

Strawberry Girl

By Lois Lenski

Chapter One: Callers

It was a bright morning in early April. Birds were chirping and singing in the shady trees. A barelegged ten-year-old girl came out on the front porch. She watered the plants in the lard buckets there. She picked off a dead leaf or two.

"Ma!" she called. "The pink geranium's a-bloomin'. Come see it. Hit shore is putty!"

Mrs. Boyer came out, drying her hands on her apron.

"Come down here, Ma, and look," begged the girl.

The woman came down the steps and stood at her side. The girl's brown hair was braided in two braids, looped up. Her eyes were big in her pointed face. She looked much like her mother.

"Ain't them right putty, Ma? I jest got to come out first thing in the mornin' and look at 'em."

"Purty, yes!" agreed her mother. "But lookin' at posies don't git the work done." She hurried back up the steps.

"Did I get some blue paint and paint the lard buckets, Ma, they'd look a sight purtier, wouldn't they?"

"Blue lard buckets!" laughed the woman. "Never heard of sich as that!" She disappeared in the house.

The girl took up a long broom made of brush-branches from a tree-and swept the yard clean. Its hard smooth surface felt good to her feet. Then she knelt in the path and began to set a row of bricks at an angle, to make a neat border. "I'll plant my amaryllis bulbs in the flower bed right here," she said to herself.

She stood up, her arms akimbo.

"Land sakes, somebody's comin'!" she called. "Ma! Callers!"

"Law me!" cried Mrs. Boyer, peeping out. "The Slaters! And my breakfast dishes not done."

The girl stared at the little procession.

Mrs. Slater, tall, thin and angular, carrying her baby like a sack of potatoes on her hip, was followed by the two little girls, Essie and Zephy. Some distance behind, as if curious yet half-unwilling to be one of the party, came a lanky twelve-year-old boy wearing a broad-brimmed black felt hat. The woman and children plowed the loose, dry sand with their bare feet. With each step forward, they seemed to slip a trifle backward, so their progress was slow. Bushy scrub oaks and a thicket of palmetto grew on the far side of the rough path, while a forest of tall pines rose in the distance.

The old Roddenberry house was not old enough to deserve to be called old. It had been built in the 1880's, the earliest type of Florida pioneer home. Deserted by the Roddenberrys after the Big Freeze of 1895, it had stood empty for some years, but showed few signs of neglect. The sturdy pine and cypress wood which had gone into its making were equal to many more years of Florida sun, rain, wind and heat.

The house was a simple one, but by backwoods standards a mansion. It was a double-pen plank house, with an open hall or breezeway in the middle. On one side was a bedroom, on the other the kitchen. Behind were two small shed rooms used for sleeping quarters. Wide porches spread across front and back.

The Slaters: approached the picket fence timidly, staring with all eyes. Mrs. Slater opened the gate.

"Howdy!"

The girl in the path spoke first.

"Hey!" came the feeble response.

The girl tipped her head and smiled. "My name's Birdie Boyer," she said. "Come in and see Ma."

She led the way onto the front porch and across the breezeway. The boy did not come in.

"Can I borrow a cup o' sugar, ma'am?" inquired Mrs. Slater.

"Shore can!" said Mrs. Boyer heartily. "Any time you need somethin', you call on me and welcome. That's what neighbors is for. Mighty nice to be near enough for neighborin'."

They sat down stiffly. An awkward silence fell.

"We had sich a heap o' work to do, to git this ole place fixed up," began Mrs. Boyer. "We ain't what you might call settled yet. Them Roddenberrys . . ."

"They got froze out in the Big Freeze," said Mrs. Slater. "They went back to wherever it was they come from. All their orange trees got bit back to the ground by the frost. Ah* no use messin' with oranges here. Hit's too cold in the wintertime."

"But the trees were seedlings," said Mrs. Boyer, "and they've come up again from the roots. When we git 'em pruned good and the moss cleaned out, they'll make us a fine grove."

"I got me a orange tree," said Birdie, "'bout so high." She raised her hand to a height of about three feet. "I planted a bunch of seeds from an orange once. This seedling was the strongest -- it come from the king seed. We brung it along with us and I planted it where the water drips from the pump. Soon I'll be pickin' my own oranges!"

"Yes, soon we'll be pickin' oranges to sell," added her mother.

"To sell?" asked Mrs. Slater in surprise.

"Yes, ma'am. We're studyin' to sell oranges and strawberries and sweet 'taters and sich and make us a good livin'."

"Sell things? Messin' with things to sell?" said Mrs. Slater. "Then you'll purely starve to death. Why, nothin' won't grow here in Floridy. The only way we-uns can git us a livin' is messin' with cows and sellin' 'em for beef "

"We're studyin' to always have us a few cows too, and cowpen the land. We git real benefit from our cattle, usin' 'em for beef and fertilizer, and for milk and butter too," said Mrs. Boyer.

"Why, them scrubby little ole woods cows don't give enough milk to bother with milkin' 'em," laughed Mrs. Slater.

"Where we come from," said Mrs. Boyer slowly, "we feed our cows.

"Feed 'em!" Mrs. Slater laughed a shrill laugh. "With all the grass they is to eat? Where you folks come from anyway?"

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