

**BILLY
GRAHAM**

BILLY GRAHAM

EXPLORER & MISSIONARY

SAM WELLMAN



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1

WAYWARD CHILD

“Billy Frank, stop your squirming. For heaven’s sakes, that’s why you’re here.”

“I don’t want to see the doctor,” whined Billy. He looked up into his mother’s soft-blue eyes. They were clouded with worry. “Oh, I like the doctor all right,” he added kindly. “But I’m not sick or anything.”

“Listen to your mother, Billy Frank.” The deep voice had been silent all morning. It wasn’t unusual for Billy’s father to say nothing for hours. But it was very unusual for him not to be in the fields in May planting beans or corn or some other crop. But Billy knew when to shut up—most of the time. His father could yank him out of the chair in the doctor’s waiting room, haul him outside, and whop him on the bottom with his belt—in no time. It seemed his dad had six hands to get all that done so fast. And his father didn’t get mad or anything. He just grabbed Billy like he grabbed a squawking hen for Sunday dinner and did what he had to do and never blinked an eye. “Did you hear me, Billy Frank?” asked his father, not blinking an eye.

“Yes, sir.” Billy felt like he could jump out of his skin. Sitting still was so hard. But his father’s callused planks of hands separated and balled into fists. That was a sure sign he was about to explode into action.

A nurse called, “Mr. and Mrs. Graham? The doctor can see you now.”

“Thank goodness,” sighed Billy’s mother.

After a few pleasantries with the doctor, in which Billy happily participated, his parents discussed an upcoming church meeting with the doctor. Billy liked the doctor. He liked just about every-

JUST ABOUT
EVERYBODY
LIKED BILLY.
WAS THERE
ANYBODY
WHO DIDN'T?

body. In fact, now that he thought about it, he did like everybody. And it was a fact that just about everybody liked Billy. Was there anybody who didn't? Well, baby brother Melvin fussed at him. Melvin was the only person he could think of who didn't just about melt when Billy grinned ear to ear. But what did Melvin know? Besides sucking his thumb and spitting out

his pabulum, Melvin knew nothing.

“Well, Doctor, he doesn't seem to ever wear down. . . .” His father's deep voice carried fatigue.

“That boy been eating sweets?” asked the doctor.

“No, Doctor,” said Billy's mother quickly. “Nothing more than an apple or a pear.”

Billy's skin was crawling. He ate sweets a lot. Suzie the cook kept a jar of sweets on the back porch. Billy and Catherine both ate lots of sweets. *Oh God, please don't let Suzie get in trouble*, prayed Billy. Billy liked her so much. And she liked Billy.

“You working that boy enough?” asked the doctor.

“He's up at four o'clock,” said Billy's mother quickly. “He goes right out with the men to do the milking.”

“And we got more than twenty cows to milk,” said Billy's father. “Praise the good Lord for that blessing,” he added quickly, so it didn't sound like he was bragging about his dairy. “Billy Frank can

milk a cow faster than any six-year-old in North Carolina. The plain truth is he can already milk a cow pert'near as fast as a man. . . .”

To get it over with, thought Billy. Oh, it was pleasant enough in the barn. Smelled real fine. Hay and milk and furry cats and that cow smell. He got along fine with the cows. He liked them. And they liked him. One stepped on his foot once. But that was a pure accident. But Billy milked fast to get it over with. Then he got to go outside and feed the chickens and the goats. The chickens were just chickens. He liked goats. He liked dogs and cats, too. But, oh, those wonderful goats. He liked them so much. And they liked him. Goats were just about the warmest, smartest, funniest critters on earth. And so friendly. They even nuzzled Melvin.

“Take off your shirt, Billy Frank,” said the doctor.

“Yes, sir.”

“He’s going to be tall and lean like you, Frank,” said the doctor. “But he’s got your blond hair, Morrow,” the doctor said to Billy’s mother. “And by dogs, if he doesn’t have his granddaddy Crook Graham’s eyes! They could stare right through a plate of lead.”

The doctor plugged a stethoscope into his ears. *Not that thing*, thought Billy. Normally, Billy liked folks touching him. He liked it when Grandma Coffey gave him a big hug. Not that that was anything special. Most kids didn’t mind their grannies. But Billy didn’t even mind if Aunt Lil grabbed him and kissed him. But he didn’t like the doctor sticking that stethoscope thing against his chest and back. And he didn’t like that popsicle stick the doctor used to clamp his tongue down.

“Say ‘aaaah.’” The doctor squinted into his throat.

“Aaaah!”

“Put your shirt on, Billy Frank,” said the doctor.

Billy listened intently. It was something he had taught himself lately. Instead of just daydreaming about goats and dogs and cats

and stuff, he listened real hard because every once in a while something real important was said by a grown-up and Billy realized he had daydreamed right through it; when he blurted, "Pardon me, would you repeat that, please?" suddenly the grown-up noticed him and said, "It doesn't concern you, bub." So this was no time to grin and carry on. He quietly put his shirt back on and softly stepped back into the corner, almost bumping the doctor's clothes tree, and just disappeared into the corner as quietly as Tarzan into the jungle.

"What is it, Doctor?" asked Billy's father.

"I can't find anything wrong with him," answered the doctor.

"But Billy Frank pushed a dresser out of an upstairs bedroom into the hall and plumb down the stairs," said Billy's father. "Morrow saw him at the top of the stairs. He just grinned at her like a puppy dog."

"That is a mite peculiar, all right," said the doctor.

"He knocks dishes off the *center* of the table," volunteered Billy's mother.

"And he overturns baskets of eggs," added Billy's father.

"He throws rocks at cars on Park Road," added Billy's mother.

"I didn't know that!" snapped Billy's father.

The doctor stood up. "Please, we must remain calm. Billy Frank is just going through a phase, I think."

"I pray," added Billy's mother. "Oh, how I pray. . . ."

The doctor opened the door. "I'll pray, too. He's a good boy," he added unconvincingly.

"It was a pleasure seeing you, Doctor," said Billy, grinning.

On the way back to their dairy farm outside Charlotte, Billy crouched in the back seat of the car, ears straining to hear over the chattering engine.

"There's nothing wrong with his body. It's in his head," groaned Billy's father. "He's just like my father and my runaway brother,

Tom. Born to raise a ruckus. I even took Billy Frank to hear Billy Sunday last year. His powerful words bounced off Billy Frank like he was a stone.”

“Billy Frank starts school in a few months, and everybody in Mecklenburg County will know about him then. We won’t let the devil win,” said Billy’s mother. “We’ll pray and pray and pray.”

“But first he’s going to get a good whipping for throwing rocks at cars.”

Billy fumed. Didn’t his mother already whip him for that? She got out that hickory switch of hers and really popped him. He was sure. He got whipped so often it was hard to remember. But he was too smart to complain. Daddy laid it on heavier then. Billy would just grin. That worked about as well as anything.

That night after supper, the Grahams prayed after the Bible reading, just as they always did. Billy Frank’s mother had said from memory more than once, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all of your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home.”

But this time his father’s voice trembled, tears ran down his cheeks, arms raised toward the ceiling. “Oh Lord, help a wayward child.”

Billy peeked over his folded hands. Who was Daddy praying about? Catherine was a little angel, except once in a while when she ate one of Suzie’s sweets. She didn’t need any help. But Melvin? Yes, Melvin certainly needed the Lord’s help.

“WE WON’T
LET THE
DEVIL WIN.
WE’LL PRAY
AND PRAY
AND PRAY.”