

HOW BILLY WENT UP IN THE WORLD.

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CHAPTER IX.

THREE YEARS LATER.

Billy Knox, who went up in the Langham Fair balloon, had disappeared—the Will Knox of three years later had, in personal appearance, very little resemblance to the long-legged, fourteen-year-old Arab. Three years of good living, and of healthy exercise in farm work, had made him a broad-shouldered, handsome young fellow. Even the obstinate red hair had taken on a shade dark enough to be no longer conspicuous; while there was a gleam of good comradeship in Billy's black eye, something open and attractive in his sun-burned face. As Silas and Prissy had predicted, his career in the district school had been highly successful. He had led the boys in every kind of mischief known or to be devised. He had tormented all the girls, Nan excepted; but he had carried the old will and spirit into his study. He learned everything between the covers of the books he attacked. He spelled down the school when occasion offered, and no boy learned great swelling orations easier, or roared them out more emphatically, than Billy Knox, on "speaking days."

The Ellerys continued to befriend him, and Silas Barnard many a time had, as Billy confessed, made him "toe the mark," when he was a out to cut a quite unalloyed cheer of some sort. Now "Will" was seven years old. He had learned considerable about farm work in the past three years, and he liked it well enough to think he would become a farmer; but he wished first to get more of an education. There was in the near town of Sefton, an excellent academy, where were taught all the higher English branches, as well as Greek and Latin.

Billy—for so his farm friends continued to call him—resolved to give himself, by some means, at least one school year at the Academy. Accordingly, one morning, late in the summer, he started for Sefton, to see how this might be accomplished. As he passed the cottage, Prissy Tarbox called to him to stop there a moment, while she made ready a parcel to send by him.

"All right," he returned, going in to see granny, who sat comfortably enjoying the late breakfast that Prissy had set out for her. It seemed to Billy that three years had made granny younger. Indeed, she had, after one severe attack of illness, recovered more strength of body and greater clearness of mind than she had possessed for a long time previous. To be sure, this morning she asked Billy three times, with eager curiosity, where he was going; and she forgot almost immediately the answer she received; but she remembered that he had mended her rocking-chair the day before, and now insisted on his sitting in it.

"So you're going to try town-life a while, are you?" asked Prissy, tying her bundle. "How are you going to manage?"

"Well, you know the fourth story of the Academy is divided into rooms for fellows from the country. They can bring their provisions from home, cook for themselves, or board in town; the room rent is small."

"What are you going to do?"

"I can tell you better when I have found out. If you'll lend me a loaf of bread I'll tuck it under my arm and play I am Benjamin Franklin. I am as poor as he was and twice as promising, if my friends only thought so. You know I'll be a great success in some line, don't you granny?"

The old woman set down her trembling cup and let her mild blue eyes rest on the boyish face, as she answered, tenderly:

"Yes, Ben, if you start right."

Prissy smiled, thinking of Ben Franklin, but Billy knew she thought him the little ben who long ago started right, and that in heaven, not here. He said, as Prissy gave him the bundle:

"How shall I start right?"

"Take with you the message for to-day. See, Prissy has it ready for me every morning."

Billy followed the glance of her eye toward the wall, where just a little higher than her head hung her "texts," in great printed letters—"There, child, you couldn't start with a better one. Just you go saying, honestly: 'Teach me to do thy will; for thou art my God: thy Spirit is good: lead me into the land of brightness.'"

"Sefton is a pretty hard town. I don't believe it's located in that land," said Billy, lightly, but under his breath; then giving the old lady a kindly pat on her bent shoulders, he was off again.

The Sefton Academy was a great stone building, quite picturesque, being overran with vines, and standing in a grove of maple and elm trees. The principal and his family occupied part of the first floor, the second and third floors were for recitation and assembly rooms; the upper floor was reserved for the purpose mentioned. Billy pushed open the great front door and went quietly about examining the empty rooms, on up through halls, and came at last to the "Boards' Hall." The rooms here were low and dark with the smoke of innumerable messes cooked by generations of boys, while the woodwork of every window and door was covered with names, pictures, or doggerel rhymes. Each room had a closet, but no furniture beyond a "four-foot," instead, corded with ropes, on which could rest the mattress and the boy, to be each season provided. A withered old man, with his neck curiously awry, was sweeping the hall into which these upper rooms opened, and Billy asked him a few questions about ways and means.

"Yes, I know about everything, for I've took care of this here building goin' on fourteen years. Some rooms is more, some less, accordin' to size and heatin' conveniences. That 'ere north one, now, is big, has two closets, and the fellers that had it last year could fire up there hot in the coldest weather."

Billy listened attentively, but with some disappointment, on learning that this meant "took care" of the building. He had imagined he might pay his way by some such work.

"What is the cheapest room here?" he asked, putting his head into a small apartment with no chimney-hole.

"That very cubby-hole you're in now. It can be warmed only by the general heat from the hall, and there ain't no arrangements for cookin'." "Dingy!" Jess o' Hiram Cox had it last year; he made his coffee over a lamp, got something warm at a catin' house when he was sharp set, and et cold snacks the rest of the time."

"Hiram is still alive, I suppose?" said Billy musing as he stood by the window. He wanted to be entirely self-supporting throughout this school year—how was he going to be so? He studied the church steeple, the long shaded streets, looked away to the distant hills, and the line of woods beyond the river, glittering in the noon-day sun. Then he called out to the old man, who was about departing with his broom and dust pan:

"Do you know any way a fellow could get outside work enough to keep him here?"

"Well, this Hi Cox did that very thing, but for the life of me, I don't remember what 'twas. Kind of seems as if some old maid hired him to—to—well, I give it up!"

"I wish I knew what he did. Any old maid may have me for ordinary work or for ornamental purposes, if she will pay me for the time out of school."

There was something about Billy that interested "Uncle Zeph," who came in and perched himself on the old bedstead to rest, putting the broom between his legs, and twisting one arm around the tall post.

"Do you know any of the Sefton folks?"

"Some of 'em."

"Know old Doctor Higbee?"

"I've seen him racing around the country in a two-wheeled 'shay,' with half a dozen dogs behind him."

"Yes, he likes dogs; he's a queer case, old Higbee is! You needn't never go near him if you ain't got something awful ailing of you. He'll act madder than a hornet if you pester him with little aches and ails. My wife's weakly, and one-spell her stomach ached—betwixt you and me, and this bedpost that was about all there was of it; but nothin' would do but she must consult Doctor Higbee. She'd figured out just what did ail her, and she mostly wanted to go and tell him. She said her 'erds was ossified partly, and partly they was all galvanized over with a fungus growth; and how on earth was I to know't want so, if Silome said 'twas so! I jest took her and went centerin' over to the office. Well, old Higbee set to and berated her for eatin' salt pork, pickles, mince pie and green tea for her supper; and he never gave her medicine enough to kill a kitten. He neglects folks that way, awfully, till they git just to where

Death's sort o' got one claw on 'em; then, I tell you, there's a free fight betwixt him and the old doctor. Why, the sick 'un will fairly get one foot into the tomb, but old Higbee will have a grip on his e at tails and yank—yank him back every time. He beats many a time after the heers-at-law have bought black kids for the funeral. He!"

Billy began to betray his impatience, and laughingly exclaimed: "But I haven't got the stomach-ache nor one foot in the tomb." "No, no, certainly not; but the old doctor, you know, why, he has hired one boy off and on for one thing or another, he?"

"Where does he live?"

"Next the Methodist church, in a big red brick house, and his sign is over the door."

Uncle Zeph was perfectly willing to sit still a while longer in order to find out leisurely where Billy came from, and all about him; but in a moment the young fellow was whistling down the old worn staircase, with full purpose of mind to find Doctor Higbee. This was easily done, for his house was only a block away, and the old gentleman himself stood on the piazza, awaiting some one or something. Billy gave a quick look at his weather-beaten face, framed around with yellow hair, which was gray and white in patches; then he explained in the briefest way that he was looking for work, and under what conditions he hoped to find it.

"Know anything about horses?"

"Everything about them," returned Billy. The doctor put a few more questions, then remarked: "A woman rules every house. I haven't any wife, but my sister keeps us all in order here. She has said lately she wouldn't have any more hired men eating and sleeping in the house. The last one broke the cook's heart, and then eloped with the chamber-maid, Catherine! Come to the door a minute!"

In response to his call, which came from no weak lungs, a tall, prim lady appeared, a polished, metallic kind of a spinner, clad in spotless steel gray. She heard what the doctor and Billy had to say; then she was inclined to make terms with the latter. After further consultation, the old gentleman made this proposal. Billy was to do all necessary work at the stable, morning, noon and night. He was, as soon as the weather grew cold, to bring coal and feed the furnace which warmed the house, and to empty the ashes. Later yet, he must shovel snow from the walks about the place. He must, when required, sit and study evenings in the doctor's office, in order to receive messages when the old gentleman was out. For these, and some other lighter duties, Billy was offered an amount sufficient to pay all his weekly expenses, if he lived with the utmost economy. The contract was made on the spot, and Billy returned to the Academy with a light heart. He found old Uncle Zeph still busy, and this time he fully satisfied his curiosity regarding himself, while he told him of his bargain with the doctor, adding:

"Now, I can engage a room here, and be on hand when the term commences. You better save this little rat hole for me."

"No, you don't need to have that. You jest engage half this good-sized west room, that can have a stove in it. Somebody will take the other half quick enough, and there you are, as fine as a fiddle. I'll see you have a decent chap in with you. Squire Ellery has done me more'n one favor; I can do that much for one that's anything to him. Though, if you ain't racing one of the family, I may say that Stan Ellery was about the worst out of anything we ever had in this school. I was proper glad to see the last of him. I heard no tutor would teach him, and he had to come here. Where is he, now?"

"He is here in Sefton, reading law."

"Reading law!" sneered Uncle Zeph. "Well, good morning to you, Knox. I s'pose you'll be fetchin' your traps over a day or two before school?"

"Yes, Mother Ellery says she shall come over and see I have a nail to hang a towel on—and a towel for the nail," laughed Billy, starting for the home tramp.

When Billy reported proceedings to the family everybody was pleased. Mr. Ellery had intended to send him to school that year at his own expense, if the young fellow found no work; but he thought it best to let Billy be independent just as far as possible.

Nan had attended a girls' school in Sefton for a long time. She boarded in the town

from Monday until Friday night, but came home always to spend Saturday and Sunday. She was glad Billy was to be near her, as he might sometimes be of service to her. She had ceased to look at him entirely in the light of a servant. In mental ability and in physical endowments he was the equal of any farmer's son of his age in the community. Nan and he had frequent brisk encounters of their wits, and at such times each spoke with great plainness.

In the beginning of Billy's career he had "hated" all girls, but after brief acquaintance he accepted Nan as a girl almost "wide awake enough to be a boy." At this period of Billy's existence, he was somewhat given to attending singing-schools for the sake of the "girls." He often wrote in their autograph books, and made them, at least several of them, rings out of carved nutshells. Toward Nan only his sentiments remained the same, and he was careful that she should never classify him as a "spongy." He feared her sharp little tongue, which seldom spared him any railing, if, in his opinion, his foibles deserved her sarcasm or ridicule. But she could be very pleasant and unselfish; as, for instance, she was at this time, in helping Billy get his room at the Academy in order.

One day, after much debate, and to little work, Mrs. Ellery and Nan requested Billy to get out the "lumber wagon," and aid them in getting his housekeeping apparatus over to Sefton, that they might personally superintend its arrangement after it arrived there. This was accordingly done; then, a few days before the school began, the three went over and made the place very attractive in Billy's estimation. They took comfortable bedding, bright calico curtains, a big red wooden arm chair, a good lamp, and all needed dishes.

"Now mind what I say, my boy," said good Mrs. Ellery; "spend your wages for proper clothing and books, but don't bother yourself to buy things to eat."

Before she could add anything, Billy gave a low bowish nod of disappointment, and expostulated with her thus:

"But I must eat sometimes; say on Sundays, just a morsel. My education is going to my head, not into my stomach."

"Now be still, Billy. I mean that when we come in for Nan, Fridays, and again to bring her back Mondays, I shall send you bread, butter, cold meat, beans, pie and doughnuts. Bakery food is poor stuff, and any messes you would cook up would be worse yet."

"Oh, Billy can make custard, mother," exclaimed Nan, who was spreading out a yellow calico bed-quilt, on whose glowing surface blossomed blood-red tulips and grass-green rushes. This last was Prissy's contribution.

"Don't you remember the day he surprised us with one, when we came home from Langham—ten eggs to a quart of milk, and flavored it with essence of peppermint?"

Billy tried to overpower her laughter with loud driving of tacks. He endured a great deal of teasing weekly, seeing how busy her deft hands were working for his comfort.

Nan was a bright little girl. Everybody said "little," although she was seventeen, but she had put on no young lady airs and graces. Her hair hung down her back in the same dark "pig tail," as Billy ungalantly styled it, and her simple dresses were still short enough to show her trim ankles.

"There," said Mrs. Ellery, at last. "You have things enough to be quite comfortable here, even if your room-mate should not provide his share. I hope he will be somebody well-disposed; no fellow with bad or disagreeable habits."

"I hope not, but it won't matter so much. I can stand it if he is not a very tame animal, for I shall be in school-rooms during school hours and at the doctor's a good share of the time out of school."

"There will be Saturdays and Sundays. I want you to go to church every Sunday, Billy."

"I will go as regularly as the parson himself."

The room was in perfect order before sunset; then Mrs. Ellery and Nan went home. Billy locked his door, gave the key to uncle Zeph, and did an errand or two in town before going to the farm. He was very hopeful and happy as he walked the pleasant streets in the golden afternoon light. The change of work, the new habits of life to be for a while, seemed really delightful. He planned to make the most of every moment. Sefton had a fine public library;