

A GIRL OF THE LIMBERLOST

By GENE STRATTON-PORTER

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SYNOPSIS

Although a good scholar, Elnora Comstock, entering high school, is abashed by her country dress. She needs \$20 for books and tuition fees. Her mother is unsympathetic, and Elnora tells her troubles to Wesley Sinton, an old neighbor.

When Elnora was born her father was drowned in a swamp, embittering her mother's life. Elnora determines to raise money by gathering forest specimens. The Sintonas buy clothes for her.

Elnora, getting her books cheaply, finds a market with the Bird Woman for butterflies, Indian relics, etc.

Mrs. Comstock's devotion to her husband's memory will not permit her to sell trees or have oil wells dug on her land. The Sintonas bring Elnora new clothing.

Elnora is delighted with her outfit. Her mother says she must pay for it. Wesley and Margaret Sinton discuss the girl's affairs.

Pete Corson, a Limberlost frequenter, warns Elnora not to visit the Limberlost at night or go far into the swamp at any time.

Billy, a bright but untrained little chap, with a shiftless father and hungry brother and sister, gets Elnora's luncheon. Wesley, troubled by Corson's warning, investigates.

Sinton finds some one has been spying on Elnora. The girl feeds Billy again. She is "taken up" by the high school girls.

Billy's father dies, and the lad is taken home by Sinton, who makes provision for his brother and sister.

Margaret finds Billy mischievous, but her heart softens, and he is adopted. Pete helps Elnora to collect specimens. She buys a Mark Twain book for her mother.

(Continued from last week.)

Billy laid a grimy hand on the region of his stomach, and the filthy little waist sank close to the backbone. "Get your life, boss," he said cheerfully.

"How long have you been twisted?" asked Sinton.

Billy appealed to the others. "When was it we had the stuff on the bridge?"

"Yesterday morning," said the girl.

"Is that all gone?" asked Sinton.

"She went and told us to take it home," said Billy ruefully, "and 'cause she said so, we took it. Pa had come back, he was drinking some more, and he ate a lot of it—most the whole thing, and it made him sick as a dog, and he went and wasted all of it. Then he got drunk some more, and now he's asleep again. We didn't get hardly none."

"You children sit on the steps until the man comes," said Sinton. "I'll send you some things to eat with him. What's your name, sonny?"

"Billy," said the boy.

"Well, Billy, I guess you better come with me. I'll take care of him," Sinton promised the others. He reached a hand to Billy.

"I ain't no baby, I'm a boy," said Billy as he shuffled along beside Sinton, taking a kick at every movable object without regard to his battered toes.

Once they passed a Great Dane dog lolling after its master, and Billy ascended Sinton as if he was a tree and clung to him with trembling hot hands.

"I ain't afraid of that dog," scoffed Billy as he was again placed on the walk, "but one'd he took me for a rat or sompin and his teeth cut into my back. If I'd a done right I'd a took the law on him."

Sinton looked down into the indignant little face. The child was bright enough, he had a good head, but, oh, such a body!

Wesley Sinton reached his hand. They were coming into the business part of Onabasha, and the streets were crowded. Billy understood it to mean that he might lose his companion and took a grip. That little hot hand clinging tight to his, the sore feet recklessly scouring the walk, the hungry child panting for breath as he tried to keep even, caught Sinton in a tender, empty spot.

"Say, son," he said, "how would you like to be washed clean and have all the supper your skin could hold and sleep in a good bed?"

"Aw, gee!" said Billy. "I ain't dead yet. Them things is in heaven. Poor folks can't have them. Pa said so."

"Well, you can have them if you want to go with me and get them," promised Sinton.

"Kin I take some to Jimmy and Belle?"

"If you'll come with me and be my boy I'll see that they have plenty."

"What will pa say?"

"Your pa is in that kind of sleep now where he won't wake up, Billy," said Sinton. "I am pretty sure the law will give you to me if you want to come."

"When people don't ever wake up they're dead," announced Billy. "Is my pa dead?"

"Yes, he is," answered Sinton.

"And you'll take care of Jimmy and Belle, too?"

"I can't adopt all three of you," said Sinton. "I'll take you and see that they are well provided for. Will you come?"

"Yep, I'll come," said Billy. "Let's eat, first thing we do."

"All right," agreed Sinton. "Come into this restaurant." He lifted Billy to the lunch counter and ordered the clerk to give him as many glasses of milk as he wanted and a biscuit. "I think there's going to be fried chicken when we get home, Billy," he said, "so you just take the edge off now and fill up later."

CHAPTER X.

Wherein Billy Creates a Sensation in the Sinton Home.

WHILE Billy lunched Sinton called up the different departments and notified the proper authorities, ending with the Women's Relief association. He sent a basket of food to Belle and Jimmy, bought Billy a pair of trousers and a shirt and went to visiting Elnora.

"Why, Uncle Wesley?" cried the girl. "Where did you find Billy?"

"I've adopted him for the time being, if not longer," replied Sinton.

"Where did you get him?" queried the astonished Elnora.

"Well, young woman," said Sinton, "Mr. Brownie told me the history of your lunch box. It didn't seem so funny to me as it does to the rest of them, so I went to look up the father of Billy's family and make him take care of them or allow the law to do it for him. It will have to be the law."

"He's deader than anything!" broke in Billy. "He can't ever take all the meat any more."

"Billy!" gasped Elnora.

"Never you mind," said Sinton. "A child don't say such things about a father who loved and raised him right. When it happens the father alone is to blame. You won't hear Billy talk like that about me when I cross over."

"You don't mean you are going to take him to keep?"

"I'll soon need help," said Sinton. "Billy will come in just about right ten years from now, and if I raise him I'll have him the way I want him."

"But Aunt Margaret don't like boys," objected Elnora. "She won't want him in her home."

"In our home," corrected Sinton.

"What makes you want him?" marveled Elnora.

"God only knows," said Sinton. "Billy ain't so beautiful, and he ain't so smart, I guess it's because he's so human. My heart goes out to him."

"So did mine," said Elnora. "I love him. I'd rather see him eat my lunch than have it myself any time."

"What makes you like him?" asked Sinton.

"Why, I don't know," pondered Elnora. "He's so little, he needs so much, he's got such splendid grit and he's perfectly unselfish with his brother and sister! But we must wash him before Aunt Margaret sees him. I wonder if mother—"

"You needn't bother. I'm going to take him home the way he is," said Sinton. "I want Maggie to see the worst of it."

"I'm afraid"—began Elnora.

"So am I," said Sinton. "but I won't give him up. He's taken a sort of grip on my heart. I've always been crazy for a boy. Don't let him hear us."

"Don't let him get killed!" cried Elnora. During their talk Billy had wandered to the edge of the walk and barely escaped the wheels of a passing automobile in an effort to catch a stray kitten that seemed in danger. Sinton drew Billy back to the walk and held his hand closely. When they

started home Billy sat on the front seat. He drove with the hitching strap tied to the railing of the dashboard, flourished the whip and yelled with delight. At first Sinton laughed with him, but by the time he left Elnora with several packages at her gate he was looking serious enough.

Margaret was at the door as they drove up the lane. Sinton left Billy in the carriage, hitched the horses and went to explain to her. He had not reached her before she cried, "Look, Wesley, that child! You'll have a runaway!"

Wesley looked and ran. Billy was standing in the carriage slashing the mettlesome horses with the whip.

"See me make 'em go!" he shouted as the whip fell a second time.

He did make them go. They took the hitching post and a few fence palings, which scraped the paint from a wheel. Sinton missed the lines at the first effort, but the dragging post impeded the horses, and he soon caught them. He led them to the barn and ordered Billy to remain in the carriage while he unhitched. Then leading Billy and carrying his packages he entered the yard.

"You run play a few minutes, Billy," he said. "I want to talk to the nice lady."

The nice lady was looking rather stupefied as Sinton approached her.

"Where in the name of sense did you get that awful child?" she demanded. Her husband told her Billy's story.

"He's half starved. I want to wash him and put clean clothes on him and give him some supper," he said.

"Have you got anything to put on him?"

"Yes."

"Where did you get it?"

"Bought it. It ain't much. All I got didn't cost a dollar."

"A dollar is a good deal when you work for it the way we do."

"Well, I don't know a better place to put it. Have you got any hot water?"

"I'll use this tub at the cistern. Please give me some soap and towels."

Instead Margaret pushed by him with a shriek. Billy had played by producing a cord from his pocket, and, having tied the tails of Margaret's white kittens together, he had climbed on a box and hung them across the clothesline. Wild with fright, the kittens were clawing each other to death, and the air was white with fur. The string had twisted, and the frightened creatures could not recognize friends. Margaret stepped back with bleeding hands. Sinton cut the cord with his knife, and the poor little cats raced under the house bleeding and disgraced. Margaret, white with wrath, faced Sinton.

"If you don't hitch up and take that animal back to town," she said, "I will."

Billy threw himself on the grass and began to scream.

"You said I could have fried chicken for supper," he wailed. "You said she was a nice lady."

Sinton lifted him, and something in his manner of handling the child infuriated Margaret. His touch was so gentle! She reached for Billy and gripped his shirt collar in the back. Sinton's hand closed over hers.

"Gently, girl!" he said. "This little body is covered with sores."

"Sores!" she ejaculated. "Sores? What kind of sores?"

"Oh, they might be from bruises made by fists or boot toes, or they might be bad blood from wrong eating, or they might be pure filth. Will you hand me some towels?"

"No, I won't," said Margaret.

"Well, give me some rags, then."

Margaret compromised on pieces of old tablecloth.

Sinton led Billy to the cistern, pumped cold water into the tub, poured in a kettle of hot air, beginning at the head, scoured him. The boy shut his little teeth and said never a word, though he twisted occasionally when the soap struck a raw spot. Margaret watched the process from the window in amazement and ever increasing anger. Where did Wesley learn it? How could his big hands be so gentle? Sinton

ton came to the door.

"Have you got any peroxide?"

"A little," she answered stiffly.

"Well, I need about a pint, but I'll begin on what you have."

Margaret handed him the bottle. Wesley took a cup, weakened the drug and said to Billy: "Man, these sores on you must be healed. Then you must eat the kind of food that's fit for little men."

"I am going to put some medicine on you, and it is going to sting like fire. If it just runs off I won't use any more. If it boils there is poison in these places, and they must be washed every day, and you must be washed and kept mighty clean. Now, hold still, because I am going to put it on."

"I think the one on my leg is the worst," said the undaunted Billy, holding out a raw place. Sinton poured on the drug. Billy's body twisted and writhed, but he did not run.

"Gee, look at it boil!" he cried. "I guess they're poison. You'll have to do it to all of them."

Sinton's teeth were set as he watched the boy's face. He poured the drug, strong enough to do effective work, on a dozen places over that little body and bandaged all he could. Billy's lips quivered at times, and his chin jumped, but he did not shed a tear or utter a sound other than to take a deep interest in the boiling.

"Now am I clean?" asked Billy.

"Yes, you are clean outside," said Sinton. "There is some dirty blood in your body, and some bad words in your mouth, that we have to get out, but that takes time. If we put right things to eat into your stomach that will do away with the sores, and if you know that I don't like bad words you won't say them any oftener than you can help, will you, Billy?"

Billy leaned against Sinton in apparent indifference.

(Continued on page 3, Col. 1.)

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