

*There were two great crises in
Floyd Patterson's life; one he solved
recently in the ring—the other his mother
now tells about, a comeback story
against the toughest opponent a man can face*



"Mom" Patterson and her one-time "problem child."

I STILL REMEMBER it so well. There was a heavy knock on the door of our tenement in the crowded Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn. When I opened the door, I saw a grim-looking policeman.

"Mrs. Patterson, is this your boy?" he said.

"Yes, that's my Floyd," I said, looking at the gangling 10-year-old he held by the shoulder.

"Better come down to the station with me," the officer said. "He's been stealing."

I've raised 11 children, but I've always worried more about Floyd than all the others put together, even before he made prize fighting his profession and twice won the heavyweight championship of the world.

As a child, he was awfully shy. He didn't speak to anyone much, and it was so hard for him to look right at somebody talking to him. I remember one day when he was just a little boy, a lady, admiring his long hair, ran her fingers through it. Floyd was so embarrassed he cried and ran off.

Realizing that some children are timid in their early years, my husband Thomas and I didn't fret about Floyd in the beginning.

"He'll get over this when he gets older," Thomas said. I agreed.

But now, as I slipped on a jacket and left with the officer and Floyd, I wasn't so sure. Not that he was a bad boy. But our neighborhood was one of the toughest in the city, and now Floyd seemed marked as a part of it. All the way to the precinct station, I asked myself if Floyd could come back from this start in life; if he'd fight back and become the person I knew he was.

Floyd didn't do anything but hang his head in shame while he went through the police routine. But I felt if somebody held out a helping hand, he would grab it. So that afternoon I set the wheels in motion to tackle Floyd's problem head-on. I talked to his school principal. He recommended a social worker. I didn't spare any details in telling about the boy I believed could be helped.

I told the social worker about the shell Floyd lived in, and how it had gotten worse when he started school. He stayed away from other children and didn't answer much when called on in class. When he fell behind in his studies, he became even more withdrawn. He was sure other children looked on him as a dunce. Soon he was finding ways to skip school completely.

With a large family to take care of, it wasn't easy to spend time on the problems of one child. Thomas

worked long hours at the Fulton Fish Market as a truckman's helper, and I tried to add to the family income by going out as a domestic as often as I could. I kept in touch with the teachers and the truant officer, but Floyd still had too many chances to play hooky.

My other children weren't like that. They went to school willingly, played street games with their many friends, and babbled happily. Their brother, meanwhile, would be wandering all over Brooklyn, visiting the Prospect Park Zoo or meandering, all by himself, along the beach at Coney Island. Sometimes he'd ride the subway for hours, or simply hide in somebody's cellar.

I tried everything I knew to get him back to school—rewards, extra kindness, punishment. He would promise faithfully to be good, and I always believed him because it really hurt him to cause us trouble. But the promises didn't last more than a week or so. Then he'd be off roaming again. Once he was so ashamed at breaking his word that he stayed away all night and really terrified us.

Floyd Gets Into Trouble

During those years, many kids in the neighborhood joined street gangs and went out looking for excitement. Sometimes they got in serious trouble. I worried about my boys, fearful they might get mixed up with one of the gangs. For a long time, none did. I was grateful for this.

And then, of course, came that knock on the door by the policeman. Floyd, it turned out, had only "swiped" some fruit from a nearby market while with some other boys. But I told the social worker that I couldn't help thinking that this might be the beginning of his joining up with a gang.

After listening to my story and talking to Floyd, the social worker explained that my boy was emotionally disturbed. Floyd needed careful, individual attention. He couldn't get this in crowded Public School 93. And the big city gave him too many chances to hide from the tough parts of life.

Although Floyd couldn't read and could barely write his name, the worker told me that he had the potential to adjust rapidly. She also said that Floyd was not a rowdy or a troublemaker; his brush with the law was little more than mischief. She suggested that we send Floyd to a special school in the country.

The thought of sending Floyd away hurt me, but Thomas and I agreed it was the right thing to do.

The next day, I signed Floyd into the Wiltwyck School for Boys, a private institution at Esopus, N. Y., in the foothills of the Catskill Mountains, about 90 miles from our home. Floyd kicked up a fuss; he was sure that he was being sent to jail because of stealing fruit. His tears made our parting even sadder for me, but I didn't back down.

At Wiltwyck, Floyd stubbornly stuck to his ways. He didn't pay any attention in class and dodged the fun of sports and other out-of-class activities. But his teachers and superiors were very nice. They didn't force him. He'd go to classes, do his regular chores, and then he could roam as he pleased.

Most of the other kids played games, but Floyd took to wandering over the countryside, and that's when he made his biggest discovery. He'd never seen much of nature before. Where we lived in Brooklyn, even a sunset wasn't much, at least not when you watched it through the rusted girders of the old Lexington Avenue "el." And no one paid much attention to the hungry sparrows and pigeons that rummaged through the gutters for food. But in the Catskills, Floyd got to see magnificent sunsets, heard the songs of birds, and all the other wonderful things that God had put out there for us to see. He even experienced a kid's triumph of catching a snake!

I visited Floyd at Wiltwyck every other week, and once he'd made this big discovery about nature I looked forward to the trips, almost like a kid myself. I'd bring along a big picnic lunch—fried chicken, different kinds of sandwiches, and some of the other things I knew Floyd enjoyed—and Floyd would lead me to some little spot he liked on the hillside. We'd spread out the lunch, and Floyd would chatter happily while he munched. He pointed out different kinds of birds and told me about the trees around us.

During each of my visits, I'd stop at the school office for a report on how Floyd was doing. The news always cheered me up. His teachers told me about a big change in Floyd. He was taking part in class and doing well. They'd even got him interested in boxing. Floyd made sure the report was good because he seemed to know how much happier I was after my visits with him. One day he told me:

"This is like a different world up here, Mom. Why don't we move here to live?"

It was hard to explain to him why we couldn't.

"Well, some day I'm going to live in the country," he said, softly, "and I'm going to have a big

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