

FRECKLES

By Gene Stratton-Porter

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CHAPTER I

THE LIMBERLOST GUARD.

FRECKLES came down the corduroy that crosses the lower end of the Limberlost. At a glance he might have been mistaken for a tramp, but he was intensely eager to belong somewhere and to be attached to almost any sort of enterprise that would furnish him food and clothing.

Long before he came in sight of the camp of the Grand Rapids Lumber company he could hear the cheery voices of the men and the neighing of the horses, and could scent the tempting odors of cooking food. A feeling of homeless friendliness swept over him. He turned into the newly made road and followed it to the camp.

"The men were jovially calling back and forth as they unbarned tired horses that fell into attitudes of rest and crunched, in deep content, the grain given them. As he wiped the flanks of his big boys with handfuls of papaw leaves, Duncan, the brassy Scotch head teamster, softly whistled, 'Oh wia will be my dearie, Oh!' and a cricket under the leaves at his feet accompanied him. Wrestling tongues of flame wrapped about the black kettles, and when the cook lifted the lids gusts of savory odors escaped.

Freckles approached him. "I want to speak to the boss," he said.

The cook glanced him over and answered carelessly, "He can't use you." The color flooded Freckles' face, but he said simply, "If you will be having the goodness to point him out we will give him a chance to do his own talking."

With a shrug of astonishment, the cook led the way to a broad, square shouldered man. "Mr. McLean, here's another man wanting to be taken on the gang, I suppose," he said.

"All right," came the cheery answer "I never needed a good man more than I do just now."

"No use of your bothering with this fellow," volunteered the cook. "He has but one hand."

The flush on Freckles' face burned deeper. His lips thinned to a mere line. He lifted his shoulders, took a step forward, and thrust out his right arm, from which the sleeve dangled empty at the wrist.

"That will do, Sears," came the voice of the boss sharply. "I will interview my man when I have finished this report."

Freckles stood one instant as he had braced himself to meet the eyes of the manager, then his arm dropped and a wave of whiteness swept over him. The boss had not even turned his head to see the deformity pointed out to him. He had used the possessive. When he said "my man" the hungry heart of Freckles went reaching out after him. The boy drew a quivering breath. Then he whipped off his old hat and beat the dust from it carefully. With his left hand he caught the right sleeve, wiped his sweaty face, and tried to straighten his hair with his fingers. He broke a spray of ironwort beside him and used the purple blossoms to beat the dust from his shoulders and limbs.

McLean was a Scotchman. The men of his camps had never known him to be in a hurry or to lose his temper. Discipline was inflexible, but the boss always was kind. He shared camp life with his gangs. The only visible signs of his great wealth consisted of a big, shimmering diamond stone of ice and fire that glittered and burned on one of his fingers and the dainty, beautiful, thoroughbred mare he rode.

No man of McLean's gangs could honestly say that he had ever been overdriven or underpaid. They all knew that up in the great timber city several millions stood to his credit. He was the only son of that McLean who had sent out the finest ships ever built in Scotland. That his son should carry on this business after his death had been the father's ambition. He sent the boy through Edinburgh university and Oxford and allowed him several years' travel.

Then he was ordered through southern Canada and Michigan to purchase a consignment of tall, straight timber for masts and down into Indiana for oak beams. The young man entered these mighty forests, parts of which still lay untouched since the dawn of the morning of time. The intense silence, like that of a great empty cathedral, fascinated him. He gradually learned that to the shy wood creatures that darted across his path or peeped inquiringly from leafy ambush he was brother. He found himself approaching, with a feeling of reverence, those majestic trees that had stood through ages of sun, wind and snow. Soon it became a difficult thing to tell them. When he had finished his order and returned home he

was amazed to find that in the swamps and forests he had lost his heart, and it was calling, forever calling him.

When he inherited his father's property he promptly disposed of it and, with his mother, founded a home in a splendid residence in the outskirts of Grand Rapids. With three partners he organized a lumber company. His work was to purchase, fell and ship the timber to the mills. Marshall managed the milling process and passed the lumber on to the factory. From the lumber Barthol made beautiful and useful furniture, which Uptegrove scattered all over the world from a big wholesale house.

McLean faced a young man, still under twenty, tall, spare, heavily framed, thickly freckled and red haired, with a homely Irish face, but in the steady gray eyes, straightly meeting his searching ones of blue, there were unswerving candor and a look of longing not to be ignored.

"You are looking for work?" questioned McLean.

"Yes," answered Freckles. "I am very sorry," said the boss, "but there is only one man I want at present—a good, big fellow with a stout heart and a strong body. I hoped that you would do, but I am afraid you are too young and hardly strong enough."

"And what was it you thought I might be doing?" asked Freckles. The boss could scarcely repress a start. Somewhere back of accident and poverty had been an ancestor who used cultivated English, even with an accent. The boy spoke in a mellow Irish voice, sweet and pure. It was scarcely definite enough to be called brogue, yet there was a trick in the turning of the sentence, the wrong sound of a letter here and there, that was almost irresistible to McLean. He was of foreign birth, and, despite years of alienation, in times of strong feeling he fell into inherited sins of accent and construction.

"It's no child's job," answered McLean. "I am the field manager of a lumber company. We have just leased 2,000 acres of the Limberlost. Many of these trees are of great value. We can't leave our camp, six miles south, for almost a year yet, so we have leased a trail and strung barbed wires securely about the extent of this lease. Before we return to our work I must put this Limberlost lease in the hands of a reliable, brave, strong man who will guard it every hour of the day and sleep with one eye open at night. I should require the entire length of the trail to be walked at least twice every day, to make sure that our lines were up and no one had been trespassing."

"But why wouldn't that be the finest job in the world for me?" pleaded Freckles. "I am never sick, I could walk the trail twice, three times every day, and I'd be watching sharp all the while."

"It's because you are little more than a boy, and this will be a trying job for a work hardened man," answered McLean. "You would be afraid. In stretching our lines we killed six rattlesnakes almost as long as your body and as thick as your arm. You would always be alone, and the Limberlost is alive with sounds and voices. I don't pretend to say what all of them come from, but from a few sinking forms I've seen and hair raising yells I've heard I'd rather not confront their owners myself, and I am neither weak nor fearful."

"Worst of all, any man who will enter the swamp to mark and steal timber is a desperate fellow. One of my employees at the south camp, John Carter, compelled me to discharge him for a number of serious reasons. He entered the swamp alone and marked a number of valuable trees that he was endeavoring to sell to our rival company when we secured the lease. He has sworn to kill these trees if he has to die or to kill others to get them."

"But if he came to steal trees wouldn't he bring teams and men enough, that all any man could do would be to watch and be after you?" queried the boy.

"Yes," replied McLean. "Then why couldn't I be watching just as closely and coming as fast as an older, stronger man?"

"Why, by George, you could!" exclaimed McLean. "I don't know that the size of a man would be half so important as his grit and faithfulness. What is your name?"

Freckles grew a shade whiter, but his eyes never faltered. "Freckles," he said.

"Good enough for every day," laughed McLean, "but I can scarcely put Freckles on the company's books."

"I haven't any name," replied the boy.

"I don't understand," said McLean. "I was thinking from the voice and the face of you that you wouldn't," said Freckles slowly.

"Does it seem to you that any one would take a newborn baby and row over it until it was bruised black, cut off its hand and leave it out in a bitter night on the steps of a charity home to the care of strangers? That's what somebody did to me."

"The home people took me in, and I was there the full legal age and several years over. They could always find homes for the rest of the children, but nobody would ever be wanting me on account of me arm."

"Were they kind to you?" asked McLean.

"I don't know," answered Freckles. The reply sounded so hopeless even to his own ears that he hastened to qualify it by adding: "You see, it's like this, sir. Kindnesses that people are paid to lay off in job lots and that belong equally to several hundred others ain't going to be soaking into any one fellow much."

"Go on," said McLean.

"There's nothing worth the taking of your time to tell," replied Freckles. "The home was in Chicago, and I was there all me life up to three months ago. When I was too old for the training they gave to the little children they sent me out to the nearest ward school as long as the law would let them, but I was never like any of the other children, and they all knew it. I'd go and come like a prisoner and be working about the home early and late for me board and clothes. I always wanted to learn mighty bad, but I was glad when that was over."

"Then a new superintendent sent me down in the state to a man he said he knew that needed a boy. He wasn't for remembering to tell that man that I was a hand shor, and he knocked me down. Between noon and that evening he and his son, about my age, had me in pretty much the same shape in which I was found in the beginning, so I lay awake that night and ran away. I'd like to have squared me account with that boy before I left, but I didn't dare for fear of waking the old man, and I knew I couldn't handle the two of them, but I'm hoping to meet him alone some day before I die."

McLean liked the boy all the better for this confession. "I didn't even have to steal clothes to get rid of starting in me home ones," Freckles went on, "for they had already taken all me clean, neat things for the boy and put me into his rags, and that went almost as sore as the beatings, for where I was we were always kept tidy and sweet smelling anyway. I hustled clear into this state before I learned that man couldn't have kept me if he'd wanted to. I commenced hunting work, but it is with everybody else just as it is with you, sir. Big, strong, whole men are the only ones for being wanted."

"I have been studying over this matter," answered McLean. "I am not so sure but that a man no older than you and like you in every way could do this work very well if he were not a coward."

"If you will give me a job where I can earn me food, clothes and a place to sleep," said Freckles, "if I can have a boss to work for like other men, and a place I feel I've a right to I will do what you tell me or die trying."

He said it so quietly and convincingly that McLean found himself answering: "I will enter you on my payroll. We'll have supper, and then I will provide you with clean clothing, wading boots, wire mending apparatus and a revolver. The first thing in the morning I will take you over the trail myself. All I ask of you is to come to me at once at the south camp and tell me like a man if you find this job too hard for you. It is work that few men would perform faithfully. What name shall I put down?"

Freckles' eyes never left McLean's face, and the boss saw the swift gleam of pain that swept his lonely, sensitive face.

"I haven't any name," he said stubbornly. "No more than one somebody clapped on to me when they put me on the home books, with not the thought or care they'd named a house cat. What they called me is no more my name than it is yours. I don't know what mine is, and I never will. But I am going to be your man and do your work, and I'll be glad to answer to any name you choose to call me. Won't you please be giving me a name, Mr. McLean?"

The boss wheeled abruptly and began stacking his books. In a voice harsh with business he spoke. "I will tell you what we will do, my lad," he said. "My father was my deal man, and I loved him better than any other I have ever known. He went out five years ago. If I give to you the name of my nearest kin and the man I loved best—will that do?"

Freckles' rigid attitude relaxed. His head drooped, and tears splashed down on the soiled calico shirt.

"All right," said McLean. "I will write it on the roll—James Ross McLean."

"Thank you mighty," said Freckles. "That makes me feel almost as if I belonged already."

Freckles' heart and soul were singing for joy.

CHAPTER II

FRECKLES PROVES HIS METAL. NEXT morning the boss showed Freckles around the timber line and engaged him board with his head teamster, Duncan, whom he had brought from Scotland and who lived in a small clearing he was working out between the swamp and the corduroy. When the gang pulled out for the south camp, Freckles was left to guard a fortune in the Limberlost. That he was under guard himself those first weeks he never knew.

Every hour was torture to the boy. The restricted life of a great city or phantasm was the other extreme of the world from the Limberlost. He was afraid for his life every minute. He cut a stout hickory cudgel, with a knot on the end as big as his fist, and it never left his hand. What he thought in those first days he himself could not clearly recall afterward.

His heart stood still every time he saw the beautiful marsh grass begin a sinuous waving against the play of the wind, as McLean had told him it would. He boited a half mile with his first boom of the bitter, and his hat lifted with every yelp of the sheitpoke. Once he saw a lean, shadowy form following him and blazed away with his revolver. Then he was frightened worse than ever for fear it might have been Duncan's colie.

The first afternoon that he found his wires down, and he was compelled to plunge knee deep into the black swamp muck to resting them, he could scarcely control his shaking hand

to do the work. With every step he felt that he would miss secure footing and be swallowed up in that clinging sea of blackness. In dumb agony he plunged along, clinging to the posts and trees. He had consumed much time. Night closed in. The Limberlost stirred gently, then shook herself, growled and awoke about him.

There seemed to be a great owl hooting from every hollow tree and a little one screeching from every knothole. Nighthawks swept past him with their shivering cry, and bats struck his face. A prowling wildcat missed its catch and screamed with rage. A lost fox bayed incessantly for its mate. The hair on the back of Freckles' neck rose like bristles, and his knees wavered under him. He could not see if the dreaded snakes were on the trail nor in the pandemonium hear the rattle for which McLean had cautioned him to listen.

Something big, black and heavy came crashing through the swamp, and with a yell Freckles broke and ran—how far he did not know. But at last he gained some sort of mastery over himself and retraced his steps. When up again came toward the corduroy; the owl fell to test the wire at every step.

Sounds that curled his blood seemed to close in about him and shapes of terror to draw nearer and nearer just when he felt that he should have died before he ever reached the clearing came Duncan's rolling call, "Freckles, Freckles!" A great shuddering sob burst in the boy's dry throat. But he only told Duncan that finding the wire down had made him late.

The next morning he started out on time. Day after day with his near bounding like a triphammer he dodged, ran when he could and fought like a wildcat when he was brought to bay. If he ever had an idea of giving up no one knew it. All these things in so far as he guessed them Duncan, who had been set to watch the first weeks of Freckles' work, carried to the boss at the south camp, but the innermost, exquisite torture of the thing the big Scotchman never guessed, and McLean with his inner perceptions came only a little nearer.

After a few weeks, when Freckles found that he was still living, that he had a home and the very first money he had ever possessed was safe in his pockets, he began to grow proud. He was gradually developing the fearlessness that men ever acquire of dangers to which they are hourly accustomed.

His heart seemed to be in his mouth when his first rattler disputed the trail with him, but he mustered courage and let drive at it with his club. After his head had been crushed he cut off its rattles to show Duncan. With the mastery of his first snake his greatest fear of them was gone.

Then he began to realize that with the abundance of food in the swamp fresh hunters would not come out on the trail and attack him, and he had his revolver for defense if they did. He soon learned to laugh at the dumpy birds that made horrible noises. One day watching from behind a tree he saw a crane solemnly performing a few measures of a beated waltz and dance with his mate. He realized that it was intended in tenderness, no matter how it appeared, the lonely, starved heart of the boy went out to them in sympathy.

When day after day the only thing that relieved his utter loneliness was the companionship of the birds and beasts of the swamp Freckles turned to them for friendship. He began by instinctively protecting the weak and helpless. He was astonished at the quickness with which they became accustomed to him once they learned that he was not a hunter and that the club he carried was used more frequently for their benefit than his own. He could scarcely believe what he saw.

When black frosts began stripping the Limberlost he watched the departing troops of his friends with dismay. He made special efforts toward friendliness with the hope that he could induce some of them to stay. It was then that he conceived the idea of carrying food to the birds, for he saw that they were leaving for lack of it. But he could not stop them. Day after day flocks gathered and departed. By the time the first snow whitened his trail about the Limberlost there were left only the little black and white juncos, the sapsuckers, yellowhammers, a few patriarchs among the flaming cardinals, the bluejays, the crows and the quail.

Then Freckles began his wizard work. He cleared a space of swale and twice a day he spread a birds' banquet. By the middle of December the strong winds of winter had benten most of the seed from the grass and bushes. The snow fell, covering the swamp, and food was very scarce and hard to find. The birds scarcely waited until Freckles' back was turned to attack his provisions. In a few weeks they flew toward the clearing to meet him. By the bitter weather of January they came half way to the cabin every morning and fluttered about him like doves all the way to the feeding ground. By February they would

perch on his head and shoulders, and the saucy jays would try to pry into his pockets.

Then Freckles added to wheat and crumbs every scrap of refuse food he could find about the cabin. One morning, coming to his feeding ground unusually early, he found a gorgeous cardinal and a rabbit sociably nibbling a cabbage leaf side by side, and that instantly gave to him the idea of cracking nuts from the store he had gathered for Duncan's children, for the squirrels, in the effort to add them to his family. Soon he had them coming—red, gray and black—and he became filled with a vast impatience that he did not know their names nor habits.

So the winter passed. Every week McLean rode over to the Limberlost, never on the same day nor at the same hour. The boy's earnings constituted his first money, and when the boss explained to him that he could leave them safe at a bank and carry away a scrap of paper that represented the amount he made a deposit on every pay day, keeping out barely what was necessary for his board and clothing. What he wanted to do with his money he did not know, but it gave to him a sense of freedom and power to feel that it was there—it was his and he could have it when he chose.

That winter held the first hours of real happiness in Freckles' life. He was free. He was doing a man's work faithfully through every rigor of rain, snow and blizzard. He was gathering a wonderful strength of body, paying his way and saving money.

Mrs. Duncan had a hot drink ready for him when he came in from a freezing day on the trail, knitted a heavy mitten for his left hand, devised a way to sew up and pad the right sleeve which protected the maimed arm in bitter weather, patched his clothing and saved kitchen scraps for his birds, not because she either knew or cared a rap about them, but because she herself was near enough the swamp to be touched by its utter loneliness. When Duncan laughed at her for this she retorted: "My God, mannie, if Freckles hadna the birds and the beasts he would be always alone. It was never meant for a human being to be so solitary."

The next morning Duncan gave an ear of corn he was shelling to Freckles and told him to carry it to his wild chickens in the Limberlost. Freckles laughed delightedly.

"My chickens!" he said. "Why didn't I ever think of that before? Of course they are! They are just little brightly colored cocks and hens. But what would you say to me 'wild chickens' being a good deal tamer than yours here in your yard?"

"Foot, lad!" cried Duncan. "Make yours light on your head and eat out of your hands and pockets," challenged Freckles.

"Go tell your fairy tales to the wee people! They're just brash on believe' things," said Duncan. "I dare you to come see!" retorted Freckles.

"Take ye!" said Duncan. "If ye make just one bird licht on your head or eat frae your hand ye are free to help yourself to my corncrib and wheat bin the rest of the winter."

After that Freckles always spoke of the birds as his chickens. The next Sabbath Duncan, with his wife and children, followed Freckles to the swamp.

Freckles' chickens were awaiting him at the edge of the clearing. They cut the frosty air about his head into curves and circles of crimson, blue and black. They chased each other from Freckles and swept so closely together selves that they brushed him with their outspread wings.

At their feeding ground Freckles set down his old pall of scraps and swept the snow from a small level space with a broom improvised from twigs. As soon as his back was turned the birds clustered over the food, snatching scraps to carry to the nearest bushes. Several of the boldest, a big crow and a couple of jays, settled on the rim and feasted at leisure, while a cardinal that hesitated to venture fumed and scolded from a twig overhead.

Then Freckles scattered his store. At once the ground resembled the spread mantle of Montezuma, except that this mass of gayly colored feathers was on the backs of living birds. While they feasted Duncan gripped his wife's arm and stared in astonishment, for from the bushes and dry grass with gentle cheeping and queer, throaty chatter, as if to encourage each other, came flocks of quail. Before any one saw it arrive a big gray rabbit sat in the midst of the feast, contentedly gnawing a cabbage leaf.

"Weel, I be drawn on!" came Mrs. Duncan's tense whisper.

"Shu-shu!" cautioned Duncan. Lastly Freckles took off his cap. He began filling it with handfuls of wheat from his pockets. In a swarm the grain eaters rose about him like a flock of tame pigeons. They perched on his arms and the cap, and, in the stress of hunger forgetting all caution, a brilliant cock cardinal and an equally gaudy jay fought for a perching place

on his head. "Weel, I be drawn!" muttered Duncan, forgetting the silence imposed on his wife. "I'll hae to give in. See'n is believe'n."

A week later Duncan and Freckles rose from breakfast to face the bitterest morning of the winter. When Freckles, warmly capped and gloved, stepped to the corner of the kitchen for his scrap pail he found a pan of steaming boiled wheat on the top of it. He wheeled to Mrs. Duncan with a shining face.

"Were you fixing this warm food for me chicken or yours?" he asked.

"It's for yours, Freckles," she said. Freckles faced Mrs. Duncan with a trace of every pang of starved mother hunger he had ever suffered written large on his homely, spotted, narrow features.

"Oh, how I wish you were my mother!" he cried.

"Lord love the lad!" exclaimed Mrs. Duncan. "Why, Freckles, are ye no bricht enough to learn without being taught by a woman that I am your mither? If a great man like yourself dinna ken that, learn it now and ne'er forget it. Ance a woman is the wife of any man she becomes wife to all men for having had the wifely experience she kens! Ance a man child has beaten his way to life under the heart of a woman she is mother to all men, for the hearts of mithers are everywhere the same. Bless ye, lad, die, I am your mither!"

She tucked the coarse scarf she had knit for him closer over his chest and pulled his cap lower about his ears, but Freckles, whipping it off and holding it under his arm, caught her rough, reddened hand and pressed it to his lips in a long kiss. Then he hurried away to hide the happy, embarrassing tears that were coming straight from his swelling heart.

Mrs. Duncan threw herself into Duncan's arms. "Oh, the pair lad!" she wailed. "Oh, the pair mither hungry lad! He breaks my heart!"

Duncan's arms closed convulsively about his wife. With a big brown hand he lovingly stroked her rough soiled hair.

"Sarah, you're a guid woman!" he said. "You're a michty guid woman! Ye hae a way o' speakin' out at times that's like the inspired prophets of the Lord."

All through the winter Freckles' entire energy was given to keeping up his lines and his "chickens" from freezing or starving. When the first breath of spring touched the Limberlost and the snow receded before it; when the catkins began to bloom; when there came a hint of green to the trees, bushes and swale; when the rushes lifted their heads and the pulse of the newly resurrected season beat strong in the heart of nature, something new stirred in the breast of the boy.

Nature always levies her tribute. Now she laid a powerful hand on the soul of Freckles, to which the boy's whole being responded, though he had not the least idea what was troubling him. Duncan accepted his wife's theory that it was a touch of spring fever, but Freckles knew better. He had never been so well.

(Continued next week.)

Perfectly Proper. Smith - Jones seems to have no thought for anything except his clothes. Brown - Yes; he is perfectly wrapped up in them.

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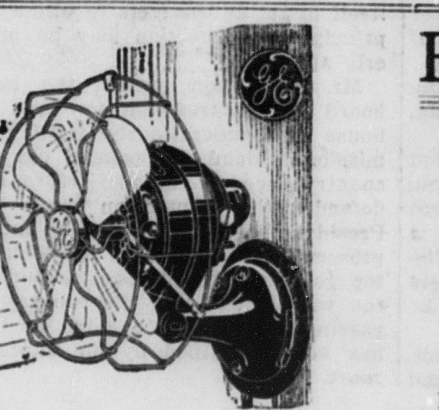
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