

FRECKLES

By
Gene Stratton-Porter

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(Continued from last week.)
SYNOPSIS.

Freckles, a homeless boy, is hired by Boss McLean to guard the expensive timber in the Limberlost 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.

He resolves to get books and educate himself. He becomes interested in a huge pair of vultures and calls his bird friends his "chickens."

CHAPTER IV.

FRECKLES' WORLD OF PROMISE.
Freckles had walked the timber line ten months. His pay was \$30 a month, and his board cost \$8. That left \$22 a month, and the \$2 was more than his clothing had cost him. At the very least he had \$200 in the bank.

"I'll be having a book about all the birds, trees, flowers, butterflies—and



THE SUN GLEINT ON ITS SHARP, HOOKED BEAK.

yes, by gummy. I'll be having one about the frogs—if it takes every cent I have," he promised himself.

Freckles fell into a rapid pace, for he had lost time that morning, and as he rounded the last curve he was at most running.

Then, wavering, flickering, darting here and there over the sweet marsh grass, came a great black shadow. He had seen some owls and hawks of the swamp that he thought could be classed as large birds, but never anything like this, for six feet it spread its great shining wings. Its big, strong feet could be seen drawn up among its feathers. The sun glinted on its sharp, hooked beak. It lit on a low tree, and a second later Freckles saw another shadow sweep the grass.

They were evidently mates, for with a queer rolling hop the first corner shivered his bronze wings, sidled up to the new arrival and gave her a sly little peck on her wing. Then he coquetishly drew away and ogled her. He lifted his head and waddled from her a few steps, awkwardly ambled back and gave her a sort of kiss on her beak.

The lover sidestepped a few feet. He spread his wings and slowly and softly waved them precisely, as if he were fanning his charmer, which indeed was the result he accomplished. Then he hobbled up to his bombardment once more. He faced her squarely this time and turned his head from side to side with queer little jerks and indiscriminate peckings at her wings and head. She yawned and shuffled away indifferently. Freckles reached up, pulled the quill from his hat and, looking from it to the birds, nodded in settled conviction.

With a ravishing swagger, half lifted wings and deep, guttural hissing the lover came on again. He suddenly lifted his body, but the other bird coolly rocked forward on the limb, glided gracefully beneath him and slowly sallied off into the Limberlost.

Freckles hurried down the trail, and when he neared the path to the clearing and saw the boss sitting motionless on the mare that was the pride of his heart the boy broke into a run.

"Oh, Mr. McLean," he cried, "I hope I haven't kept you waiting very long! And the sun is getting so hot! I have been so slow this morning! I could have gone faster, only there were so many things to keep me, and I didn't know you would be here. I'll hurry after this. I've never had to be giving excuses before. The line wasn't down, and there wasn't a sign of trouble. It

was other things that were making me late."

This flushed, panting, talkative lad was not the same creature that had sought him in despair and bitterness. With an eloquence of which he never dreamed Freckles told his story. He talked with such enthusiasm that McLean never took his eyes from his face nor shifted in the saddle until he described the strange bird lover, and then the boss suddenly bent over the pommel and laughed with him.

"They're back there in the middle of the swamp now," said Freckles. "Do you suppose there is any chance of them staying with me chickens? If they do they'll be about the queerest I have. But I tell you, sir, I am getting some plum good ones. There's a new kind over at the mouth of the creek that uses its wings like feet and walks on all fours. It travels like a thrashing machine. There's another, tall as me waist, with a bill a foot long, a neck near two, not the thickness of me wrist and an elegant color. He's some blue and gray, touched up with black, white and brown. The voice of him is such that if he'd be going up and standing by a tree and sawing at it a few times he could be cutting it square off. I don't know but it would be a good idea to try him on the gang, sir."

McLean laughed. "Those must be blue herons, Freckles," he said. "And it doesn't seem possible, but your story of the big black birds sounds like genuine black vultures. They are common enough in the south. I've seen them thick about the lumber camps of Georgia, but I never heard of any this far north before. They must be strays. You have perfectly described our nearest equivalent to a branch of these birds called in Europe Pharaoh's chickens."

"He was loving her so," said Freckles in a hushed voice. Freckles lifted his brave, steady eyes to the boss.

"If anybody loved me like that, Mr. McLean, I wouldn't be spending any time caring how they looked or moved. All I'd be thinking of was how they felt toward me. If they will stay I'll be caring as much for them as any chickens I have."

The face of McLean was a study. "And now, Freckles, what has been the trouble all spring? You have done your work as faithfully as any one could ask, but I can't help seeing that there is something wrong. Are you tired of your job?"

"I love it," answered Freckles. "It will almost break me heart when the gang begins tearing up the swamp and scaring away me chickens."

"Then what is the matter?" insisted McLean.

"I think, sir, it's been books. Being among these beautiful things every day, I got so anxious like to be knowing and naming them that it got to eating into me and went and made me near sick when I was well as I could be. Of course I learned to read, write and figure some at school, but there was nothing there nor in any of the city that I ever got to see that would make a fellow even be dreaming of such interesting things as there are here. I've seen the parks, but they ain't even beginning to be in it with Limberlost. It's all new and strange to me. I don't know a thing about any of it. The bullfrog told me to 'find out' plain as day, and books are the only way, ain't they?"

"Of course," said McLean, astonished at himself for his heartfelt relief. He had not guessed until that minute what it would have meant to him to have Freckles give up. "You know enough to study out what you want yourself if you have the books, don't you?"

"I am pretty sure I do," said Freckles. "I learned all I'd the chance at in the home, and me schooling was good as far as it went. Wouldn't let you go past fourteen, you know. I always did me sums perfect, and I loved me history books. I never could get me grammar to suit them. They said it was just born in me to go wrong talking, but I could knock them all out singing. I was always leader in the home, and once one of the superintendents gave me car fare and let me go into the city and sing in a boys' choir. The master said I'd the sweetest voice of them all until it got rougher, and then he made me quit for awhile, but he said it would be coming back by now, and I'm rally thinking it is, sir, for I've tried about the line a bit of late."

"That and me chickens has been all the company I've been having, and it will be all I'll want if I can have books and learn the real names of things, where they come from and why they do such interesting things. It's been fretting me to be shut up here among all these wonders and not knowing a thing. I wanted to ask you what some books would cost me and if you'd be having the goodness to get me the right ones. I think I have enough money."

Freckles handed up his account book, and the boss studied it gravely.

"You needn't touch your bank account, Freckles," he said. "Ten dollars from this month's pay will get you everything you need to start on. I will write a friend in Grand Rapids today to select you the very best and send them at once."

Freckles' eyes were shining. "Never owned a book in my life!" he said. "Even me schoolbooks were never mine. Lord, how I used to wish I could have just one of them for me very own! Won't it be fun to see me sawbird and me little yellow fellow looking at me from the pages of a book and their real names and all about them printed alongside?"

"I'll have Duncan get you a ten bushel store box the next time he goes to town," said McLean. "You can put in your spare time filling it with the specimens you pick up until the books come, and then you can study

out what you have. I suspect you could find a lot of stuff that I could sell for you. I'll order you a butterfly net and box and show you how scientists pin specimens. But I don't want to hear of your killing any birds. They are protected by heavy fines."

McLean rode away and left Freckles staring aghast. Then he saw the point and grinned sheepishly. Standing on the trail, he twirled the feather and thought the morning over.

"Well, if life ain't getting to be worth living!" he said wonderingly. "Biggest streak of luck I ever had! 'Bout time something was coming my way, but I wouldn't ever thought anybody could strike such prospects through just a falling feather."

On Duncan's return from his next trip to town there was a store box loaded on the back of his wagon. He drove to the west entrance of the swamp, set the box on a stump that Freckles had selected in a beautiful and sheltered place and made it secure on its foundation with a tree at its back.

"It seems most a pity to nail into that tree," said Duncan. "I hadna the time to examine into the grain of it, but it looks as if it might be a rare one. Anyhow, the nailing' wina burn it deep, and havin' the case by it will make it safer if it is a guld one."

"Isn't it an oak?" asked Freckles. "Aye," said Duncan. "It looks like it might be one of those fine grained golden oaks that mak' such grand furniture."

When the body of the case was secure Duncan made a door out of the lid and fastened it on with hinges. He drove a staple, screwed on a latch and gave Freckles a small padlock, so that he might safely fasten in his treasures. He made a shelf in the top for the books and last of all covered the case with oilecloth.

It was the first time in Freckles' life that any one had ever done that much for his pleasure, and it warmed his heart with pure joy.

"Mr. Duncan," he said, "I don't know why you are being so mighty good to me, but if you have any jobs up at the cabin that I could do for you or Mrs. Duncan hours off the line it would make me mighty happy."

"Freckles," said Duncan as he began gathering up his tools, "I canna see that it will hurt ye to be told that ye are doin' every day a thing that pleases the boss as much as anything ye could do. Ye're bein' uncommon faithful, lad, and honest as old Father Time. McLean is trustin' ye as he would his own flesh and blood."

"Oh, Duncan!" cried the boy. "Are you sure?"

"Why, I know," answered Duncan. "I wadna venture to say else. In those first days he cautioned me na to tell ye that, but now he wadna care. D'ye ken, Freckles, that some of the single trees ye are guardin' are worth a thousand dollars?"

Freckles looked limp, and his eyes popped.

"Ye see," said Duncan, "that's why they maun be watched so closely. The other night down at camp some son of Baalam was suggestin' that ye might be sellin' the boss out to Jack and lettin' him tak the trees secretly and nobody wad ever ken till the gang gets here."

A wave of scarlet flooded Freckles' face, and he blazed hotly at the insult. "And the boss," continued Duncan, ignoring Freckles' anger, "he lays back just as cool as covecumbers and says,

'I'll give a thousand dollars to any man that will show me a fresh stump when we reach the Limberlost,' says he. Some of the men just snapped him up that they'd find some. So ye see how the boss is trustin' ye, lad."

"I am gladder than I can ever express," said Freckles. "And now will I be walking double time to keep some of them from cutting a tree to get all that money?"

"Mither o' Moses!" howled Duncan. "Ye can trust the Scotch to bungle things a'thegither. McLean was only meanin' to show ye all confidence and honor. He's gone and set a high price for some dirty whelp to ruin ye. I was just tryin' to show ye how he felt toward ye, and I've gone and give ye that worry to bear."

"I am mighty proud of what you have been telling me, Duncan," said Freckles. "I need the warning sure, for with the books coum'g I might be tempted to neglect me work when double watching is needed."

Freckles picked up his club and started down the line, whistling cheerily. Duncan went straight to the lower camp and, calling McLean aside, repeated the conversation verbatim. "And, nae matter what happens now or ever, dinna ye dare let anything make ye believe that Freckles hasna garded faithful as any man could."

"I don't think anything could shake my faith in the lad," said McLean.

Freckles kept one eye religiously on the line. The other he divided between the path, his friends of the wire and a search of the sky for his latest arrivals. Every day since their coming he had seen them, either hanging like small black clouds above the swamp or bobbing over logs and trees with their queer tilting walk. Whenever he could spare time he entered the swamp and tried to make friends with them, and they were the tamest of all his unnumbered subjects. They ducked, dodged and ambled about him, over logs and bushes, and not even a near approach would drive them to flight.

For two weeks he had found them circling over the Limberlost regularly, but one morning the female was missing, and only the big black chicken hung sentinel above the swamp. His mate did not reappear in the following days, and Freckles grew very anxious. He spoke of it to Mrs. Duncan, and she quieted his fears by raising a delightful hope in their stead.

"Why, Freckles, if it's the hen bird ye are missin' it's ten to one she's safe," she said. "She's laid and is settin', ye silly. Watch her and mark whaur he lights. Then follow and find the nest. Some Sabbath we'll all gang see it."

Accepting this theory, Freckles be-

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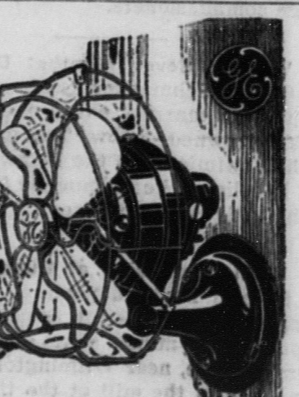
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