

FRECKLES

By
Gene Stratton-Porter

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SYNOPSIS.

Freckles, a homeless boy, is hired by Boss McLean to guard the expensive timber in the Lumberlost from timber thieves. Freckles does his work faithfully, makes friends with the birds and yearns to know more about nature. He lives with Mr. and Mrs. Duncan.

CHAPTER III. A FEATHER FALLS.

THE sounds that had at first struck cold fear into Freckles' soul he now knew had left on wing and silent foot at the approach of winter. As flock after flock of the birds returned and he recognized the old echoes reawakening, he found to his surprise that he had been lonely for them and was hailing their return with great joy. He was possessed of an overpowering desire to know what they were, to learn where they had been and whether they would make friends with him as the winter birds had done, and if they did would they be as fickle? For with the running sap, creeping worm and winging bug most of Freckles' "chickens" had deserted him, entered the swamp and feasted to such a state of plethora on its store that they cared little for his supply, so that in the days of maring and nest building the boy was deserted.

The yearly resurrection of the Lumberlost is a mighty revival. Freckles stood back and watched with awe and envy the gradual reclothing and re-populating of the swamp. Keen eyed and alert through danger and loneliness, he noted every stage of development from the first piping frog and unshedding bud to full leafage and the return of the last emigrant. The knowledge of his complete loneliness and utter insignificance was hourly thrust upon him. He brooded and fretted until he was in a fever, and yet he never guessed the cause. He was filled with a vast impatience and a longing that would not much further be denied.

It was June by the zodiac, June by the Lumberlost, and by every delight of a newly resurrected season it should have been June in the hearts of all men. Yet Freckles scowled darkly as he came down the trail, and the running tap, tap which tested the sagging wire and telegraphed word of his coming to his furred and feathered friends of the swamp this morning carried the story of his discontent a mile ahead of him.

Freckles' special pet, a dainty yellow coated, black sleeved cock goldfinch, had for several days past remained on the wire, the bravest of all, and Freckles, absorbed with the cunning and beauty of the tiny fellow, never guessed that he was being duped, for the goldfinch was skipping, flirting and swinging for the express purpose of holding his attention that he would not look up and see a small cradle of thistledown and wool perilously near his head.

A peculiar movement under a small walnut tree caught his eye. He stopped to investigate. It was an unusually large Luna cocoon, and the moth was just bursting the upper end in its struggles to reach light and air. Freckles stood and stared.

"There's something in there trying to get out," he muttered. "Wonder if I could help it? Guess I best not be trying. If I hadn't happened along there wouldn't have been any one to help it, and maybe I'd only be hurting it. It's—it's—oh, skagagny! It's just being born!"

Freckles gasped with surprise. The moth cleared the opening and with great wobbles and contortions climbed up the tree. He stared, speechless with amazement as the moth crept around a limb and clung to the underside. There was a great pearly body almost as large as his thumb and of the very snowiest white that Freckles had ever seen. There was a band of delicate lavender across its forehead, and its feet were of the same color. There were antlers like tiny straw colored ferns on its head and on its shoulders little wet looking flaps no bigger than his thumb nail. Freckles saw that those queer little wet looking things were expanding, drooping, taking on color, and small oval markings were beginning to show.

The minutes went by. Freckles' steady gaze never wavered. Without realizing it he was trembling with eagerness and anxiety. As he saw what was taking place "It's going to have wings" he breathed in hushed wonder. The morning sun fell on the moth and dried its velvet down, and the soft air made it fluffy. The rapidly growing wings began to appear to be of the most delicate green, with lavender fore ribs, transparent, eye shaped markings edged with lines of red, tan and black and long, crisp trailers.

Freckles was whispering to himself for fear of disturbing the moth. It began a systematic exercise of raising and lowering its exquisite wings to dry them and to establish circulation. Freckles realized that it would soon be able to spread them and sail away. His long coming soul sent up its first shivering cry.

"I don't know what it is. Oh, I wish I knew! How I wish I knew! It must be something grand. It can't be a butterfly. It's away too big. Oh, I wish there was some one to tell me what it is!"

He climbed on the locust post and, balancing himself by the wire, held a finger in the line of the moth's advance up, and he stepped back to the path, holding it up to the light and examining it closely. Then he held it in the shade and turned it, gazing over its markings and beautiful coloring. When he held the moth back to the limb it climbed on, still waving those magnificent wings.

"My, but I'd like to be staying with you!" he said. "But if I was to stay here all day you couldn't get any prettier than you are right now and I wouldn't get smart enough to tell what you are. I suppose there's some one that knows. Of course there is. Mr. McLean said there were people that knew every leaf bird and flower in the Lumberlost. Oh, lord, how I wish you'd be telling me just this one thing!"

The goldfinch had ventured back to the wire, for there was his mate only a few inches above the man creature's head, and, indeed, he simply must not be allowed to look up just them, so the brave little fellow rocked on the wire and piped up, just as he had done every day for a week, "See me; see me?" "See you! Of course I see you," growled Freckles. "I see you day after day, and what good is it doing me? I might see you every morning for a year and then not be able to tell; any one about it. 'Seen a bird—little and yellow as any canary, with black silk wings.' That's as far as I'd get. What you doing here anyway? Have you a mate? What's your name? 'See you?' I reckon I see you, but I might as well be blind for any good it's doing me!"

Freckles impatiently struck the wire. With a screech of fear the goldfinch fled precipitately. His mate tore from off the nest with a whirr. Freckles looked up and saw it.

"O-ho!" he cried. "So that's what you are doing here! You have a wife." Freckles climbed up to examine the nest, tiny cradle and its contents. The hen darted at him in a frenzy. "Now, where do you come in?" he demanded when he saw that she was not like the goldfinch.

"You be clearing out of here! This is none of your fry. This is the nest of me little yellow friend of the wire, and you shan't be touching it. Don't blame you for wanting to see though. My, but it's a fine nest and beauties of eggs. Will you be keeping away or will I fire this stick at you?"

Freckles dropped back to the trail. The hen darted to the nest and settled on it with a tender, coddling movement. He of the yellow coat flew to the edge to make sure that everything was right.

"Well, I'll be switched!" muttered Freckles. "If that ain't both their nest! And he's yellow and she's green, or she's yellow and he's green. Of course I don't know, and I haven't any way to find out, but it's plain as the nose on your face that they are both ready to be fighting for that nest, so of course they belong. Don't that beat you? Say, that's what's been sticking me for all of these two weeks on that grass nest in the thorn tree down the line. One day a bluebird is setting, and I think it is hers. The next day a brown bird is on, and I chase it off because the nest is blue's. Next day the brown bird is on again, and I let her be because I think it must be hers. Next day, be golly, blue's on again, and off I sent her because it's brown's, and now I bet my hat it's both their nest, and I've only been bothering them and making a big fool of meself."

Freckles plodded on down the trail, scowling blackly and viciously spanging the wire. At the finches' nest he left the line and peered into the thorn tree. There was no bird brooding. He pressed closer to take a peep at the snowy, spotless little eggs he had found so beautiful, and at the slight noise up fared four tiny baby heads with wide open mouths and hunger cries. Freckles stepped back. The brown bird lit on the edge and closed one cavity with a wiggling green worm, and not two minutes later the blue filled another with something white. That settled it. The blue and brown were mates. Once again Freckles repeated his "How I wish I knew!"

About the bridge spanning Sleepy Snake creek the swale spread wide, the timber largely dropped away, and willows, rushes, marsh grass and splendid wild flowers grew abundantly. Lazy big black water snakes, for which the creek was named, sunned on the bushes, wild ducks and grebe chattered, cranes and herons fished, and muskrats plowed the bank in queer, rolling furrows. It was always a place full of interest to Freckles.

Freckles struck slowly into the path leading from the bridge to the line. It was the one spot at which he might relax his vigilance. The greatest timber thief the swamp had ever known would not have attempted to enter it by the mouth of the creek on account of the water and because there was no protection from surrounding trees. He was swishing the rank grass with his cudgel and thinking of the shade the denser swamp afforded when he suddenly dodged sideways. The cudgel whistled sharply through the air and Freckles sprang back.

Out of the clear sky above him, first level with his face, then skimming, dipping, tilting, whirling until it lit quill down in the path in front of him, came a glossy, iridescent big black feather. As it struck the ground Freckles snatched it up and with an almost continuous movement faced the sky. There was not a tree of any size in a large open space. From the clear sky it had fallen, and Freckles, gazing eagerly into the arch of June blue with a few lazy clouds floating far up in the sea of ether, had neither mind nor knowledge to dream of a bird hanging as if frozen there. He turned the big quill questioningly, and again his awed eyes swept the sky.

"A feather dropped from heaven!" he breathed reverently. "Are the holy angels molting? But, no; if they were, it would be white. Maybe all the angels are not for being white. What if the angels of God are white and those of the devil are black? But a black one has no business up there. Maybe some poor black angel is so tired of being punished it's for slipping up to the gates, beating its wings trying to make the Mass hear!"

Again and again Freckles searched the sky, but there was no answering gleam of golden gates, no form of sailing bird. Then he went slowly on his way, turning the feather over and wondering about it. It was a wing quill eighteen inches in length, with a big, heavy spine, gray at the base, shading to jet black at the tip, and it caught the play of the sun's rays in slanting gleams of green and bronze. Again Freckles' "old man of the sea" sat sullen and heavy on his shoulders and weighted him down until his step lagged and his heart ached.

"Where did it come from? What is it? Oh, how I wish I knew!" he kept repeating.

Before him spread a great green pool, filled with rotting logs and leaves, bordered with delicate ferns and grasses, among which lifted the creamy spikes of the arrowhead, the blue of water hyacinth and the delicate yellow of the jewel flower. As Freckles leaned, handling the feather and staring first at it and then into the depths of the pool, he once more gave voice to his old query, "I wonder what it is?"

Straight across from him, crouched in the mosses of a soggy old log, a big green bullfrog, with palpitant throat and bulging eyes, lifted his head and bellowed in answer, "Fin' dout, fin' dout!"

"Wha-what's that?" stammered Freckles, almost too much taken aback to speak. "I—I know you are only a bullfrog; but, be jabers, that sounded mightily like speech. Wouldn't you please to be saying it over?" The bullfrog cuddled contentedly in the ooze. Then suddenly he lifted his voice and, like an imperative drumbeat, rolled it again, "Fin' dout, fin' dout!"

Freckles had the answer. Like the lightning's flash, something seemed to snap in his brain. There was a wavering flame before his eyes. Then his mind cleared. His head lifted in a new poise, his shoulders squared, and his spine straightened. The agony was over. His soul floated free. Freckles came into his birthright.

"Before God, I will!" He uttered the oath so impressively that the recording angel never winced as he posted it up in the prayer column.

Freckles set his hat over the top of one of the locust posts used between trees to hold up the wire and fastened the feather securely in the band. Then he started down the line, talking to himself as men that have worked long alone always fall into the habit of doing. "What a fool I have been!" he muttered. "Of course that's what I have to do. There wouldn't likely anybody be doing it for me. Of course I can! What am I a man for? If I was a four footed thing of the swamp maybe I couldn't, but a man can do anything if he's the grit to work hard enough and stick at it. Mr. McLean is always saying, and here's the way I am to do it. He said, too, that there were people that knew everything in the swamp. Of course they have written books. The thing for me to be doing is to quit mooping and be buying me some books. Never bought a book in me life or anything else of much account, for that matter. Oh, ain't I glad I didn't waste me money! I'll surely be having enough to get a few. Let me see."

(Continued next week.)

Show Spread of Education. In Edinburgh, Scotland, a few days since, there was presented a Masque of learning, or a pageant of education through the ages. It was organized by Prof. Patrick Geddes and his colleagues in celebration of the semi-jubilee of the university hall or residence. The scheme of the pageant comprised a presentation of the culture aspects of all the great civilizations—eastern and western, ancient and modern; from the Egyptian, Indian and Chinese systems, through the Greek and Roman, Celtic and Mediaeval, to the Renaissance and encyclopaedic epochs, and the ideal union of city and university.

Gravitation. The great Newton himself did not pretend to know what gravitation is. He only knew that it existed and he was able to prove how it acted, but what it was in and of itself he never knew. Gravitation is a law of nature, or a force acting in accordance with a law of nature, and that is all that the wisest man is able to say about it—unless he is prepared to talk nonsense. It is like electricity. We know perfectly well what electricity itself does, but what electricity itself is baffles the profoundest of scientists and philosophers.

Rich New South Wales Mine.

At Gundagai, in New South Wales, the owners of the Long Tunnel mine are quietly amassing a fortune. Not long since a parcel of 156 ounces was the result of dollyng 50 pounds of ore brought in in five afternoons. Dollyng by shareholders during a period of eight days from 200 pounds of quartz gave the wonderful return of 73 pounds of gold (\$76 ounces), valued at \$16,000. This ore averaged over 35 per cent gold. The previous week one dish from the mine gave 206 ounces of gold, and three dishes, in which there was under one hundredweight of stone, treated by dollyng, gave the wonderful return of 40 pounds weight of gold, being at the rate of 40 per cent. Each make improves with depth, as also does the character of the gold. The stone, which is of a calcite nature, is hinged together with the precious metal, and though there is a lot of very fine gold, the bulk is made up of solid pyrites from five pennyweights to two ounces each.

Long Chance.

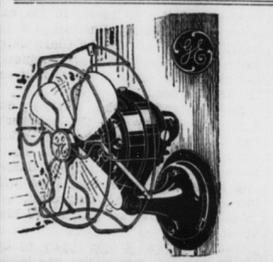
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ELECTRIC FANS.



THE PITTSBURGH POST.

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