

MICHAEL O'HALLORAN

By Gene Stratton-Porter

SYNOPSIS.

Michael O'Halloran, an orphaned newsboy, finds a friend in Peaches, a girl frantic for fear that the authorities will send her to an orphanage. She had been left at her grandmother's a few hours previously. Michael, or Mickey, is slightly afraid of the world outside, but he has no time over the prospect of the orphans' home, she pleads him with not to leave her.

(Continued from Yesterday.)

Mickey took both the small boy hands reaching for him. He was so frightened with their hot, tremulous clutch that he tried to pull away, dragging the tiny figure half to light and bringing from it moans of pain.

"Oh, my back! Oh, you're hurting me! Oh, don't leave me! Oh, boy; oh, dear boy, please don't leave me!"

When she said "Oh dear boy" Mickey heard the voice of his mother in an hour phrase. He crept closer, enduring the touch of the grimy claws.

"My name's Mickey," he said. "What's yours?"

"Peaches," she answered. "Peaches, when I'm good. Crippled brat, when I'm bad."

"Believe if you had your chance you could look the peaches," said Mickey, "but what were you bad for?"

"They won't let us on the cars," said Peaches.

"Then what did you do bad for?" marvelled Mickey.

" Didn't you ever get so tired of one thing you'd take a little hurt just for a change?"

"My eye!" said Mickey. "I don't know one fellow who'd do that, Peaches."

"Mickey, hide me. Oh, hide me! Don't let them 'get' me," she begged.

"Why, kid, you're crazy," said Mickey.

"Now lemme tell you. Where they'll take you looks like a nice place. Honest it does. I've seen lots of them. You get a clean, soft bed all by yourself, three big, comfortable, day beds, and a room to play with. Honest, Peaches, you do!

"I wouldn't tell yo if it wasn't so. If I'll stay with you till they come, then go with you to the place till you see how nice it is, will you be good and go?"

She burrowed in the covers, screaming again.

"You're scared past all reason," said Mickey. "You don't know anything. But maybe the orphans homes ain't so good as they look. If they are, why was mother frightened silly about them getting me? Always she said she just had to live until I got so big they wouldn't 'get' me. And I kept them from getting me by doing what she told me. You'd better keep quiet about them getting me. There's nothing of you. If I could move you there I bet I could feed you more than your granny did. While I know I could keep you cleaner. You could have my bed, a window to look from, and clean covers."

Mickey was thinking aloud. "Having you to come home would be lots nicer than nothing. You'd be able to dog all hollow 'cause you can talk, if I could get you there. I believe I could be making it. Yes, I believe I could do a lot better than this, and I believe I'd like you, Peaches; you are a game little kid."

"She could life me with one hand," she panted. "Oh, Mickey, take me! Hurry!"

"Lemme see if I can manage you," said Mickey. "First you got to be all right in particular way?"

"Mickey, ain't you got folks that beat you?" she asked.

"I ain't got folks now," said Mickey, "and they didn't beat me when I had them. I'm all for myself—and if you say so I guess from now on I'm for you. Want to go?"

Her arms wound tightly around his neck. Her hot little face pressed against it.

"Put one arm 'cross my shoulders an' the other round my legs," she said.

"Now, she said stoutly. "Mickey, hurry!"

"But honest, I can't carry you all that way. I would if I could, Peaches; honest I would."

"Oh, Mickey, dear Mickey, hurry!" she begged.

"Get down and cover up till I think," he ordered. "Say, you look here! If I tackle this job do you want to change bad enough to be mean for it?"

"Just a little bit, maybe," said Peaches.

"But I won't hit you," explained Mickey.

"You can if you want to," she said. "I won't cry. Give me a good crack now an' see if I do."

"You make me sick at my stomach," said Mickey. "Lord, kid! Shove down till I see. I'm going to get you there some way."

Mickey went back to the room where he helped deliver the clothes basket. "How much can you earn the rest of the night?" he asked the woman.

"Mehly 16 cents," she said.

"Well, if you will loan me that twelve and 16 cents, and come with me an hour, there's that back and just a dollar in it for you, lady," he offered.

She turned from him with a sneering laugh.

"Honest, lady!" said Mickey. "This is how it is: That crimp got me so I went to Auntie Constastokin'. She's a kid with a lame back all alone up there, half starved and scared fighting wild. We could put her in that basket—she's just a handful—and take her to a place she wants to go. We could ride most of the way on the cars and then a little walk, and get her to a clean room, where she'd be taken care of, and in an hour be back with enough nickels in your pocket to make a great, big, round, shining, full-moon cartwheel. Dearest lady, doesn't the prospect please you?"

"It would," she said, "if I had the cartwheel now."

"In which case you wouldn't go," said Mickey. "Dearest lady, it isn't business to help you do work."

"And it isn't business to pay your employer's fare to get to your job, either," she retorted.

"No, that beats business a mile," said Mickey. "That's an investment. You invest 10 cents and an hour's time on a gamble. Now look what you get, lady. A nice, restful ride on the cars. You go to a place where a white, big, shining, round, lady-liberty bird, if you trust in God, as the coin says the bird does, and more'n that, dearest lady, you go to

bed feeling your pinfeathers sprouting, 'cause you've done a kind deed to a poor crippled orphing."

"If I thought you really had the money—" she said.

"Honest, lady, I got the money," said Mickey, "and sides, I got a surprise for you. When you get back you may go to that room and take some scrap that's in it. Now come to me, we'll get you to the cars and so get to the station to try to catch a train, like that, ain't you? May be put something soft in the bottom of the basket while I fetch the kind."

Mickey ran up the stairs.

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