

BOYS AND GIRLS

Reforming Frederick

(Walter Leon Sawyer, in 'The Youth's Companion.')

The south pasture was the last place where Elkanah Watson expected to meet with a surprise. Boy and man he had known it for fifty years, and he could have mapped the location of every stone. Yet never before had he encountered there—or elsewhere—the very dirty little boy who jumped up from a fence corner as Elkanah approached on a certain September morning.

Elkanah was slow of speech; he opened his mouth and stared at the stranger.

'I ain't done nothin'!' the boy cried, defiantly, after they had looked at each other a moment. 'I wasn't goin' to be buried up in the ground, though, you bet!'

'Hey?' Who are ye, sonny?'

'Im Fred-er-ick.' The child prolonged the word in a curious fashion, as if he had been warned never to let go of it. 'The men put my mother in a box and carried her off in a black waggon, and I was 'fraid they or the cops would come back and get me, so I skun out.'

'Where do ye live?'

'In Galvin's Alley.'

'That's in the city, ain't it?'

'Yep,' said Frederick.

'Well, how d'ye get out here, thirty mile?' asked Elkanah.

'I hooked a ride, an' then I walked.'

The boy's black eyes seemed rather shifty, but evasive glances were the only sign he gave of possible untruthfulness. He 'spoke up' promptly, too, when the farmer questioned him. Yet the situation perplexed Elkanah, who was not quick at reaching conclusions. 'Haven't ye got any folks?' he demanded.

The boy's lips quivered. 'I ain't got nothin',' he answered.

Elkanah turned decisively in the direction of the house. 'Well, I can't have ye starvin' to death on my premises,' he said, with affected sternness. And then he added, 'You come along o' me, sonny boy.'

It would be easy to dwell on the details of Frederick's introduction to the Watsons' place: to tell how 'Aunt Rhoda' Watson fed him—which was agreeable, and scrubbed him—which was not; how she borrowed garments to replace his rags, and fitted him out a day or two later with clothing that was almost beyond Frederick's fondest conceptions of splendor; how the boy got acquainted with the wonders of the farm, and at the same time had his first experience of the crowning triumph of civilization—a Christian home.

But the essential incident at this stage in Frederick's career was Elkanah's visit to the city and to Galvin's Alley, where—although in deadly fear for his head and his pocketbook—he lingered until he had learned all that anybody could tell him about the boy.

'I guess it's so, that he hasn't got any folks,' Elkanah reported to Aunt Rhoda that night, when Frederick was safe in bed. 'Near as I can find out, his father and mother—McKendree, the name was—were pretty poor sticks. They're both dead. Folks do say, Rhody,' Elkanah added reluctantly, 'that this boy was a terrible little thief, reg'lar trained for it. 'Tain't me that's sayin' it, Rhody,' for his wife showed signs of vehement indignation. 'I don't know as he is, and I don't

know as he isn't. I thought I ought to tell ye, though.'

'Couldn't expect much of a child that's been brought up the way he has,' Aunt Rhoda retorted. 'If he was kind o' light-fingered, it's probably because nobody ever told him different. Like enough he stole when he was starving. He's as pretty behaved a young one, so far, as anybody'd want to see. I've been thinking, Elkanah, she ended abruptly, 'we might keep him a while and see how he did turn out. There's room enough here, land knows, and it would seem kind o' lonesome now without him.'

'That's what I've been thinkin', too, Rhody,' Elkanah agreed.

So speedily, and in spite of the warnings of his old neighbors, Elkanah took Frederick into the family. He was not old enough to appreciate his good fortune fully, perhaps, and he had an 'unsenti-

There it remained for five days. At the end of that time the minister's wife, chancing to call, identified the box as a 'scholars' companion' which her son had missed from his desk at school. She bore the trophy home with her. Aunt Rhoda let the matter pass, only saying gently to Frederick that he 'musn't make any more such mistakes.'

To outward seeming, he obeyed. Autumn glided into winter, and winter verged toward spring, and, so far as anybody knew, Frederick wore the white badge of perfect rectitude. He was handy as well as mentally alert, and he seemed always glad to be useful.

Out of school hours he fetched wood and water, went to the store and the post-office, attended to the thousand odd jobs that lie in wait for a boy on a farm, and seemed happily content withal. His foster-parents never had a doubt of him un-



THE FARMER LAID THE COMBINATION ON HIS PLATE AND STUDIED IT INTENTLY.

mental' disposition and made few displays of feeling; but he dropped into the home life and into school and Sunday school affairs as if he had always borne a part in them.

Frederick was a bright boy, and he went ahead with amazing rapidity. Aunt Rhoda and Elkanah were quite unrighteously proud when Frederick, returning from school one Friday night, showed them a japanned tin box, and told them with unwavering eyelids that it was his 'prize.'

'For spellin', sonny boy,' Elkanah queried benevolently, 'or figgers, or readin'?'

'He's spellin' in three letters,' Aunt Rhoda interjected; 'and it was only a little while ago he couldn't say the alphabet.'

Frederick gazed solemnly from one to the other. 'Uh-huh!' he observed. Then he seemed willing to drop the subject, and only anxious to take the box, which contained pencils and crayons, up to his own room. But Aunt Rhoda insisted that this, being his first prize, should have a place of honor. She set it on the parlor mantel.

til the mild spring day when, while Aunt Rhoda was putting his room to rights, she traced an overpowering odor to Frederick's trunk.

It was an old haircloth monster the boy had found in the attic and begged for his own. Nobody could imagine what he wanted to do with it, but the natural conclusion was that, as Elkanah said, he had planned 'some boy contraption—anything from makin' a c'lection of rocks to settin' a hen.'

She tiptoed over to the trunk and dragged it from under the edge of the bed. It was not locked, but the straps were elaborate and perplexing, and Aunt Rhoda's resolution—and breath—had almost failed her before she had mastered all their mysteries. Then she courageously threw up the lid.

Surely never before or since was seen such an assortment of things! If one could imagine a museum in a madhouse—a museum established by the patients—one would have something resembling Frederick's collection.

A carving-knife lay cheek by jowl with