

ELEANOR H. PORTER

MISS BILLY

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About this eBook

MISS BILLY
Eleanor H. Porter

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CHAPTER I

BILLY WRITES A LETTER

Billy Neilson was eighteen years old when the aunt, who had brought her up from babyhood, died. Miss Benton's death left Billy quite alone in the world – alone, and peculiarly forlorn. To Mr. James Harding, of Harding & Harding, who had charge of Billy's not inconsiderable property, the girl poured out her heart in all its loneliness two days after the funeral.

„You see, Mr. Harding, there isn't any one – not any one who – cares,“ she choked.

„Tut, tut, my child, it's not so bad as that, surely,“ remonstrated the old man, gently. „Why, I – I care.“

Billy smiled through tear-wet eyes.

„But I can't LIVE with you,“ she said.

„I'm not so sure of that, either,“ retorted the man. „I'm thinking that Letty and Ann would LIKE to have you with us.“

The girl laughed now outright. She was thinking of Miss Letty, who had „nerves,“ and of Miss Ann, who had a „heart“; and she pictured her own young, breezy, healthy self attempting to conform to the hushed and shaded thing that life was, within Lawyer Harding's home.

„Thank you, but I'm sure they wouldn't,“ she objected. „You don't know how noisy I am.“

The lawyer stirred restlessly and pondered.

„But, surely, my dear, isn't there some relative, somewhere?“ he demanded. „How about your mother's people?“

Billy shook her head. Her eyes filled again with tears.

„There was only Aunt Ella, ever, that I knew anything about. She and mother were the only children there were, and mother died when I was a year old, you know.“

„But your father's people?“

„It's even worse there. He was an only child and an orphan when mother married him. He died when I was but six months old. After that there was only mother and Aunt Ella, then Aunt Ella alone; and now – no one.“

„And you know nothing of your father's people?“

„Nothing; that is – almost nothing.“

„Then there is some one?“

Billy smiled. A deeper pink showed in her cheeks.

„Why, there's one – a man but he isn't really father's people, anyway. But I – I have been tempted to write to him.“

„Who is he?“

„The one I'm named for. He was father's boyhood chum. You see that's why I'm ‚Billy‘ instead of being a proper ‚Susie,‘ or ‚Bessie,‘ or ‚Sally Jane.‘ Father had made up his mind to name his baby ‚William‘ after his chum, and when I came, Aunt Ella said, he was quite broken-hearted until somebody hit upon the idea of naming me Billy.‘ Then he was content, for it seems that he always called his chum ‚Billy‘ anyhow. And so – ‚Billy‘ I am to-day.“

„Do you know this man?“

„No. You see father died, and mother and Aunt Ella knew him only very slightly. Mother knew his wife, though, Aunt Ella said, and SHE was lovely.“

„Hm – ; well, we might look them up, perhaps. You know his address?“

„Oh, yes unless he's moved. We've always kept that. Aunt Ella used to say sometimes that she was going to write to him some day about me, you know.“

„What's his name?“

„William Henshaw. He lives in Boston.“

Lawyer Harding snatched off his glasses, and leaned forward in his chair.

„William Henshaw! Not the Beacon Street Henshaws!“ he cried.

It was Billy's turn to be excited. She, too, leaned forward eagerly.

„Oh, do you know him? That's lovely! And his address IS Beacon Street! I know because I saw it only to-day. You see, I HAVE been tempted to write him.“

„Write him? Of course you'll write him,“ cried the lawyer. „And we don't need to do much ‚looking up‘ there, child. I've known the family for years, and this William was a college mate of my boy's. Nice fellow, too. I've heard Ned speak of him. There were three sons, William, and two others much younger than he. I've forgotten their names.“

„Then you do know him! I'm so glad,“ exclaimed Billy. „You see, he never seemed to me quite real.“

„I know about him,“ corrected the lawyer, smilingly, „though I'll confess I've rather lost track of him lately. Ned will know. I'll ask Ned. Now go home, my dear, and dry those pretty eyes of yours. Or, better still, come home with me to tea. I – I'll telephone up to the house.“ And he rose stiffly and went into the inner office.

Some minutes passed before he came back, red of face, and plainly distressed.

„My dear child, I – I'm sorry, but – but I'll have to take back that invitation,“ he blurted out miserably. „My sisters are – are not well this afternoon. Ann has been having a turn with her heart – you know Ann's heart is – is bad; and Letty – Letty is always nervous at such times – very nervous. Er – I'm so sorry! But you'll – excuse it?“

„Indeed I will,“ smiled Billy, „and thank you just the same; only“ – her eyes twinkled mischievously – “you don't mind if I do say that it IS lucky that we hadn't gone on planning to have me live with them, Mr. Harding!“

„Eh? Well – er, I think your plan about the Henshaws is very good,“ he interposed hurriedly. „I'll speak to Ned – I'll speak to Ned,“ he finished, as he ceremoniously bowed the girl from the office.

James Harding kept his word, and spoke to his son that night; but there was little, after all, that Ned could tell him. Yes, he remembered Billy Henshaw well, but he had not heard of him for years, since Henshaw's marriage, in fact. He must be forty years old, Ned said; but he was a fine fellow, an exceptionally fine fellow, and would be sure to deal kindly and wisely by his little orphan namesake; of that Ned was very sure.

„That's good. I'll write him,“ declared Mr. James Harding. „I'll write him tomorrow.“

He did write – but not so soon as Billy wrote; for even as he spoke, Billy, in her lonely little room at the other end of the town, was laying bare all her homesickness in four long pages to „Dear Uncle William.“

CHAPTER II

„THE STRATA“

Bertram Henshaw called the Beacon Street home „The Strata.“ This annoyed Cyril, and even William, not a little; though they reflected that, after all, it was „only Bertram.“ For the whole of Bertram’s twenty-four years of life it had been like this – “It’s only Bertram,” had been at once the curse and the salvation of his existence.

In this particular case, however, Bertram’s vagary of fancy had some excuse. The Beacon Street house, the home of the three brothers, was a „Strata.“

„You see, it’s like this,” Bertram would explain airily to some new acquaintance who expressed surprise at the name; „if I could slice off the front of the house like a loaf of cake, you’d understand it better. But just suppose that old Bunker Hill should suddenly spout fire and brimstone and bury us under tons of ashes – only fancy the condition of mind of those future archaeologists when they struck our house after their months of digging!

„What would they find? Listen. First: stratum number one, the top floor; that’s Cyril’s, you know. They’d note the bare floors, the sparse but heavy furniture, the piano, the violin, the flute, the book-lined walls, and the absence of every sort of curtain, cushion, or knickknack. ‚Here lived a plain man,‘ they’d say; ‚a scholar, a musician, stern, unloved and unloving; a monk.‘

„And what next? They’d strike William’s stratum next, the third floor. Imagine it! You know William as a State Street broker, well-off, a widower, tall, angular, slow of speech, a little bald, very much nearsighted, and the owner of the kindest heart in the world. But really to know William, you must know his rooms. William collects things. He has always collected things – and he’s saved every one of them. There’s a tradition that at the age of one year he crept into the house with four small round white stones. Anyhow, if he did, he’s got them now. Rest assured of that – and he’s forty this year. Miniatures, carved ivories, bugs, moths, porcelains, jades, stamps, post-cards, spoons, baggage tags, theatre programs, playing-cards – there isn’t anything that he doesn’t collect. He’s on teapots, now. Imagine it – William and teapots! And they’re all there in his rooms – one glorious mass of confusion. Just fancy those archaeologists trying to make their ‚monk‘ live there!

„But when they reach me, my stratum, they’ll have a worse time yet. You see, I like cushions and comfort, and I have them everywhere. And I like – well, I like lots of things. My rooms don’t belong to that monk, not a little bit. And so you see,” Bertram would finish merrily, „that’s why I call it all ‚The Strata.‘“

And „The Strata“ it was to all the Henshaws’ friends, and even to William and Cyril themselves, in spite of their objection to the term.

From babyhood the Henshaw boys had lived in the handsome, roomy house, facing the Public Garden. It had been their father’s boyhood home, as well, and he and his wife had died there, soon after Kate, the only daughter, had married. At the age of twenty-two, William Henshaw, the eldest son, had brought his bride to the house, and together they had striven to make a home for

the two younger orphan boys, Cyril, twelve, and Bertram, six. But Mrs. William, after a short five years of married life, had died; and since then, the house had known almost nothing of a woman's touch or care.

Little by little as the years passed, the house and its inmates had fallen into what had given Bertram his excuse for the name. Cyril, thirty years old now, dignified, reserved, averse to cats, dogs, women, and confusion, had early taken himself and his music to the peace and exclusiveness of the fourth floor. Below him, William had long discouraged any meddling with his precious chaos of possessions, and had finally come to spend nearly all his spare time among them. This left Bertram to undisputed ownership of the second floor, and right royally did he hold sway there with his paints and brushes and easels, his old armor, rich hangings, rugs, and cushions, and everywhere his specialty – his „Face of a Girl.“ From canvas, plaque, and panel they looked out – those girlish faces: winsome, wilful, pert, demure, merry, sad, beautiful, even almost ugly – they were all there; and they were growing famous, too. The world of art was beginning to take notice, and to adjust its spectacles for a more critical glance. This „Face of a Girl“ by Henshaw bade fair to be worth while.

Below Bertram's cheery second floor were the dim old library and drawing-rooms, silent, stately, and almost never used; and below them were the dining-room and the kitchen. Here ruled Dong Ling, the Chinese cook, and Pete.

Pete was – indeed, it is hard telling what Pete was. He said he was the butler; and he looked the part when he answered the bell at the great front door. But at other times, when he swept a room, or dusted Master William's curios, he looked – like nothing so much as what he was: a fussy, faithful old man, who expected to die in the service he had entered fifty years before as a lad.

Thus in all the Beacon Street house, there had not for years been the touch of a woman's hand. Even Kate, the married sister, had long since given up trying to instruct Dong Ling or to chide Pete, though she still walked across the Garden from her Commonwealth Avenue home and tripped up the stairs to call in turn upon her brothers, Bertram, William, and Cyril.

CHAPTER III

THE STRATA – WHEN THE LETTER COMES

It was on the six o'clock delivery that William Henshaw received the letter from his namesake, Billy. To say the least, the letter was a great shock to him. He had not quite forgotten Billy's father, who had died so long ago, it is true, but he had forgotten Billy, entirely. Even as he looked at the disconcerting epistle with its round, neatly formed letters, he had great difficulty in ferreting out the particular niche in his memory which contained the fact that Walter Neilson had had a child, and had named it for him.

And this child, this „Billy,“ this unknown progeny of an all but forgotten boyhood friend, was asking a home, and with him! Impossible! And William Henshaw peered at the letter as if, at this second reading, its message could not be so monstrous.

„Well, old man, what's up?“ It was Bertram's amazed voice from the hall doorway; and indeed, William Henshaw, red-faced and plainly trembling, seated on the lowest step of the stairway, and gazing, wild-eyed, at the letter in his hand, was somewhat of an amazing sight. „What IS up?“

„What's up!“ groaned William, starting to his feet, and waving the letter frantically in the air. „What's up! Young man, do you want us to take in a child to board? – a CHILD?“ he repeated in slow horror.

„Well, hardly,“ laughed the other. „Er, perhaps Cyril might like it, though; eh?“

„Come, come, Bertram, be sensible for once,“ pleaded his brother, nervously. „This is serious, really serious, I tell you!“

„What is serious?“ demanded Cyril, coming down the stairway. „Can't it wait? Pete has already sounded the gong twice for dinner.“

William made a despairing gesture.

„Well, come,“ he groaned. „I'll tell you at the table.... It seems I've got a namesake,“ he resumed in a shaking voice, a few moments later; „Walter Neilson's child.“

„And who's Walter Neilson?“ asked Bertram.

„A boyhood friend. You wouldn't remember him. This letter is from his child.“

„Well, let's hear it. Go ahead. I fancy we can stand the – LETTER; eh, Cyril?“

Cyril frowned. Cyril did not know, perhaps, how often he frowned at Bertram.

The eldest brother wet his lips. His hand shook as he picked up the letter.

„It – it's so absurd,“ he muttered. Then he cleared his throat and read the letter aloud.

„DEAR UNCLE WILLIAM: Do you mind my calling you that? You see I want SOME one, and there isn't any one now. You are the nearest I've got. Maybe you've forgotten, but I'm named for you. Walter Neilson was my father, you know. My Aunt Ella has just died.

„Would you mind very much if I came to live with you? That is, between times – I’m going to college, of course, and after that I’m going to be – well, I haven’t decided that part yet. I think I’ll consult you. You may have some preference, you know. You can be thinking it up until I come.

„There! Maybe I ought not to have said that, for perhaps you won’t want me to come. I AM noisy, I’ll own, but not so I think you’ll mind it much unless some of you have ‚nerves‘ or a ‚heart.‘ You see, Miss Letty and Miss Ann – they’re Mr. Harding’s sisters, and Mr. Harding is our lawyer, and he will write to you. Well, where was I? Oh, I know – on Miss Letty’s nerves. And, say, do you know, that is where I do get – on Miss Letty’s nerves. I do, truly. You see, Mr. Harding very kindly suggested that I live with them, but, mercy! Miss Letty’s nerves won’t let you walk except on tip-toe, and Miss Ann’s heart won’t let you speak except in whispers. All the chairs and tables have worn little sockets in the carpets, and it’s a crime to move them. There isn’t a window-shade in the house that isn’t pulled down EXACTLY to the middle sash, except where the sun shines, and those are pulled way down. Imagine me and Spunk living there! Oh, by the way, you don’t mind my bringing Spunk, do you? I hope you don’t, for I couldn’t live without Spunk, and he couldn’t live with out me.

„Please let me hear from you very soon. I don’t mind if you telegraph; and just ‚come‘ would be all you’d have to say. Then I’d get ready right away and let you know what train to meet me on. And, oh, say – if you’ll wear a pink in your buttonhole I will, too. Then we’ll know each other. My address is just ‚Hampden Falls.‘

„Your awfully homesick namesake,

„BILLY HENSHAW NEILSON“

For one long minute there was a blank silence about the Henshaw dinner-table; then the eldest brother, looking anxiously from one man to the other, stammered:

„W-well?“

„Great Scott!“ breathed Bertram.

Cyril said nothing, but his lips were white with their tense pressure against each other.

There was another pause, and again William broke it anxiously.

„Boys, this isn’t helping me out any! What’s to be done?“

„Done!“ flamed Cyril. „Surely, you aren’t thinking for a moment of LETTING that child come here, William!“

Bertram chuckled.

„He WOULD liven things up, Cyril; wouldn’t he? Such nice smooth floors you’ve got up-stairs to trundle little tin carts across!“

„Tin nonsense!“ retorted Cyril. „Don’t be silly, Bertram. That letter wasn’t written by a baby. He’d be much more likely to make himself at home with your paint box, or with some of William’s junk.“

„Oh, I say,“ expostulated William, „we’ll HAVE to keep him out of those things, you know.“

Cyril pushed back his chair from the table.

„We’ll have to keep him out!“ William, you can’t be in earnest! You aren’t going to let that boy come here,“ he cried.

„But what can I do?“ faltered the man.