



# Children's Stories That Never Grow Old

## JESSICA'S FIRST PRAYER

**I**N a corner of one of the railway bridges which span the streets of London, years ago, was a coffee stall, kept by an elderly, solemn-faced man.

One day a pair of bright dark eyes gazed hungrily at him and the slices of bread and butter on his board. A thin, meager face belonged to the eyes, half hidden by a mass of matted hair. A tattered frock was slipping down over the shivering shoulders of a little girl. Stooping down to a basket behind his stall, he saw two bare little feet constantly moving on the cold, damp pavement.

She stood silently, and hungrily watched each cupful of coffee which he poured out of his can, and he heard her lips smack, as if she, too, were drinking some.

"Come, now," he said, at last; "why don't you go away, little girl?"

"I'm just going, sir," she answered; "only 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 sprill little laugh.



"**H**AVE you had no breakfast?" said the coffee stall keeper.

"No," she replied, as she turned away. She had gone but half a dozen steps when he called to her, and in an instant she was back again at the stall.

"Step in here," said the owner, in a whisper; "here's a little coffee left over and a few crusts. You must never come again, for I never give to beggars, and if you'd begged, I'd have called the police. There, put your poor feet toward the fire."

She was seated upon an empty basket, with her feet near the pan of charcoal, and a steaming cup of coffee on her lap.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Jessica," said the girl; "but mother and everybody calls me Jess. But I'm tired of the name. It's Jess here and Jess there; and everybody wants me to go errands, and gives me smacks, kicks and pinches as a reward. I wish I could stay here for ever and ever just as I am!" she cried. "But now you're going away, and I'm never to come again or you'll set the police on me!"



**T**HE coffee-stall keeper looked around to see if there were any other ragged children within sight, and then he said:

"If you'll promise not to come again for a whole week, and not to tell anybody else, you may come once more; but you must be off now."

"All right," answered Jess, as she started down the street.

Jessica kept her part of the bargain, and was back at the stall in just one week. She slipped between the trestles of his stand and took her seat on the empty basket. She seemed even thinner and more ragged than before.

"What's your name?" she asked, as she sipped her coffee.

"My Christian name is Daniel."

"You're very good, aren't you, Mr. Daniel?" said Jess.

"I am afraid not," he answered, uneasily. "But if you do not tell, you may come every morning for your breakfast."



**F**OR weeks Jessica came every morning to the coffee stall. She told Daniel that she lived in a hayloft over an old stable. The entrance was by a wooden ladder, through a trapdoor in the floor of the loft.

One evening, as Jessica wandered far away from her dirty, cold room, she saw the well-known figure of her only friend, the coffee-stall keeper. Jessica followed him until he stopped before the iron gates of a large church, which he unlocked and passed on to the doorway. She followed him until she stood in the carpeted aisle, with high pews on each side. Daniel disappeared for a moment or two into the vestry, while Jessica stole silently up under the dark pews. He soon appeared again, dressed in a long gown, and she stood spellbound. As his eyes fell upon her, he said, harshly:

"Come, now; you must take yourself out of this. This isn't any place for such as you."

"Mother beat me," she said, "and I seen you and followed you. It's a nice place. What do the people do here?"

"**T**HEY come here to pray," whispered Daniel.

"What is pray?" asked Jessica.

"Never mind," he said. "You must be off, and must never come again."

"Isn't there a dark corner that I could hide in?" she asked.

"No," said he; "run away."

Jessica went to the doors and slipped behind one of them. Here Sunday after Sunday she hid herself, but one day the minister's children saw her crouching in her hiding place.

"Oh, don't have me drove away!" she cried. "It's all the pleasure I've got. I want to find out what prayer and God is."

"Little girl," said the minister's daughter, "our papa is the minister, and if you will come, we will ask him what to do."

They took Jessica to the vestry, where the min-



"**W**HAT is your name?" he said.

"Jessica," she answered. "Are you the minister, sir?"

"Yes," he answered.

"What is a minister?" she asked.

"A servant," he replied.

"Please, sir, whose servant are you?"

"The servant of God and man," he answered.

"Jessica, I am your servant."

The child shook her head and laughed, and asked: "Who is God?"

"Jessica," he said, "there is a place close under my pulpit where you shall sit. Be a good girl and listen, and you shall hear something about God."

Before she could believe it for very gladness, Jessica found herself inside the church facing the glittering organ.



**W**HEN the service was over, the minister came down from the pulpit, and, taking Jessica by the hand, he led her into the vestry.

"Child," he said, with a smile, "it is no easy thing to know God. But this one thing we know: that He is our Father. For Father, Jessica."

"I never had any father," she said.

"God is your Father," he answered. "We have only to speak, and He hears, and we may ask Him for whatever we want."

"Will He let me speak to Him as well as these fine children?" asked Jessica.

"Yes," said the minister; "you may ask Him this moment for what you want."

Jessica gazed around with wide-open eyes, and then she shut her eyes and, bending her head, she said:

"O God! I want to know about You. And please pay Mr. Dan'l for all the warm coffee he's give me."

The minister, with tears in his eyes, added "Amen!" to Jessica's first prayer.



**E**VERY Sunday evening the barefooted and bare-headed child made her way to the church. But at last there came a Sunday when Jessica did not come, and Daniel looked in vain for her.

When the next Sunday came, Jessica's seat was still empty. Daniel was worried, and went to the dirty court to find her. There he found her in the loft of the stable, where her mother had left her, ill, alone, and half starved.

Daniel took Jessica to his home, where she grew strong and happy, and where she never felt hunger or cold again.

