

JESSICA'S FIRST PRAYER

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Jessica's first prayer by Hesba Stretton

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BY

HESBA STRETTON

AUTHOR OF

'LITTLE MEG'S CHILDREN' 'THE FISHERS OF DERRY HATON'

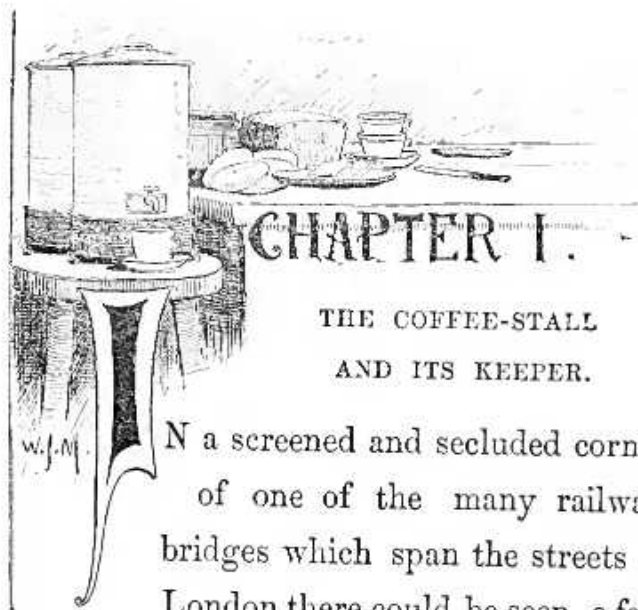
'SEDE'S CHARITY' 'ALONE IN LONDON' 'CAROLA'

&c.

LONDON

THE RELIGIOUS TRACT SOCIETY

56 PATERNOSTER ROW, 65 ST PAUL'S CHURCHYARD



CHAPTER I.

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 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 workpeople were thronging into the City on their 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 inquiries 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 workpeople

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 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