

## HOW BILLY WENT UP IN THE WORLD.

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## CHAPTER VI.

## A PURIFICATION.

In the summer months that followed Billy's entrance into the Ellery family, he learned more than in all his life previous as a vagabond. He was of course too young and too inexperienced to be put at any one long task involving much thought or responsibility, but the farmer gave him plenty to do; and after explaining all the whys and wherefores, he required Billy to be faithful and industrious. Frequently he had some work to do for Mrs. Ellery, and she taught him to be careful and neat. He strained the milk and helped her churn. On rare occasions he washed dishes, but always with a secret protest, because that was properly Nan's work, and her saucy black eyes were usually full of fun at the awkward sabs he made into the water. Nan would have been astonished to know how Billy felt towards her about this time. A week or so after that night, when he had heard her say he knew almost nothing, she found a spelling-book, a second reader, and the First Lessons in Grammar. Armed with these, and upheld with a virtuous desire to do "Missionary work," Nan one day walked out on the piazza where the boy sat mending a horse-net, and said, "You can't read very well, can you, Billy?"

"Not so well as usual," he replied, waxing a length of twine with a big lump of beeswax.

"As usual?" repeated Nan, somewhat puzzled.

"Well, then, not so well as before I went up in that wallow, and her saucy black eyes were usually full of fun at the awkward sabs of intelligent sobriety, that Nan asked quickly."

"Why did it burst your brains?"

"Awfully. I was most ready to enter college before that. I talked Latin easier that nothing; but going up so suddenly as I did, and coming down suddenly, was a kind of a shock to a fellow who couldn't spread any wings to save his life. It gave me softening of the brain."

"I thought that ailed you," said Nan, just as sedately; "but I supposed you didn't know what the cause was. I was just going to offer to teach you any lesson you wanted to learn. Mother thought you ought not to stay so ignorant."

"That's painful a bit," said saucy Billy; "and likely as not all my old education will come back some day." Then he could not resist a provoking grin, as he glanced up at the trim little would-be teacher.

Nan's dignity was so much offended that she exclaimed severely: "Do you intend to grow up without knowing anything?"

"No marm."

"Do you want me to teach you anything?"

Alas for the cause of education, the "good-little girl," tone of Nan's voice rasped Billy's already irritated temper, and he doggedly returned:

"No, I don't want anything of you."

"Well, you are the most ill-mannered boy I ever saw; and I don't know what father took you for, I'm sure. I wouldn't teach you now if you teased me ever so hard," returned Nan, her voice loud and sharp with anger. She stood a second after saying that, as if she were tempted to add something more. Then hearing her mother calling her she turned away hastily.

For a moment Billy's revenge was pleasant; a girl had despised him, and he had made her "hopping mad." And as he went on mending his net, his face grew very red, for slowly and surely he realized that he had acted like a "jackanapes." He did not know much, and Nan only saw the truth. It was kind in her father to tell her to help him, and kind in her to be willing to do so, after she thought about it, as she evidently had thought.

It seemed horrid to have to be the victim of kindness, but if he had been singled out for her effort in that way, even his untutored sense told him he should have either accepted or refused the offered help, in at least a decently civil manner. It never occurred to him to apologize for his rudeness—far from it; but a certain loss of respect made him sullen all the rest of the day. Several times before night the old lawless devil returned to Billy to strike off and commit

some folly. Once or twice he looked down the pleasant country road that passed the house, and wondered how it would seem to be starting away, nobody knew where, to seek his fortune. Of old, when such a mood possessed the boy he followed it; but it was well for him that he had wit enough now to reason that a good home, and honest work, was a present fortune for a nobody's boy.

Silas Barnard was a help to him in times like these. Billy would often talk freely with him and get much homely, sensible advice in return. Si was also, very kind to granny, and to Miss Tarbox. He continued to milk their cow evenings, and he often stayed later to render them any little service. This evening, when Billy was not so well inclined as usual, he looked for Silas to return and divert him by playing the fiddle; but Silas stayed at the cottage until after eight o'clock. About that time Billy went to the old well for a drink, and there encountered Stanton Ellery. The boys had a notion that, in warm weather, the water drawn up in the old-fashioned bucket was cooler than that from the modern pump nearer the house. Billy, in particular, liked to come to this spot, for a huge tree overshadowed it, and on the wooden platform, now moss-covered, he could sit with Si Barnard, when the latter felt like fiddling.

"I suppose you did not have a well like this on every corner of New York streets, did you, Bill?" exclaimed Stanton.

"Haven't you ever been in the city?"

"Oh, dozens of times. It is the only place to live. The country was made for cattle. By-and-by, when I'll get enough of books to suit Uncle Tom, I'll get out of this old pasture-land. What did you see that was lively in your time, Billy? Didn't you say you washed whiskey glasses in a concert saloon, once?"

"Yes, I did it for a week. Bob Phipps had the place, but a truck run over him, and his boss offered me my grub to be there nights. It was mighty poor grub, though, on the free lunch order, you know; and the show just wasn't worth the late hours. I lodged in a dry-goods box in the Bowery about those times, and if I had tried to sleep days, you know, somebody would have been overhauling my bed-room, as likely as not; so I retired from the trade."

As Billy talked, he had wound up the dripping, creaking bucket, and was refreshing himself from the half shell of a cocoanut that hung close by the well. Then he turned away to go to bed.

"Sit down a while, young chap, and let me put you through your paces," said Stanton in his lazy, good-natured way.

Billy dropped on the dry grass, and the boys continued to talk of city scenes in low life. He began by telling Stanton of that which seemed to him the most entertaining; of great down-town fires; of the thrilling escapes of the firemen; of military parades; of a certain strike, and a lively mob that discomfited the police. But young Ellery was not greatly interested. He questioned him of other things, that had already begun to drop out of the boy's thoughts.

Under exactly the same circumstances, and after the same training, Stanton Ellery would have betrayed coarser instincts than Billy Knox. Stanton's life had passed in pure, sweet, country scenes. He had walked through woods, and had never seen a wild-flower, or cared a straw whether or not birds sang, or tall ferns waved, or that curious little insects, and animals were all around him. But he never heard a low joke at the town grocery which he did not remember. Billy Knox had met a great deal of wickedness, had seen and heard bad things, because there were where he had been; but it was as true of him figuratively as it was literally, that, when he came to filth, he had walked around it, instead of turning it over curiously.

To night, as the two boys sat in the faint star-light, under the shade of the black tree, Billy could not fail soon to perceive, that what his soft-mannered, white-handed companion wanted, was to have him tell him, in detail, of the most vulgar scenes, the smuttiest, slimiest places he knew. It was somewhat awkward for Billy at first, because the worst of his old street companions had not taxed him to make himself agreeable in this fashion, ever before. They knew as much as he knew, but what they wanted to know, as a rule, was something amusing, or even helpful. However, when Billy saw that the

lower his allusions were, and the viler his stories became, the more excessively did they amuse Stanton Ellery—who was he that he should be fastidious? Whatever he did, he did with all his might; and now he raked his memory for material wherewith to satisfy his listener, who, by exciting questions would lead him on, or by appreciation expressed in his long, low, musical laughter, would flatter Billy's self-conceit. They sat there an hour; then Stanton, finding that Billy had apparently exhausted his resources, rose up, yawned, and sauntered off toward the house, remarking:

"Well! Well, my little red herring, you are pretty well salted. You'll keep! I always knew you couldn't be so fresh as you seemed."

A moment after Stanton had gone, Billy thought he heard a step behind the well-sweep. He turned quickly, but it was too dark to see any distance. It was late, too, and time for all doors to be locked. That was Si's business, and Si had returned, for the light from his lantern could now be seen glimmering through the barn door. Billy wished he need not go to bed; he was not at all sleepy. He would like Silas to fiddle his liveliest dancing-tunes. He sprang up, and had gone about a rod, when a man pounced down, and gripping him by the shoulder, exclaimed:

"I want you in the barn!"

"Well, land, Si! You needn't wring a fellow's neck off, if you do. I can take an invitation easier than that," returned Billy; adding: "What's up? A cow choking again?" as Silas strode away toward the lantern and the open barn door.

Billy followed fast, into a little room where Si kept his tools, carriage grease and old clothes. He went nearer, as the man opened a little keg and looked grimly in, then searched and found a cloth.

"What is it Si?" he asked, again.

"It is this," said Silas, sternly; and turning, he clutched Billy in two powerful hands that held him firmly; "I have stood by that 'ere well for half an hour, and I feel as if my nose was full of a stench that came from some bottomless pit. Now, Billy Knox, I ain't got no call to attend to Stanton Ellery. He is a gentlemanly young cuss, that bids fair to be a gentlemanly devil one of these days; but I am amazed at you. It seemed to me to-night, that you m-b-rotten through and through. Fast off, I was of as good a mind as ever I had to eat, to go fetch the boss, and let him send you flyin'; but I held on a little longer, seen as how Stan was egg'n' you on, and I've concluded to give you a chance—one more chance—for decency. But I hope, for gracious sake, you throw up all the horrible stuff there is in you. I've got a thing or two to say, after I've cleaned your mouth out so you'll be fit to speak to the rest of the family in the morning."

Thus saying, and quicker than a wink, Si Barnard had Billy's red head under his shirt sleeve, and into Billy's mouth, opened to roar, had gone a swab of soft-soap that did good execution. Up, down, and around his gums, and into his cheeks went brown chunks of the strong dark substance. The frantically kicking heels behind, upset a peck measure of meal, a pail of water, and waved wildly in the air like banners of distress. Si was emphatically at the head of this undertaking, and cared for nothing in the rear. He soaped and scrubbed the spitting, spluttering mouth, in a way no boy would forget to his dying day; then he suddenly dumped Billy on a bran chest, and went out, locking the small room door.

"I will be back soon, when I've done a chore or two. You'll get your breath by that time, and can listen to me."

Silas' voice was so void of all temper, so full of self-control, that Billy was for a moment or so surprised at himself that he was not madder at the treatment he had received. A little water remained in a pail not overturned, and dipping up this as best he could, he removed the soap clinging to his teeth; but the process was far from agreeable.

By-and-by Si returned, set down the lantern by his feet, and perched himself on a barrel top, from which position he silently studied Billy, who began to feel a strange new emotion of shame.

"I know all about common animals," calmly remarked Si, at last. "I've seen and heard most of the wild beasts at one time or another, but to the best of my knowledge there ain't no one brute among 'em all that seems to love pure filth because it is filth—

and that one is the hog. He ain't pretty—he looks like a hog, and ain't got but one set of manners. He is for that very reason not in danger of doing much harm, because he is kept in his pen and not invited to sit at folks' tables or to keep company with 'em. There is a human creature that is a great sight meaner and worse to have around than an honest out-and-out dirty beast. It is a boy or a man who can act like a gentleman, smooth nice ways, good grammar kind of talk before folks he's afraid of—but when he gets a chance, down he goes roarin' in the mire—spattering everybody and everything, soakin' 'everything he touches; callin' after him some little wretch like you that has just been set onto your pegs in a clean spot. I'm ashamed of you, Billy Knox!"

"Haven't done nothing much—only talked. You must be green, Si, if you never heard folks go on sort of free and easy," muttered Billy, sullenly.

"Look up here, boy!"

Billy lifted his head. Si took the lantern, and holding it close to the boy's face, he leaned forward, saying: "Tell me the truth now. Do you like such kind of talk? Do you begin it when you are along with other boys?"

"No, I don't," said Billy, firmly.

"Do you think much of such stuff?"

"I forgot I'd ever seen or heard the most of that—that nonsense I had over to-night, until I got a going, Si," replied Billy, looking him full in the eyes with his own bright ones.

Si saw truth and shame both in the face upturned to him. He put down the lantern, and said:

"I'll believe you until I find you fooling me, on the condition that this purifying you've had keeps your mouth clean hereafter. Do you suppose I'll have you talk as you did to-night, and then go to the cottage visiting them good women there, breathin' the same air with old granny, who looks as if she'd got one tired old foot right on the threshold of heaven, and her face half way in it—and Prissy too! I think considerable of Prissy. I'd sooner turn a regular hog in on them, just as I said before, than a man made out of a boy like Stan Ellery. I've often noticed that a boy that had a real and out nice, pretty sister, didn't want no such fool talking boys around her. You ain't never had any sister, had you, Billy?"

"No; and I'm glad of it. I hate girls!"

"And judgin' from your talk to-night," continued Si, with deliberate study of his youthful listener's dogged countenance, "judgin' from talk of your past, I suppose your mother must ha' been a low, vulgar talkin'!"

Billy gave one bound, and landing about on Si's stomach, would have rolled him headlong off the reeling barrel; but perhaps Si expected to be bombarded, for he struggled good-naturedly, and cried out, "I take it all back, Billy. Maybe she wasn't!"

"She was the best woman that ever lived!" roared the boy. "She was ten thousand times better than any mother you ever had, Si Barnard! She—"

"I take it back, Billy, every word. There, stop prancin'; you'll break my lantern," urged Silas, adding, in a tone that quieted and moved Billy, "I know what a good mother is—but mine did not have a very good son. I loved her, God knows I did! But I made her no end of trouble. I run away from home against her wishes, 'cause I could not live peaceable with my oldest brother and my father. I wouldn't come home when she used to write and tell me to come, but I always said to myself that I'd earn some money for a black silk dress (father was awful tight, and she never had a decent dress to her back); then soon as I could show 'em that I could take care of myself, I'd go home and take mother that there nice present. Well, I got my steady work, and I got the dress, as sure as you live. It laid three weeks in my trunk before I could get leave of absence to take it to her. I used to look at it in that old hair cloth trunk, just as women folks look into cradles at their babies; but you see it sort of meant to me how I loved that poor weavily little woman who had had precious little comfort in life. One day I got a telegraph. Lor, how them yellow envelopes makes me shiver!—an' it said she was sick, dangerous. I didn't lose no time, but when I got there, they was asking what they should lay her out in. I handed that black silk dress to the neighbor women, and my mother had it for her shroud. But