

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 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.

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

Some of the trees he is guarding are worth \$3,000 each. Freckles' books arrive. He receives a call from Wessner.

CHAPTER V.

FRECKLES FACES TROUBLE.

COMING from a long day on the trail, Freckles saw Duncan's children awaiting him much closer the swale than they usually ventured, and from their wild gestures he knew that something had happened. He broke into a run, but the cry that reached him was, "The books have come!"

They found books on birds, trees, flowers, moths and butterflies. There was also one containing Freckles' bullfrog, true to life. And besides these were a butterfly net, a naturalist's tin specimen box, a bottle of gasoline, a box of cotton, a paper of long steel specimen pins and a letter telling what all these things were and how to use them.

At the discovery of each new treasure Freckles shouted, "Will you be looking at this now!"

Mrs. Duncan cried, "Weel, I be drawn on!"

When Freckles started for the trail next morning the shining new specimen box flashed on his back. The black "chickens," a mere speck in the blue, caught the gleam of it and wondered what it was. The folded net hung by the boy's hatchet, and the bird book was in the box. He walked the line and tested each section scrupulously, watching every foot of the trail, for he was determined not to alight his work. But if ever a boy "made haste slowly" in a hurry it was Freckles that morning. When at last he reached the space he had cleared out and fitted up around his case his heart swelled with the pride of possessing even so much that he could call his own.

He had made a large room with the door of the case set even with one side of it. On three sides fine big bushes of wild rose climbed to the lower branches of the trees. Part of his walls were mallow, part alder, thorn, willow and dogwood. Below there filled in a solid mass of pale pink sheep laurel and yellow St. John's wort, while the amber threads of the dodder interlaced everywhere. At one side the swamp came close and cattails grew in profusion. In front of them he had planted a row of water hyacinths without disturbing in the least the state of their azure bloom, and where the ground rose higher for his door a row of foxglove that would soon be open.

To the left he had discovered a queer natural arrangement of the trees that grew to giant size and were set in a gradually narrowing space so that a long, open vista stretched away until lost in the dim recesses of the swamp. A little trimming back of underbrush rolling out of dead logs, leveling of floor and carpeting of moss, made it easy to understand why Freckles had named this the "cathedral," yet he had never been taught that "the groves were God's first temples."

On either side of the trees that constituted the first arch of this dim vista of the swamp he planted ferns that grew waist high this early in the season, and so skillfully had the work been done that not a frond drooped because of the change. Opposite he cleared a space and made a flowerbed. Every day saw the addition of new specimens.

On the line side he left the bushes thick for concealment and entered by a narrow path he and Duncan had cleared in setting up the case. He called this the front door, though he used every precaution to hide it. He built rustic seats between several of the trees, leveled the floor and thickly carpeted it with rank, heavy woolly dog moss. About the case he planted wild clematis, bitternut and wild grapevines and trained them over it until it was almost covered.

This morning Freckles walked straight to his case, unlocked it and set his apparatus and dinner inside. He took out the birdbook, turned to the section headed "V." Past "vireo" and "vireo" he went, on down the line until his finger, trembling with eagerness, stopped at "vulture."

"Great black California vulture," he read. "Humph! This side the Rockies will do for us."

"Common turkey buzzard."

"Well, we ain't hunting common turkeys. McLean said chickens, and

what he says goes." "Black vulture of the south." "Here we are arrived at once." Freckles' finger followed the line, and he read scraps aloud.

"Common in the south. Sometimes called Jim Crow. Nearest equivalent to C-a-t-b-a-r-t-e-s A-t-r-a-t-a."

"— the Pharaoh's chickens of European species. Sometimes stray north as far as Virginia and Kentucky."

"And sometimes farther," interpolated Freckles, "cos I got them right here in Indiana so like these pictures I can just see me big chicken bobbing up to get his ears boxed. Hey?"

"Light blue eggs?" "Golly, I got to be seeing them!"

"— big as a common turkey's, but shaped like a hen's, heavily spotted with chocolate!"

"Caramels, I suppose. And?"

"— in hollow logs or stumps."

"Oh, haggidy! Wasn't I barking up the wrong tree though? Ought to be looking near the ground all this time. Now it's all to do over, and I suspect the sooner I start the sooner I'll be likely to find them."

Freckles ate and drank his last drop of water. He sat resting a little and watching the sky to see if his big chicken was hanging up there. But he came to the earth abruptly, for there were steps coming down the trail that were neither McLean's nor Duncan's, and there never had been others. Freckles' heart leaped hotly. He ran a quick hand over his belt to feel if his revolver and hatchet were there, caught up his cudgel and laid it across his knees, then sat quietly waiting. Was it Black Jack, or some one even worse? Forced to do something to brace his nerves, he puckered his stiffening lips and began whistling a tune he had led in his clear tenor every year of his life at the home Christmas exercises.

His quick Irish wit roused to the ridiculousness of it and he burst into a laugh that steadied him amazingly.

Through the bushes he caught a glimpse of the oncoming figure. His heart flooded with joy, for it was a man from the gang. Wessner had been his bunk mate the night he came down the corduroy. This was no timber thief. Freckles sprang up and called cheerily, a warm welcome on his face.

"Well, it's good telling if you're glad to see me," said Wessner. "We've been hearing down at the camp you were so mighty touchy you didn't allow a man within a rod of the line."

"No more do I," answered Freckles. "If he's a stranger, but you're from McLean, ain't you?"

"Oh, curse McLean!" said Wessner. Freckles gripped the cudgel.

"And are you really saying so?" he inquired with elaborate politeness.

"Yes, I am," said Wessner. "So would every other man of the gang if they wasn't too big cowards to say anything unless maybe that other stobbering old Scotchman Duncan. Grinding the lives out of us! Working us like dogs and paying us starvation wages, while he rolls up his millions and lives like a prince!"

Green lights began to play through the gray of Freckles' eyes.

"Wessner," he said impressively, "you'd make a fine pattern for the father of liars! Every man on that gang is strong and hithy, paid all he earns and treated with the courtesy of a gentleman. As for the boss living like a prince, he shares fare with you every day of your lives."

Wessner was not a born diplomat, but he saw he was on the wrong tack, and he tried another.

"Freckles, old fellow," he said, "if you let me give you a pointer I can put you on to making a cool five hundred without stepping out of your tracks."

Freckles drew back.

"You needn't be afraid of speaking up," he said. "There isn't a soul in the Lumberlost save the birds and the beasts unless some of your sort's come along and's crowding the privileges of the legal tinints."

"None of my friends along," said Wessner. "Nobody knew I came but Black Jack—I mean a friend of mine. If you want to hear sense and act with reason he can see you later, but it ain't necessary. We can make all the plans needed. The trick's so dead small and easy."

"Must be if you have the engineering of it," said Freckles. But he heard with a sigh of relief that they were alone.

Wessner was impervious. "You just bet it is! Why, only think, Freckles, slavin' away at a measly little \$30 a month, and here is a chance to clear \$500 in a day! You surely won't be the fool to miss it!"

"And how was you proposing for me to stale it?" inquired Freckles. "Or am I just to find it laying in me path about the line?"

"That's it, Freckles," blustered the Dutchman, "you're just to find it. You needn't know a thing. You name a morning when you will walk up the west side of the swamp and then turn round and walk back down the same side again and the money is yours. Couldn't anything be easier than that, could it?"

"Depends entirely on the man," said Freckles. The ill of a lark hanging above the swale beside them was not sweeter than the sweetness of his voice. "To some it would seem to come easy as breathing, and to some wringin' the last drop of their hearts' blood couldn't force them! I'm not the man that goes into a scheme like that with the blindfold over me eyes, for, you see, it means to break trust with the boss, and I've served him faithful as I know. You'll have to be making the thing very clear to me understanding."

"It's so dead easy," repeated Wessner, "it makes me tired of the simpleness of it. You see, there's a few trees in the swamp that's real gold

mines. There's three especial. Two are back in, but one's square on the line. Why, your pottering old Scotch fool of a boss nailed the wire to it with his own hands! He never noticed where the bark had been peeled nor saw what it was. If you will stay on this side of the trail just one day we can have it cut, loaded and ready to drive out at night. Next morning you can find it, report and be the busiest man in the search for us. We know where to fix it all safe and easy. Then McLean has a set up with a couple of the gang that there can't be a raw stump found in the Lumberlost. There's plenty of witnesses to swear to it, and I know three that will there's a cool thousand, and this tree is worth all of that raw. Say, it's a gold mine, I tell you, and just \$500 of it is yours. There's no danger on earth to you, for you've got McLean that bamboozled you could sell out the whole swamp and he'd never mistrust you. What do you say?"

Freckles' soul was satisfied. "Is that all?" he asked.

"No, it ain't," said Wessner. "If you want to brace up and be a man and go into the thing for keeps you can make five times that in a week. My friend knows a dozen others who could get out in a few days, and all you'd have to do would be to keep out of sight. Then you could take your money and skip some night and begin life like a gentleman somewhere else. What do you think about it?"

Freckles purred like a kitten.

"'T would be a rare joke on the boss," he said, "to be stallin' from him the very thing he's trusted me to guard and be getting me wages all winter thrown in free. And you're making the pay awful high. Me to be getting five hundred for such a simple little thing as that. You're treating me most royal indeed! It's away beyond all I'd be expecting. Sixteen cents would be a big price for that job. It must be looked into thorough. Just you wait here until I do a minute's turn in the swamp, and then I'll be escorting you out to the clearing and giving you the answer."

Freckles lifted the overhanging bushes and hurried back to the case. He unsling the specimen box and laid it inside with his hatchet and revolver. He slipped the key in his pocket and went back to Wessner.

"Now for the answer," he said. "Stand up!"

There was iron in his voice, and he was commanding like an outraged general. "Anything you want to be taking off?" he questioned.

Wessner looked the astonishment he felt. "Why, no, Freckles," he said.

"Have the goodness to be calling me Mr. McLean," snapped Freckles. "I'm after resarrin' me pet name for the use of me friends! You may stand with your back to the light or be taking any advantage you want."

"Why, what do you mean?" spluttered Wessner.

"I'm mainin'," said Freckles tersely, "to lick a quarter section of h— out of you, and may the Holy Virgin stay me before I leave you here carrion. For your carcass would turn the stumblers of me chickens!"

Down at the camp that morning Wessner's conduct had been so palpable an excuse to force a discharge that Duncan moved near McLean and whispered, "Think of the boy, sir!"

McLean was so troubled that an hour later he mounted Nellie and followed Wessner to his home in Wildcat Hollow, only to find that he had left there a little before, heading for the Lumberlost. McLean rode at top speed. When Mrs. Duncan told him that a man answering Wessner's description had gone down the west side of the swamp near noon he left the mare in her charge and followed on foot. When he heard voices he entered the swamp and silently crept near just in time to hear Wessner whine: "But I can't fight you, Freckles. I ain't done nothing to you. I'm away bigger than you, and you've only one hand."

CHAPTER VI.

WESSNER GETS A THERASHING.

THE boss crouched among the bushes like a tiger ready to spring, but as Freckles' voice reached him he held himself with the effort of his life to see what mettle was in the boy.

"Don't you be wasting of me good time in the numbering of me hands," howled Freckles. "The stringth of me case will make up for the weakness of me members, and the size of a cowardly thief don't count. You'll think all the wildcats of the Lumberlost is turned loose on you when I come against you, and, as for me cause, I slept with you, Wessner, the night I come down the corduroy like a dirty, friendless tramp, and the boss was for taking me up, washing, clothing and feeding me and giving me a home full of love and tenderness, and a master to look to, and good, well earned money in the bank. He's trusting me, his hearty, and here comes you, you spotted toad of the big road, and insults me, as is an honest Irish gintlemin, by hinting that you conceive I'd be willing to shut me eyes and hold fast while you rob him of the thing I was set and paid to guard and then act the sneak and liar to him and ruin and eternally blacken the soul of me. You rascal," raved Freckles, "be fighting before I forget the laws of a gintlemin's game and split your dirty head with me stick!"

Wessner backed away, mumbling, "But I don't want to hurt you, Freckles."

"Oh, don't you!" raged the boy. "Well, you ain't resembling me none, for I'm itchin' like death to git me fingers in the face of you."

He danced up and, as Wessner lunged out in self defense, ducked under his arm like a bantam and

punched him in the pit of the stomach, so that he doubled up with a groan. Before Wessner could straighten himself Freckles was on him, fighting like the wildest fury. The Dutchman dealt thundering blows that sometimes landed and sent Freckles reeling and sometimes missed, while he went plunging into the swale with the impetus of them. Freckles could not strike with half Wessner's force, but he could land three blows to Wessner's one. It was here that Freckles' days of alert watching on the line, the perpetual swinging of the heavy cudgel and the endurance of all weather stood him in good stead, for he was as tough

as a pine knot and as agile as a panther. He danced, ducked and dodged. For the first five minutes he endured fearful punishment. Then Wessner's breath commenced to whistle between his teeth, when Freckles had only just begun fighting. He sprang back with shrill laughter.

"Regolly, and will your honor be whistling the hornpipe for me to be dancing off?" he cried.

Spang went his fist into Wessner's face, and he was past him into the swale.

"And would you be pleased to tune up a little livelier?" he gasped and clipped his ear as he sprang back. Wessner lunged at him in blind fury. Freckles, seeing an opening, forgot the laws of a gentleman's game and drove the toe of his heavy wading boot into Wessner's middle until he doubled up and fell heavily. In a flash Freckles was on him. For a time McLean could not see what was happening. "Go! Go to him now!" he commanded himself, but so intense was his desire to see the boy win alone that he could not stir.

At last Freckles sprang up and backed away. "Time!" he yelled like a fury. "Be getting up, Mr. Wessner, and don't be afraid of hurting me. I'll let you throw in an extra hand and lick you to me complete satisfaction, all the same. Did you hear me call the limit? Will you get up and be facing me?"

As Wessner struggled to his feet he resembled a battler, for his clothing was in ribbons and his face and hands streaming blood.

"I—I guess I got enough," he mumbled.

"Oh, do you?" roared Freckles. "Well, this ain't your say. You come on to me ground lying about me boss and intimatin' I'd stale from his very pockets. Now, will you be standing up and taking your medicine like a man or getting it poured down the throat of you like a baby? I ain't got enough. This is only just the beginning with me. Be looking out there!"

He sprang against Wessner and sent him rolling. He attacked the unresisting figure and fought him until he lay limp and still and Freckles had no strength left to lift an arm. Then he rose and stepped back, gasping for breath. With his first good lungful of air he shouted, "Time!" But the figure of Wessner lay motionless.

Freckles watched him with respectful eye and saw at last that he was completely exhausted. He bent over him and, catching him by the back of the neck, jerked him to his knees. Wessner lifted the face of a whipped cur and, fearing further punishment, burst into great shivering sobs, while the tears washed tiny rivulets through the blood and muck. Freckles stepped back, glaring at Wessner, but suddenly the scowl of anger and the ugly disfiguring red faded from the boy's face. He dabbed at a cut on his temple, from which issued a tiny crimson stream, and jauntily shook back his hair. His face took on the innocent look of a cherub, and his voice rivaled that of a brooding dove, but into his eyes crept a look of diabolical mischief.

He glanced vaguely about him until

he saw his club, seized and twirled it like a drum major, struck it upright in the muck and marched on tiptoe over to Wessner mechanically, as a puppet worked by a string. Bending over, Freckles reached an arm about Wessner's waist and helped him to his feet.

"Careful, now," he cautioned; "be careful, Freddy. There's danger of you hurting me."

Fishing a handkerchief from a back pocket, Freckles tenderly wiped Wessner's eyes and nose.

"Come, Freddy, me child," he admonished Wessner; "it's time little boys were getting home. I've me work to do and can't be entertaining you any more today. Come back tomorrow if you ain't through yet and we'll renate the performance."

(Continued next week.)

Quarreled in Life's Sunset.

A curious divorce case is before the court at Auxerre, northern France, in which the wife, aged eighty-seven, sues her husband, aged ninety-three. The aged couple had lived a happy married life for over thirty-seven years until last summer, when altercations were caused by the jealousy of madame. At first laughing at his wife's reproaches, the husband later became exasperated, and turned her out of doors. "Disregarding the loving care I have always shown him," the old lady said indignantly in court, "he insults me and treats me like a person of no account. Fancy at my age, too." "It was you," he retorted, "who brought accusations against me and made out I was a ne'er-do-well."

Four Days Without Food or Shelter.

After being marooned on Vendova island which is uninhabited, for four days, without food, two Bellingham, Wash., business men, succeeded in reaching safety at Eliza Island the other day. The men removed their clothing and used it as a sail for their small launch, which had been wrecked by the gale. They drifted about the greater part of one night, battling water out of their boat constantly to prevent it from sinking.

The West and New York.

What is "The West?" How many various and surprising individualities are included in these words? New York can see through a millstone if it has a hole in it, but she is less apt to jump at conclusions than some other communities; she wants to "be shown" quite as earnestly as Missouri; perhaps she can "understand the West" quite as intelligently as "The West" can understand New York.—New York Evening Sun.

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