; only at every steaming cupful which he poured out of his can, her dark eyes gleamed hungrily, and he could hear her smack her thin lips, as if in fancy she was tasting the warm and fragrant coffee.

Oh, come now! he said at last, when only one boy was left taking his breakfast leisurely, and he leaned over his stall to speak in a low and quiet tone, why don't you go away, little girl? Come, come; you're staying too long, you know.

I'm just going, sir, she answered, shrugging her small shoulders to draw her frock up higher about her neck; only it's raining cats and dogs outside; and mother's been away all night, and she took the key with her; and it's so nice to smell the coffee; and the police has left off worrying me while I've been here. He thinks I'm a customer taking my breakfast. And the child laughed a shrill little laugh of mockery at herself and the policeman.

You've had no breakfast, I suppose, said the coffee-stall keeper, in the same low and confidential voice, and leaning over his stall till his face nearly touched the thin, sharp features of the child.

No, she replied, coolly, and I shall want my dinner dreadful bad afore I get it, I know. You don't often feel dreadful hungry, do you, sir? I'm not griped yet, you know; but afore I taste my dinner it'll be pretty bad, I tell you. Ah! very bad indeed!

She turned away with a knowing nod, as much as to say she had one experience in life to which he was quite a stranger; but before she had gone half a dozen steps, she heard the quiet voice calling to her in rather louder tones, and in an instant she was back at the stall.

Slip in here, said the owner, in a cautious whisper; here's a little coffee left and a few crusts. There, you must never come again, you know. I never give to beggars; and if you'd begged, I'd have called the police. There; put your poor feet towards the fire. Now, aren't you comfortable?

The child looked up with a face of intense satisfaction. She was seated upon an empty basket, with her feet near the pan of charcoal, and a cup of steaming coffee on her lap; but her mouth was too full for her to reply, except by a very deep nod, which expressed unbounded delight. The man was busy for a while packing up his crockery; but every now and then he stopped to look down upon her, and to shake his head gravely.

What's your name? he asked, at length; but there, never mind! I don't care what it is. What's your name to do with me, I wonder?

It's Jessica, said the girl but mother and everybody calls me Jess. You'd be tired of being called Jess, if you was me. It's Jess here, and Jess there; and everybody wanting me to go errands. And they think nothing of giving me smacks, and kicks, and pinches. Look here!

Whether her arms were black and blue from the cold, or from ill-usage, he could not tell; but he shook his head again seriously, and the child felt encouraged to go on.

I wish I could stay here for ever and ever, just as I am! she cried. But you're going away, I know; and I'm never to come again, or you'll set the police on me!

Yes, said the coffee-stall keeper, very softly, and looking round to see if there were any other ragged children within sight; if you'll promise not to come again for a whole week, and not to tell anybody else, you may come once more. I'll give you one other treat. But you must be off now.

## Jessica's First Prayer

'I'm off, sir, she said, sharply; but if you've a errand I could go on, I'd do it all right, I would. Let me carry some of your things.'

No, no, cried the man; you run away, like a good girl; and mind! I'm not to see you again for a whole week.

All right! answered Jess, setting off down the rainy street at a quick run, as if to show her willing agreement to the bargain; while the coffee-stall keeper, with many a cautious glance around him, removed his stock-in-trade to the coffee-house near at hand, and was seen no more for the rest of the day in the neighbourhood of the railway-bridge.

## Chapter 2. JESSICA'S TEMPTATION

Jessica kept her part of the bargain faithfully; and though the solemn and silent man under the dark shadow of the bridge looked out for her every morning as he served his customers, he caught no glimpse of her wan face and thin little frame. But when the appointed time was finished, she presented herself at the stall, with her hungry eyes fastened again upon the piles of buns and bread and butter, which were fast disappearing before the demands of the buyers. The business was at its height, and the famished child stood quietly on one side watching for the throng to melt away. But as soon as the nearest church clock had chimed eight, she drew a little nearer to the stall, and at a signal from its owner she slipped between the trestles of his stand, and took up her former position on the empty basket. To his eyes she seemed even a little thinner, and certainly more ragged, than before; and he laid a whole bun, a stale one which was left from yesterday's stock, upon her lap, as she lifted the cup of coffee to her lips with both her benumbed hands.

What's your name? she asked, looking up to him with her keen eyes.

Why? he answered, hesitatingly, as if he was reluctant to tell so much of himself; my christened name is Daniel.

And where do you live, Mr. Dan'el ? she enquired.

Oh, come now! he exclaimed, if you're going to be impudent, you'd better march off. What business is it of yours where I live? I don't want to know where you live, I can tell you.

I didn't mean no offence, said Jess, humbly; only I thought I'd like to know where a good man like you lived. You're a very good man, aren't you, Mr. Dan'el ?

I don't know, he answered, uneasily; I'm afraid I'm not.

Oh, but you are, you know, continued Jess. You make good coffee; prime! And buns too! And I've been watching you hundreds of times afore you saw me, and the police leaves you alone, and never tells you to move on. Oh, yes! you must be a very good man.

Daniel sighed, and fidgeted about his crockery with a grave and occupied air, as if he were pondering over the child's notion of goodness. He made good coffee, and the police left him alone! It was quite true; yet still as he counted up the store of pence which had accumulated in his strong canvas bag, he sighed again still more heavily. He purposely let one of his pennies fall upon the muddy pavement, and went on counting the rest busily, while he furtively watched the little girl sitting at his feet. Without a shade of change upon her small face, she covered the penny with her foot, and drew it in carefully towards her, while she continued to chatter fluently to him. For a moment a feeling of pain shot a pang through Daniel's heart; and then he congratulated himself on having entrapped the young thief. It was time to be leaving now; but before he went he would make her move her bare

## Jessica's First Prayer

foot, and disclose the penny concealed beneath it, and then he would warn her never to venture near his stall again. This was her gratitude, he thought; he had given her two breakfasts and more kindness than he had shown to any fellow-creature for many a long year; and, at the first chance, the young jade turned upon him, and robbed him! He was brooding over it painfully in his mind, when Jessica's uplifted face changed suddenly, and a dark flush crept over her pale cheeks, and the tears started to her eyes. She stooped down, and picking up the coin from amongst the mud, she rubbed it bright and clean upon her rags, and laid it upon the stall close to his hand, but without speaking a word. Daniel looked down upon her solemnly and searchingly.

What's this ? he asked.

Please, Mr. Daniel, she answered, it dropped, and you didn't hear it.

Jess, he said, sternly, tell me all about it.

Oh, please, she sobbed, I never had a penny of my very own but once; and it rolled close to my foot; and you didn't see it; and I hid it up sharp; and then I thought how kind you'd been, and how good the coffee and buns are, and how you let me warm myself at your fire; and please, I couldn't keep the penny any longer. You'll never let me come again, I guess.

Daniel turned away for a minute, busying himself with putting his cups and saucers into the basket, while Jessica stood by trembling, with the large tears rolling slowly down her cheeks. The snug, dark corner, with its warm fire of charcoal, and its fragrant smell of coffee, had been a paradise to her for these two brief spans of time; but she had been guilty of the sin which would drive her from it. All beyond the railway arch the streets stretched away, cold and dreary, with no friendly faces to meet hers, and no warm cups of coffee to refresh her; yet she was only lingering sorrowfully to hear the words spoken which should forbid her to return to this pleasant spot. Mr. Daniel turned round at last, and met her tearful gaze, with a look of strange emotion upon his own solemn face.

Jess, he said, I could never have done it myself. But you may come here every Wednesday morning, as this is a Wednesday, and there'll always be a cup of coffee for you.

She thought he meant that he could not have hidden the penny under his foot, and she went away a little saddened and subdued, notwithstanding her great delight in the expectation of such a treat every week; while Daniel, pondering over the struggle that must have passed through her childish mind, went on his way, from time to time shaking his head, and muttering to himself, I couldn't have done it myself: I never could have done it myself.

## Chapter 3. AN OLD FRIEND IN A NEW DRESS

Week after week, through the three last months of the year, Jessica appeared every Wednesday at the coffee-stall, and, after waiting patiently till the close of the breakfasting business, received her pittance from the charity of her new friend. After a while Daniel allowed her to carry some of his load to the coffee-house, but he never suffered her to follow him farther, and he was always particular to watch her out of sight before he turned off through the intricate mazes of the streets in the direction of his own home. Neither did he encourage her to ask him any more questions; and often but very few words passed between them during Jessica's breakfast time.

As to Jessica's home, she made no secret of it, and Daniel might have followed her any time he pleased. It was a single room, which had once been a hayloft over the stable of an old inn, now in use for two or three donkeys, the property of costermongers dwelling in the court about it. The mode of entrance was by a wooden ladder, whose rungs were crazy and broken, and which led up through a trap-door in the floor of the loft. The interior of the home was as desolate and comfortless as that of the stable below, with only a litter of straw for the bedding, and a few bricks and boards for the furniture. Everything that could be pawned had disappeared long ago, and Jessica's

## Jessica's First Prayer

mother often lamented that she could not thus dispose of her child. Yet Jessica was hardly a burden to her. It was a long time since she had taken any care to provide her with food or clothing, and the girl had to earn or beg for herself the meat which kept a scanty life within her. Jess was the drudge and errand-girl of the court; and what with being cuffed and beaten by her mother, and over-worked and ill-used by her numerous employers, her life was a hard one. But now there was always Wednesday morning to count upon and look forward to; and by and by a second scene of amazed delight opened upon her.

Jessica had wandered far away from home in the early darkness of a winter's evening, after a violent outbreak of her drunken mother, and she was still sobbing now and then with long-drawn sobs of pain and weariness, when she saw, a little way before her, the tall, well-known figure of her friend Mr. Daniel. He was dressed in a suit of black, with a white neckcloth, and he was pacing with brisk yet measured steps along the lighted streets. Jessica felt afraid of speaking to him, but she followed at a little distance, until presently he stopped before the iron gates of a large building, and, unlocking them, passed on to the arched doorway, and with a heavy key opened the folding-doors and entered in. The child stole after him, but paused for a few minutes, trembling upon the threshold, until the gleam of a light lit up within tempted her to venture a few steps forward, and to push a little way open an inner door, covered with crimson baize, only so far as to enable her to peep through at the inside. Then, growing bolder by degrees, she crept through herself, drawing the door to noiselessly behind her. The place was in partial gloom, but Daniel was kindling every gaslight, and each minute lit it up in more striking grandeur. She stood in a carpeted aisle, with high oaken pews on each side, almost as black as ebony. A gallery of the same dark old oak ran round the walls, resting upon massive pillars, behind one of which she was partly concealed, gazing with eager eyes at Daniel, as he mounted the pulpit steps and kindled the lights there, disclosing to her curious delight the glittering pipes of an organ behind it.

Before long the slow and soft-footed chapel-keeper disappeared for a minute or two into a vestry; and Jessica, availing herself of his short absence, stole silently up under the shelter of the dark pews until she reached the steps of the organ loft, with its golden show. But at this moment Mr. Daniel appeared again, arrayed in a long gown of black serge; and as she stood spell-bound gazing at the strange appearance of her patron, his eyes fell upon her, and he also was struck speechless for a minute, with an air of amazement and dismay upon his grave face.

Come, now, he exclaimed, harshly, as soon as he could recover his presence of mind, you must take yourself out of this. This isn't any place for such as you. It's for ladies and gentlemen; so you must run away sharp before anybody comes. How ever did you find your way here?

He had come very close to her, and bent down to whisper in her ear, looking nervously round to the entrance all the time. Jessica's eager tongue was loosened.

Mother beat me, she said, and turned me into the streets, and I see you there, so I followed you up. I'll run away this minute, Mr. Daniel; but it's a nice place. What do the ladies and gentlemen do when they come here? Tell me, and I'll be off sharp.

They come here to pray, whispered Daniel.

What is pray? asked Jessica.

Bless the child! cried Daniel, in perplexity.

Why, they kneel down in those pews; most of them sit, though; and the minister up in the pulpit tells God what they want.

Jessica gazed into his face with such an air of bewilderment that a faint smile crept over the sedate features of the pew-opener.

## Jessica's First Prayer

What is a minister and God? she said; and do ladies and gentlemen want anything? I thought they'd everything they wanted, Mr. Daniel.

Oh! cried Daniel, you must be off, you know. They'll be coming in a minute, and they'd be shocked to see a ragged little heathen like you. This is the pulpit, where the minister stands and preaches to 'em; and there are the pews, where they sit to listen to him, or to go to sleep, may be; and that's the organ to play music to their singing. There, I've told you everything, and you must never come again, never.

Mr. Daniel, said Jessica, I don't know nothing about it. Isn't there a dark little corner somewhere that I could hide in?

No, no, interrupted Daniel, impatiently; we couldn't do with such a little heathen, with no shoes or bonnet on. Come now, it's only a quarter to the time, and somebody will be here in a minute. Run away, do!

Jessica retraced her steps slowly to the crimson door, casting many a longing look backwards; but Mr. Daniel stood at the end of the aisle, frowning upon her whenever she glanced behind. She gained the lobby at last, but already some one was approaching the chapel door, and beneath the lamp at the gate stood one of her natural enemies, a policeman. Her heart beat fast, but she was quickwitted, and in another instant she spied a place of concealment behind one of the doors, into which she crept for safety until the path should be clear, and the policeman passed on upon his beat.

The congregation began to arrive quickly. She heard the rustling of silk dresses, and she could see the gentlemen and ladies pass by the niche between the door and the post. Once she ventured to stretch out a thin little finger and touch a velvet mantle as the wearer of it swept by, but no one caught her in the act, or suspected her presence behind the door. Mr. Daniel, she could see, was very busy ushering the people to their seats; but there was a startled look lingering upon his face, and every now and then he peered anxiously into the outer gloom and darkness, and even once called to the policeman to ask if he had seen a ragged child hanging about. After a while the organ began to sound, and Jessica, crouching down in her hiding-place, listened entranced to the sweet music. She could not tell what made her cry, but the tears came so rapidly that it was of no use to rub the corners of her eyes with her hard knuckles; so she lay down upon the ground, and buried her face in her hands, and wept without restraint. When the singing was over, she could only catch a confused sound of a voice speaking. The lobby was empty now, and the crimson doors closed. The policeman, also, had walked on. This was the moment to escape. She raised herself from the ground with a feeling of weariness and sorrow; and thinking sadly of the light, and warmth, and music that were within the closed doors, she stepped out into the cold and darkness of the streets, and loitered homewards with a heavy heart.

## Chapter 4. PEEPS INTO FAIRY-LAND

It was not the last time that Jessica concealed herself behind the baize-covered door. She could not overcome the urgent desire to enjoy again and again the secret and perilous pleasure; and Sunday after Sunday she watched in the dark streets for the moment when she could slip in unseen. She soon learned the exact time when Daniel would be occupied in lighting up, before the policeman would take up his station at the entrance, and again, the very minute at which it would be wise and safe to take her departure. Sometimes the child laughed noiselessly to herself until she shook with suppressed merriment, as she saw Daniel standing unconsciously in the lobby, with his solemn face and grave air, to receive the congregation, much as he faced his customers at the coffee-stall. She learned to know the minister by sight, the tall, thin, pale gentleman, who passed through a side door, with his head bent as if in deep thought, while two little girls, about her own age, followed him with sedate yet pleasant faces. Jessica took a great interest in the minister's children. The younger one was fair, and the elder was about as tall as herself, and had eyes and hair as dark; but oh, how cared for, how plainly waited on by tender hands! Sometimes, when they were gone by, she would close her eyes, and wonder what they would do in one of the high black pews

## Jessica's First Prayer

inside, where there was no place for a ragged, barefooted girl like her; and now and then her wonderings almost ended in a sob, which she was compelled to stifle.

It was an untold relief to Daniel that Jessica did not ply him with questions, as he feared, when she came for breakfast every Wednesday morning; but she was too shrewd and cunning for that. She wished him to forget that she had ever been there, and by and by her wish was accomplished, and Daniel was no longer uneasy, while he was lighting the lamps, with the dread of seeing the child's wild face starting up before, him.

But the light evenings of summer-time were drawing near apace, and Jessica foresaw with dismay that her Sunday treats would soon be over. The risk of discovery increased every week, for the sun was later and later in setting, and there would be no chance of creeping in and out unseen in the broad daylight. Already it needed both watchfulness and alertness to dart in at the right moment in the grey twilight; but still she could not give it up; and if it had not been for the fear of offending Mr. Daniel, she would have resolved upon going until she was found out. They could not punish her very much for standing in the lobby of a chapel.

Jessica was found out, however, before the dusky evenings were quite gone. It happened one night that the minister's children, coming early to the chapel, saw a small tattered figure, bareheaded and barefooted, dart swiftly up the steps before them and disappear within the lobby. They paused and looked at one another, and then, hand in hand, their hearts beating quickly, and the colour coming and going on their faces, they followed this strange new member of their father's congregation. The pew-opener was nowhere to be seen, but their quick eyes detected the prints of the wet little feet which had trodden the clean pavement before them, and in an instant they discovered Jessica crouching behind the door.

Let us call Daniel Standing, said Winny, the younger child, clinging to her sister; but she had spoken aloud, and Jessica overheard her, and before they could stir a step she stood before them with an earnest and imploring face.

Oh, don't have me drove away, she cried; I'm a very poor little girl, and it's all the pleasure I've got. I've seen you lots of times, with that tall gentleman as stoops, and I didn't think you'd have me drove away. I don't do any harm behind the door, and if Mr. Daniel finds me out, he won't give me any more coffee.

Little girl, said the elder child, in a composed and demure voice, we don't mean to be unkind to you; but what do you come here for, and why do you hide yourself behind the door?

I like to hear the music, answered Jessica, and I want to find out what pray is, and the minister, and God. I know it's only for ladies and gentlemen, and fine children like you; but I'd like to go inside just for once, and see what you do.

You shall come with us into our pew, cried Winny, in an eager and impulsive tone; but Jane laid her hand upon her outstretched arm, with a glance at Jessica's ragged clothes and matted hair. It was a question difficult enough to perplex them. The little outcast was plainly too dirty and neglected for them to invite her to sit side by side with them in their crimson-lined pew, and no poor people attended the chapel with whom she could have a seat. But Winny, with flushed cheeks and indignant eyes, looked reproachfully at her elder sister.

Jane, she said, opening her Testament, and turning over the leaves hurriedly, this was papa's text a little while ago. 'For if there come into your assembly a man with a gold ring, in goodly apparel, and there come in also a poor man in vile raiment; and ye have respect to him that weareth the gay clothing, and say unto him, Sit thou here in a good place; and say to the poor, Stand thou there, or sit here under my footstool; are ye not then partial in yourselves, and are become judges of evil thoughts?' If we don't take this little girl into our pew, we 'have the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with respect of persons.'

## Jessica's First Prayer

I don't know what to do, answered Jane, sighing; the Bible seems plain; but I'm sure papa would not like it. Let us ask the chapel-keeper.

Oh, no, no! cried Jessica, don't let Mr. Daniel catch me here. I won't come again, indeed; and I'll promise not to try to find out about God and the minister, if you'll only let me go.

But, little girl, said Jane, in a sweet but grave manner, we ought to teach you about God, if you don't know him. Our papa is the minister, and if you'll come with us, we'll ask him what we must do.

Will Mr. Daniel see me? asked Jessica.

Nobody but papa is in the vestry, answered Jane, and he'll tell us all, you and us, what we ought to do. You'll not be afraid of him, will you ?

No, said Jessica, cheerfully, following the minister's children as they led her along the side of the chapel towards the vestry.

He is not such a terrible personage, said Winny, looking round encouragingly, as Jane tapped softly at the door; and they heard a voice saying Come in.

## Chapter 5. A NEW WORLD OPENS

The minister was sitting in an easy chair before a comfortable fire, with a hymnbook in his hand, which he closed as the three children appeared in the open doorway. Jessica had seen his pale and thoughtful face many a time from her hiding-place, but she had never met the keen, earnest, searching gaze of his eyes, which seemed to pierce through all her wretchedness and misery, and to read at once the whole history of her desolate life. But before her eyelids could droop, or she could drop a reverential curtsy, the minister's face kindled with such a glow of pitying tenderness and compassion, as fastened her eyes upon him, and gave her new heart and courage. His children ran to him, leaving Jessica upon the mat at the door, and with eager voices and gestures told him the difficulty they were in.

Come here, little girl, he said, and Jessica walked across the carpeted floor till she stood right before him, with folded hands, and eyes that looked frankly into his.

What is your name, my child ? he asked.

Jessica, she answered.

Jessica, he repeated, with a smile; that is a strange name.

Mother used to play 'Jessica' at the theatre, sir, she said, and I used to be a fairy in the pantomime, till I grew too tall and ugly. If I'm pretty when I grow up, mother says I shall play too; but I've a long time to wait. Are you the minister, sir ?

Yes, he answered, smiling again.

What is a minister? she enquired.

A servant! he replied, looking away thoughtfully into the red embers of the fire.

## Jessica's First Prayer

Papa! cried Jane and Winny, in tones of astonishment; but Jessica gazed steadily at the minister, who was now looking back again into her bright eyes.

Please, sir, whose servant are you? she asked.

The servant of God and of man, he answered, solemnly. Jessica, I am your servant.

The child shook her head, and laughed shrilly as she gazed round the room, and at the handsome clothing of the minister's daughters, while she drew her rags closer about her, and shivered a little, as if she felt a sting of the east wind, which was blowing keenly through the streets. The sound of her shrill, childish laugh made the minister's heart ache, and the tears burn under his eyelids.

Who is God? asked the child. When mother's in a good temper, sometimes she says 'God bless me!' Do you know him, please, minister ?

But before there was time to answer, the door into the chapel was opened, and Daniel stood upon the threshold. At first he stared blandly forwards, but then his grave face grew ghastly pale, and he laid his hand upon the door to support himself until he could recover his speech and senses. Jessica also looked about her, scared and irresolute, as if anxious to run away or to hide herself. The minister was the first to speak.

Jessica, he said, there is a place close under my pulpit where you shall sit, and where I can see you all the time. Be a good girl and listen, and you will hear something about God. Standing, put this little one in front of the pews by the pulpit steps.

But before she could believe it for very gladness, Jessica found herself inside the chapel, facing the glittering organ, from which a sweet strain of music was sounding. Not far from her Jane and Winny were peeping over the front of their pew, with friendly smiles and glances. It was evident that the minister's elder daughter was anxious about her behaviour, and she made energetic signs to her when to stand up and when to kneel; but Winny was content with smiling at her, whenever her head rose above the top of the pew. Jessica was happy, but not in the least abashed. The ladies and gentlemen were not at all unlike those whom she had often seen when she was a fairy at the theatre; and very soon her attention was engrossed by the minister, whose eyes often fell upon her, as she gazed eagerly, with uplifted face, upon him. She could scarcely understand a word of what he said, but she liked the tones of his voice, and the tender pity of his face as he looked down upon her. Daniel hovered about a good deal, with an air of uneasiness and displeasure, but she was unconscious of his presence. Jessica was intent upon finding out what a minister and God were.

## Chapter 6. THE FIRST PRAYER

When the service was ended, the minister descended the pulpit steps, just as Daniel was about to hurry Jessica away, and taking her by the hand in the face of all the congregation, he led her into the vestry, whither Jane and Winny quickly followed them. He was fatigued with the services of the day, and his pale face was paler than ever, as he placed Jessica before his chair, into which he threw himself with an air of exhaustion; but bowing his head upon his hands, he said in a low but clear tone, Lord, these are the lambs of thy flock. Help me to feed thy lambs!

Children, he said, with a smile upon his weary face, it is no easy thing to know God. But this one thing we know, that he is our Father my Father and your Father, Jessica. He loves you, and cares for you more than I do for my little girls here.

## Jessica's First Prayer

He smiled at them and they at him, with an expression which Jessica felt and understood, though it made her sad. She trembled a little, and the minister's ear caught the sound of a faint though bitter sob.

I never had any father, she said, sorrowfully.

God is your Father, he answered, very gently; he knows all about you, because he is present everywhere. We cannot see him, but we have only to speak, and he hears us, and we may ask him for whatever we want.

Will he let me speak to him, as well as these fine children that are clean, and have got nice clothes? asked Jessica, glancing anxiously at her muddy feet, and her soiled and tattered frock.

Yes, said the minister, smiling, yet sighing at the same time; you may ask him this moment for what you want.

Jessica gazed round the room with large, wide-open eyes, as if she were seeking to see God; but then she shut her eyelids tightly, and bending her head upon her hands, as she had seen the minister do, she said, O God! I want to know about you. And please pay Mr. Dan'el for all the warm coffee he's give me.

Jane and Winny listened with faces of unutterable amazement; but the tears stood in the minister's eyes, and he added Amen to Jessica's first prayer.

## Chapter 7. HARD QUESTIONS

Daniel had no opportunity for speaking to Jessica; for, after waiting until the minister left the vestry, he found that she had gone away by the side entrance. He had to wait, therefore, until Wednesday morning, and the sight of her pinched little face was welcome to him, when he saw it looking wistfully over the coffee-stall. Yet he had made up his mind to forbid her to come again, and to threaten her with the policeman if he ever caught her at the chapel, where for the future he intended to keep a sharper look-out. But before he could speak, Jess had slipped under the stall, and taken her old seat upon the up-turned basket.

Mr. Dan'el, she said, has God paid you for my sups of coffee yet?

Paid me? he repeated, God? No.

Well, he will, she answered, nodding her head sagely; don't you be afraid for your money, Mr. Dan'el; I've asked him a many times, and the minister says he's sure to do it.

Jess, said Daniel, sternly, have you been and told the minister about my coffee-stall ?

No, she answered, with a beaming smile, but I've told God lots and lots of times since Sunday, and he's sure to pay in a day or two.

Jess, continued Daniel, more gently, you're a sharp little girl, I see; and now mind, I'm going to trust you. You're never to say a word about me or my coffee-stall; because the folks at our chapel are very grand, and might think it low and mean of me to keep a coffee-stall. Very likely they'd say I mustn't be chapel-keeper any longer, and I should lose a deal of money.

Why do you keep the stall then? asked Jessica.

## Jessica's First Prayer

Don't you see what a many pennies I get every morning? he said, shaking his canvas bag. I get a good deal of money that way in a year.

What do you want such a deal of money for? she enquired; do you give it to God?

Daniel did not answer, but the question went to his heart like a sword thrust. What did he want so much money for? He thought of his one bare and solitary room, where he lodged alone, a good way from the railway-bridge, with very few comforts in it, but containing a desk, strongly and securely fastened, in which was his savings' bank book and his receipts for money put out at interest, and a bag of sovereigns, for which he had been toiling and slaving both on Sundays and week-days. He could not remember giving anything away, except the dregs of the coffee and the stale buns, for which Jessica was asking God to pay him. He coughed, and cleared his throat, and rubbed his eyes; and then, with nervous and hesitating fingers, he took a penny from his bag, and slipped it into Jessica's hand.

No, no, Mr. Dan'el, she said; I don't want you to give me any of your pennies. I want God to pay you.

Ay, he'll pay me, muttered Daniel; there'll be a day of reckoning by and by.

Does God have reckoning days? asked Jessica. I used to like reckoning days when I was a fairy.

Ay, ay, he answered, but there's few folks like God's reckoning days.

But you'll be glad, won't you? she said.

Daniel bade her get on with her breakfast, and then he turned over in his mind the thoughts which her questions had awakened. Conscience told him he would not be glad to meet God's reckoning day.

Mr. Dan'el, said Jessica, when they were about to separate, and he would not take back his gift of a penny, if you wouldn't mind, I'd like to come and buy a cup of coffee to-morrow, like a customer, you know: and I won't let out a word about the stall to the minister next Sunday, don't you be afraid.

She tied the penny carefully into a corner of her rags, and with a cheerful smile upon her thin face, she glided from under the shadow of the bridge, and was soon lost to Daniel's sight.

## Chapter 8. AN UNEXPECTED VISITOR

When Jessica came to the street into which the court where she lived opened, she saw an unusual degree of excitement among the inhabitants, a group of whom were gathered about a tall gentleman, whom she recognised in an instant to be the minister. She elbowed her way through the midst of them, and the minister's face brightened as she presented herself before him. He followed her up the low entry, across the squalid court, through the stable, empty of the donkeys just then, up the creaking rounds of the ladder, and into the miserable loft, where the tiles were falling in, and the broken window-panes were stuffed with rags and paper. Near to the old rusty stove, which served as a grate when there was any fire, there was a short board laid across some bricks, and upon this the minister took his seat, while Jessica sat upon the floor before him.

Jessica, he said, sadly, is this where you live?

Yes, she answered, but we'd a nicer room than this when I was a fairy, and mother played at the theatre; we shall be better off when I'm grown up, if I'm pretty enough to play like her.

## Jessica's First Prayer

My child, he said, I'm come to ask your mother to let you go to school in a pleasant place down in the country. Will she let you go?

No, answered Jessica, mother says she'll never let me learn to read, or go to church; she says it would make me good for nothing. But please, sir, she doesn't know anything about your church, it's such a long way off, and she hasn't found me out yet. She always gets very drunk of a Sunday.

The child spoke simply, and as if all she said was a matter of course; but the minister shuddered, and he looked through the broken window to the little patch of gloomy sky overhead.

What can I do? he cried mournfully, as though speaking to himself.

Nothing, please, sir, said Jessica, only let me come to hear you of a Sunday, and tell me about God. If you was to give me fine clothes like your little girls, mother 'ud only pawn them for gin. You can't do anything more for me.

Where is your mother? he asked.

Out on a spree, said Jessica, and she won't be home for a day or two. She'd not hearken to you, sir. There's the missionary came, and she pushed him down the ladder, till he was nearly killed. They used to call mother the Vixen at the theatre, and nobody durst say a word to her.

The minister was silent for some minutes, thinking painful thoughts, for his eyes seemed to darken as he looked round the miserable room, and his face wore an air of sorrow and disappointment. At last he spoke again.

Who is Mr. Daniel, Jessica? he enquired.

Oh, she said cunningly, he's only a friend of mine as gives me sups of coffee. You don't know all the folks in London, sir!

No, he answered, smiling, but does he keep a coffee-stall?

Jessica nodded her head, but did not trust herself to speak.

How much does a cup of coffee cost? asked the minister.

A full cup's a penny, she answered, promptly; but you can have half a cup; and there are halfpenny and penny buns.

Good coffee and buns? he said, with another smile.

Prime, replied Jessica, smacking her lips.

Well, continued the minister, tell your friend to give you a full cup of coffee and a penny bun every morning, and I'll pay for them as often as he chooses to come to me for the money.

Jessica's face beamed with delight, but in an instant it clouded over as she recollected Daniel's secret, and her lips quivered as she spoke her disappointed reply.

Please, sir, she said, I'm sure he couldn't come; oh! he couldn't. It's such a long way, and Mr. Daniel has plenty of customers. No, he never would come to you for the money.

## Jessica's First Prayer

Jessica, he answered, I will tell you what I will do. I will trust you with a shilling every Sunday, if you'll promise to give it to your friend the very first time you see him. I shall be sure to know if you cheat me. And the keen, piercing eyes of the minister looked down into Jessica's, and once more the tender and pitying smile returned to his face.

I can do nothing else for you ? he said, in a tone of mingled sorrow and questioning.

No, minister, answered Jessica, only tell me about God.

I will tell you one thing about him now, he replied. If I took you to live in my house with my little daughters, you would have to be washed and clothed in new clothing to make you fit for it. God wanted us to go and live at home with him in heaven, but we were so sinful that we could never have been fit for it. So he sent his own Son to live amongst us, and die for us, to wash us from our sins, and to give us new clothing, and to make us ready to live in God's house. When you ask God for anything, you must say 'For Jesus Christ's sake.' Jesus Christ is the Son of God.

After these words the minister carefully descended the ladder, followed by Jessica's bare and nimble feet, and she led him by the nearest way into one of the great thoroughfares of the city, where he said good-bye to her, adding, God bless you, my child, in a tone which sank into Jessica's heart. He had put a silver six-pence into her hand to provide for her breakfast the next three mornings, and, with a feeling of being very rich, she returned to her miserable home.

The next morning Jessica presented herself proudly as a customer at Daniel's stall, and paid over the sixpence in advance. He felt a little troubled as he heard her story, lest the minister should endeavour to find him out; but he could not refuse to let the child come daily for her comfortable breakfast. If he was detected, he would promise to give up his coffee-stall rather than offend the great people of the chapel; but unless he was, it would be foolish of him to lose the money it brought in week after week.

## Chapter 9. JESSICA'S FIRST PRAYER ANSWERED

Every Sunday evening the barefooted and bareheaded child might be seen advancing confidently up to the chapel, where rich and fashionable people worshipped God; but before taking her place she arrayed herself in a little cloak and bonnet, which had once belonged to the minister's elder daughter, and which was kept with Daniel's serge gown, so that she presented a somewhat more respectable appearance in the eyes of the congregation. The minister had no listener more attentive, and he would have missed the pinched, earnest little face if it were not to be seen in the seat just under the pulpit. At the close of each service he spoke to her for a minute or two in his vestry, often saying no more than a single sentence, for the day's labour had wearied him. The shilling, which was always lying upon the chimney-piece, placed there by Jane and Winny in turns, was immediately handed over, according to promise, to Daniel as she left the chapel, and so Jessica's breakfast was provided for her week after week.

But at last there came a Sunday evening when the minister, going up into his pulpit, did miss the wistful, hungry face, and the shilling lay unclaimed upon the vestry chimney-piece. Daniel looked out for her anxiously every morning, but no Jessica glided into his secluded corner, to sit beside him with her breakfast on her lap, and with a number of strange questions to ask. He felt her absence more keenly than he could have expected. The child was nothing to him, he kept saying to himself; and yet he felt that she was something, and that he could not help being uneasy and anxious about her. Why had he never enquired where she lived? The minister knew, and for a minute Daniel thought he would go and ask him, but that might awaken suspicion. How could he account for so much anxiety, when he was supposed only to know of her absence from chapel one Sunday evening? It would be running a risk, and, after all, Jessica was nothing to him. So he went home and looked over his savings' bank

## Jessica's First Prayer

book, and counted his money, and he found to his satisfaction that he had gathered together nearly four hundred pounds, and was adding more every week.

But when upon the next Sunday Jessica's seat was again empty, the anxiety of the solemn chapel-keeper overcame his prudence and his fears. The minister had retired to his vestry, and was standing with his arm resting upon the chimney-piece, and his eyes fixed upon the unclaimed shilling, which Winny had laid there before the service, when there was a tap at the door, and Daniel entered with a respectful but hesitating air.

Well, Standring? said the minister, questioningly.

Sir, he said, I'm uncomfortable about that little girl, and I know you've been once to see after her; she told me about it; and so I make bold to ask you where she lives, and I'll see what's become of her.

Right, Standring, answered the minister; I am troubled about the child, and so are my little girls. I thought of going myself, but my time is very much occupied just now.

I'll go, sir, replied Daniel, promptly; and, after receiving the necessary information about Jessica's home, he put out the lights, locked the door and turned towards his lonely lodgings.

But though it was getting late upon Sunday evening, and Jessica's home was a long way distant, Daniel found that his anxiety would not suffer him to return to his solitary room. It was of no use to reason with himself, as he stood at the corner of the street, feeling perplexed and troubled, and promising his conscience that he would go the very first thing in the morning after he shut up his coffee-stall. In the dim, dusky light, as the summer evening drew to a close, he fancied he could see Jessica's thin figure and wan face gliding on before him, and turning round from time to time to see if he were following. It was only fancy, and he laughed a little at himself; but the laugh was husky, and there was a choking sensation in his throat, so he buttoned his Sunday coat over his breast, where his silver watch and chain hung temptingly, and started off at a rapid pace for the centre of the city.

It was not quite dark when he reached the court, and stumbled up the narrow entry leading to it; but Daniel did hesitate when he opened the stable-door, and looked into a blank, black space, in which he could discern nothing. He thought he had better retreat while he could do so safely; but as he still stood with his hind upon the rusty latch, he heard a faint, small voice through the nicks of the unceiled boarding above his head.

Our Father, said the little voice, please to send somebody to me, for Jesus Christ's sake, Amen.

I'm here, Jess, cried Daniel, with a sudden bound of his heart, such as he had not felt for years, and which almost took away his breath as he peered into the darkness, until at last he discerned dimly the ladder which led up into the loft.

Very cautiously, but with an eagerness which surprised himself, he climbed up the creaking rounds of the ladder and entered the dismal room, where the child was lying in desolate darkness. Fortunately he had put his box of matches into his pocket, and the end of a wax candle, with which he kindled the lamps, and in another minute a gleam of light shone upon Jessica's white features. She was stretched upon a scanty litter of straw under the slanting roof where the tiles had not fallen off with her poor rags for her only covering; but as her eyes looked up into Daniel's face bending over her, a bright smile of joy sparkled in them.

Oh! she cried, gladly, but in a feeble voice, it's Mr. Dan'el! Has God told you to come here, Mr. Dan'el ?

Yes, said Daniel, kneeling beside her, taking her wasted hand in his, and parting the matted hair upon her damp forehead.

## Jessica's First Prayer

What did he say to you, Mr. Dan'el? said Jessica.

He told me I was a great sinner, replied Daniel. He told me I loved a little bit of dirty money better than a poor, friendless, helpless child, whom he had sent to me to see if I would do her a little good for his sake. He looked at me, or the minister did, through and through, and he said, 'Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee: then whose shall those things be which thou hast provided?' And I could answer him nothing, Jess. He was come to a reckoning with me, and I could not say a word to him.

Aren't you a good man, Mr. Dan'el? whispered Jessica.

No, I'm a wicked sinner, he cried, while the tears rolled down his solemn face. I've been constant at God's house, but only to get money; I've been steady and industrious, but only to get money; and now God looks at me, and he says, 'Thou fool!' Oh, Jess, Jess! You're more fit for heaven than I ever was in my life.

Why don't you ask him to make you good for Jesus Christ's sake? asked the child.

I can't, he said. I've been kneeling down Sunday after Sunday when the minister's been praying, but all the time I was thinking how rich some of the carriage people were. I've been loving money and worshipping money all along, and I've nearly let you die rather than run the risk of losing part of my earnings. I'm a very sinful man.

But you know what the minister often says, murmured Jessica. 'Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.'

I've heard it so often that I don't feel it, said Daniel. I used to like to hear the minister say it, but now it goes in at one ear and out at the other. My heart is very hard, Jessica.

By the feeble glimmer of the candle Daniel saw Jessica's wistful eyes fixed upon him with a sad and loving glance; and then she lifted up her weak hand to her face, and laid it over her closed eyelids, and her feverish lips moved slowly.

God, she said, please to make Mr. Dan'el's heart soft, for Jesus Christ's sake, Amen.

She did not speak again, nor Daniel, for some time. He took off his Sunday coat and laid it over the tiny, shivering frame, which was shaking with cold even in the summer evening; and as he did so he remembered the words which the Lord says he will pronounce at the last day of reckoning, Forasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me. Daniel Standing felt his heart turning with love to the Saviour, and he bowed his head upon his hands, and cried in the depths of his contrite spirit, God be merciful to me, a sinner.

## Chapter 10. THE SHADOW OF DEATH

There was no coffee-stall opened under the railway arch the following morning, and Daniel's regular customers stood amazed as they drew near the empty corner, where they were accustomed to get their early breakfast. It would have astonished them still more if they could have seen how he was occupied in the miserable loft. He had intrusted a friendly woman out of the court to buy food, and fuel, and all night long he had watched beside Jessica, who was light-headed and delirious, but in the wanderings of her thoughts and words often spoke to God, and prayed for her Mr. Dan'el. The neighbour informed him that the child's mother had gone off some days before, fearing that she was ill of some infectious fever, and that she, alone, had taken a little care of her from time to time. As soon as the morning came he sent for a doctor, and, after receiving permission from him, he wrapped the poor deserted Jessica in his coat, and bearing her tenderly in his arms down the ladder, he carried her

## Jessica's First Prayer

to a cab, which the neighbour brought to the entrance of the court. It was to no other than his own solitary home that he had resolved to take her; and when the mistress of the lodgings stood at her door with her arms a-kimbo, to forbid the admission of the wretched and neglected child, her tongue was silenced by the gleam of a half-sovereign, which Daniel slipped into the palm of her hard hand.

By that afternoon's post the minister received the following letter :—

Reverend Sir,

If you will condescend to enter under my humble roof, you will have the pleasure of seeing little Jessica, who is at the point of death, unless God in his mercy restores her. Hoping you will excuse this liberty, as I cannot leave the child, I remain with duty,

Your respectful Servant,

D. Standring.

P.S. Jessica desires her best love and duty to Miss Jane and Winny.

The minister laid aside the book he was reading, and without any delay started off for his chapel-keeper's dwelling. There was Jessica lying restfully upon Daniel's bed, but the pinched features were deadly pale, and the sunken eyes shone with a waning light. She was too feeble to turn her head when the door opened, and he paused for a minute, looking at her and at Daniel, who, seated at the head of the bed, was turning over the papers in his desk, and reckoning up once more the savings of his lifetime. But when the minister advanced into the middle of the room, Jessica's white cheeks flushed into a deep red.

Oh, minister ! she cried, God has given me everything I wanted except paying Mr. Dan'el for the coffee he used to give me.

Ah! but God has paid me over and over again, said Daniel, rising to receive the minister. He's given me my own soul in exchange for it. Let me make bold to speak to you this once, sir. You're a very learned man, and a great preacher, and many people flock to hear you till I'm hard put to it to find seats for them at times; but all the while, hearkening to you every blessed Sabbath, I was losing my soul, and you never once said to me, though you saw me scores and scores of times, 'Standring, are you a saved man?'

Standring, said the minister, in a tone of great distress and regret, I always took it for granted that you were a Christian.

Ah, continued Daniel, thoughtfully, but God wanted somebody to ask me that question, and he did not find anybody in the congregation, so he sent this poor little lass to me. Well, I don't mind telling now, even if I lose the place; but for a long time, nigh upon ten years, I've kept a coffee-stall on week-days in the city, and cleared, one week with another, about ten shillings: but I was afraid the chapel-wardens wouldn't approve of the coffee business, as low, so I kept it a close secret, and always shut up early of a morning. It's me that sold Jessica her cup of coffee, which you paid for, sir.

There's no harm in it, my good fellow, said the minister, kindly; you need make no secret of it.

Well, resumed Daniel, the questions this poor little creature has asked me have gone quicker and deeper down to my conscience than all your sermons, if I may make so free as to say it. She's come often and often of a morning, and looked into my face with those dear eyes of hers, and said, 'Don't you love Jesus Christ, Mr. Dan'el?' 'Doesn't it make you very glad that God is your Father, Mr. Dan'el?' 'Are we getting nearer heaven every day, Mr.

## Jessica's First Prayer

Dan'el?' And one day says she, 'Are you going to give all your money to God, Mr. Dan'el?' Ah, that question made me think indeed, and it's never been answered till this day. While I've been sitting beside the bed here, I've counted up all my savings: 397*l.* 17*s.* it is; and I've said, Lord, it's all thine; and I'd give every penny of it rather than lose the child, if it be thy blessed will to spare her life.'

Daniel's voice quavered at the last words, and his face sank upon the pillow where Jessica's feeble and motionless head lay. There was a very sweet yet surprised smile upon her face, and she lifted her wasted fingers to rest upon the bowed head beside her, while she shut her eyes and shaded them with her other weak hand.

Our Father, she said, in a faint whisper which still reached the ears of the minister and the beadle, I asked you to let me come home to heaven; but if Mr. Dan'el wants me, please to let me stay a little longer, for Jesus Christ's sake, Amen.

For some minutes after Jessica's prayer there was a deep and unbroken silence in the room, Daniel still hiding his face upon the pillow, and the minister standing beside them with bowed head and closed eyes, as if he also were praying. When he looked up again at the forsaken and desolate child, he saw that her feeble hand had fallen from her face, which looked full of rest and peace, while her breath came faintly but regularly through her parted lips. He took her little hand into his own with a pang of fear and grief; but instead of the mortal chillness of death, he felt the pleasant warmth and moisture of life. He touched Daniel's shoulder, and as he lifted up his head in sudden alarm, he whispered to him, The child is not dead, but is only asleep.

Before Jessica was fully recovered, Daniel rented a little house for himself and his adopted daughter to dwell in. He made many enquiries after her mother, but she never appeared again in her old haunts, and he was well pleased that there was nobody to interfere with his charge of Jessica. When Jessica grew strong enough, many a cheerful walk had they together, in the early mornings, as they wended their way to the railway bridge, where the little girl took her place behind the stall, and soon learned to serve the daily customers; and many a happy day was spent in helping to sweep and dust the chapel, into which she had crept so secretly at first, her great delight being to attend to the pulpit and the vestry, and the pew where the minister's children sat, while Daniel and the woman he employed cleaned the rest of the building. Many a Sunday also the minister in his pulpit, and his little daughters in their pew, and Daniel treading softly about the aisles, as their glance fell upon Jessica's eager, earnest, happy face, thought of the first time they saw her sitting amongst the congregation, and of Jessica's first prayer.