

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.

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 \$1,000 each. Freckles' books arrive. He receives a call from Wessner.

Again an awful wrenching seized McLean. Freckles stepped back as Wessner, tottering and reeling like a thoroughly drunken man, came toward the path, looking indeed as if wildcats had taken their fill of him.

The cudgel spun high in air, and, catching it with an expertness acquired by long practice on the line, the boy twirled it a second and, stepping out into the trail, followed Wessner. Because Freckles was Irish, it was impossible to do so silently, and presently his clear throat rang out, though there were bad catches where he was hard pressed for breath.

"It was the Dutch! It was the Dutch. Do you think it was the Irish hollerer help? Not much!

"It was the Dutch. It was the Dutch!" Wessner turned and mumbled: "What you following me for? What are you going to do with me?"

Freckles called the Lumberlost to witness. "How's that for the ingratitude of a beast? And me troubling myself to show him off me territory with the honors of war?"

Then he changed his tone completely and added: "Belike it's this, Freddy. You see, the boss might come riding down this trail any minute, and the little mare's so wheedlesome that if she'd come on to you in your prisist state all of a sudden she'd stop that short she'd send Mr. McLean out over the ears of her. No disparagement in tinned to the stase of the mare!" he added hastily.

Wessner belched a fearful oath, and Freckles laughed merrily.

"That's a sample of the thanks a generous act's always for getting," he continued. "Here's me neglectin' me work to escort you out proper, and you saying such awful words. Freddy," he demanded sternly, "do you want me to soap out your mouth? You don't seem to be realizing it, but if you was to buck into Mr. McLean in your prisist state without me there to explain matters the chance is he'd cut the liver out of you, and I shouldn't think you'd be wanting such a fine gintleman as him to see that it's white."

Wessner grew ghastly under his grime and broke into a staggering run. Freckles twirled the baton and stood like a soldier at "attention" until Wessner left the clearing, but it was the last scene of that performance. When the boy turned there was a deathly illness in his face, and his legs wavered like reeds beneath his weight.

He staggered back to the case, and opening it, he took out a piece of cloth. He dipped it into the water and, sitting on a bench, he wiped the blood and grime from his face, while his breath sucked between his clenched teeth. He was shivering with pain and excitement in spite of himself. He unlutrooned the band of his right sleeve, and, turning it back, exposed the blue lined, calloused whiteness of his maimed arm, now vividly streaked with contusions, while in a series of circular dots the blood oozed slowly. Here Wessner had succeeded in setting his teeth. When Freckles saw what it was he forgave himself the kick in the pit of Wessner's stomach.

"Freckles, Freckles," said McLean's voice.

Freckles snatched down his sleeve and rose to his feet.

"Excuse me, sir," he said. "You'll surely be beavin' I thought meself alone."

McLean pushed him carefully to the seat and, bending over him, opened a pocket case that he carried as regularly as his revolver and watch, for cuts and bruises were of daily occurrence among the gang.

Taking the hurt arm, he turned back the sleeve and bathed and bound up the wounds. He examined Freckles' head and body and convinced himself that there was no permanent injury.

Then he sat down beside Freckles. All the indescribable beauty of the place was strong about him, but he saw only the bruised face of the suffering boy, who had hedged for the information he wanted like a diplomat, argued like a judge, fought like a sheik and triumphed like a devil.

As the pain lessened and breath caught up with Freckles' pounding heart he watched the boss from the tail of his eye. How had McLean got there, and how long had he been there? Freckles did not dare ask. At

last he arose and, going to the case, took out his revolver and the wire mending apparatus and locked the door. Then he turned to McLean.

"Have you any orders, sir?" he asked.

"Yes," said McLean, "I have, and you are to follow them to the letter. Turn over that apparatus to me and go straight home. Soak yourself in the hottest bath your skin will bear and go to bed at once. Now, hurry."

"Mr. McLean," said Freckles, "it's sorry I am to be telling you, but the afternoon's walking of the line ain't done. You see, I was just for getting to me feet to start, and I was on good time when up came a gintleman, and we got into a little heated argument. It's either settled or it's just begun, but between us I'm that late I haven't started for the afternoon yet. I must be going at once, for there's a tree I must find before the day's over."

"You plucky little idiot," growled McLean, "you can't walk the line! I doubt if you can get to Duncan's. Don't you know when you are done up? You go to bed. I'll finish your work."

"Niver!" protested Freckles. "I was just a little done up for the prisist a minute ago. I'm all right now. Riding boots are away too low. The day's hot and the walk a good seven miles, sir. Niver!"

As he reached for the outfit he pitched forward and his eyes closed. McLean stretched him on the moss and applied restoratives. When Freckles returned to consciousness McLean ran to the cabin to tell Mrs. Duncan to get a hot bath ready and to bring Nellie. That worthy woman promptly filled the wash boiler and set a roaring fire under it. She pushed the horse trough off its base and rolled it up to the kitchen.

By the time McLean came again, leading Nellie and holding Freckles on her back, Mrs. Duncan was ready for business. She and the boss laid Freckles in a trough and poured on hot water until he squirmed. They soaked, rubbed and scoured him. Then they let the hot water off and closed his pores with cold. Lastly they stretched him on the floor and chafed, rubbed and kneaded him until he cried out for mercy. As they rolled him into bed his eyes dropped shut, but a little later they flared open.

"Mr. McLean," he cried, "the tree! Oh, do be looking after the tree!"

McLean bent over him. "Which tree, Freckles?"

"I don't know exact, sir, but it's on the east line, and the wire is fastened to it. He bragged that you nailed it yourself, sir. You'll know it by the bark having been laid open to the grain somewhere low down, and it was \$500 he offered me—to be—selling you out—sir!"

Freckles' head rolled over and his eyes dropped shut. McLean's mind traveled back to the night almost a year before when he had engaged Freckles, a stranger.

McLean bent, covering the hurt arm with one hand and laying the other with a caress on the boy's forehead. Freckles stirred at his touch and twittered as softly as the swallows under the eaves.

"If you're coming this way—tomorrow—be pleased to step over—and we'll repate the chorus softly."

"Bless the gritty devil," growled McLean.

Then he went out and told Mrs. Duncan to keep close watch on Freckles and send Duncan to him at the swamp the minute he came home. Following the trail down to the line and back to the scene of the fight, the boss entered Freckles' study softly, as if his spirit sleeping there might be roused, and gazed about with astonished eyes.

How had the boy conceived it? What a picture he had wrought in living colors! He had the heart of a painter; he had the soul of a poet. The boss stepped carefully over the velvet carpet and touched the walls of crisp verdure with gentle fingers. He stood long beside the flower bed and gazed at the banked wall of bright flowers as if he could never leave off.

"DEAR'S OFF, BOYS!" HE SAID CHEERFULLY.

"I made a big mistake not to be bringing the egg out with the baby, but I was fearing to touch it. It's shaped like a hen's egg, and it's big as a turkey's, and the beautiful blue—just splattered with big brown spots, like me book said, precise. But you never saw such a sight as it made on the yellow of the rotten wood beside that funny leathery faced little white baby."

"Tell you what, Freckles," said one of the teamsters. "Have you ever heard of this bird woman that goes all over the country with a camera and makes pictures? She made some on my brother Jim's place last summer, and Jim's so wild about them he quits plowing and goes after her about every nest he finds. He helps her all he can to get them, and then she gives him a picture. Jim's so proud of what he has he keeps them in the Bible. He shows them to everybody that comes and brags about how he helped to take them. If you're smart you'll send for her and she'll come and make a picture just like life. If you help her she will give you one. It would be uncommon pretty to keep after your birds are gone. I dunno what they are. I never see their like before. They must be something rare. Any you fellows ever see a bird like that hereabouts?"

No one ever had.

"Well," said the teamster, "falling to get this log lets me off till noon,

whipped so completely. He won't come back for the repetition of the chorus. We can surely find the tree. If we can't Freckles can. I will bring enough of the gang to take it out at once. That will insure peace for a time at least, and I am hoping that in a month more the whole gang can be moved here. It will soon be fall, and then, if he will go, I intend to send Freckles to my mother to be educated.

With his quickness of mind and body and a few years' good help he can do anything. Why, Duncan, I'd give a hundred dollar bill if you could have been here and seen for yourself!"

Locating the tree was an easy task because it was so well identified. When the rumble of the lumber wagons passing the cabin on the way to the swamp awakened Freckles next morning he sprang up and was soon following them. The tree was a giant maple and so precious that they almost dug it out by the roots.

McLean had told Freckles to ride on a section of the maple with him, but now the boy begged to go into the swamp with Duncan.

"I don't see why you want to go," said McLean. "I have no business to let you out today at all."

"It's me chickens, sir," answered Freckles.

Freckles hurried into the swamp. He was some little distance behind, but he could still see the men. Before he overtook them they had turned from the west road and had entered the swamp toward the east. The underbrush was almost impenetrable. As he plunged into it a great black bird swept over their heads.

Freckles danced wildly. "It's me chickens! Oh, it's me chickens!" he shouted. "Oh, Duncan, come quick! You've found the nest of me precious chickens!"

Duncan hurried down to the mouth of a monstrous log, but Freckles was before him. He crashed through poison vines and underbrush regardless of any danger and climbed on the stump. When Duncan got there he was shouting like a wild thing.

"It's hatched!" he yelled. "Oh, me big chicken has hatched out me little chicken, and there's another egg. I can see it plain, and, oh, the funny little white baby! Duncan, can you see me little white chicken?"

Duncan could easily see it, and so could every one else. Freckles tenderly carried the hissing, blinking little thing out to the light in a leaf lined hat. The men found it sufficiently wonderful to satisfy even Freckles, who had forgotten he was ever sore or stiff, and cuddled over it with every blarneying term of endearment he knew.

Duncan gathered up his tools. "Deal's off, boys!" he said cheerfully. "The log mauna be touched until Freckles' chukkas have finished with it. We might as well gang. Better put it back, Freckles. It's just out, and it may chill. Ye will probably hae twa the morn."

Freckles deposited the baby beside the egg. When he came back he said:

CHAPTER VII. AN ANGEL MATERIALIZES. HERE had Freckles ever found and how had he translated such ferns? As McLean turned from them he stopped suddenly. He had reached the door of the cathedral. That which Freckles had attempted would have been patent to any one. What had been in the heart of the shy, silent boy when he had found that long, dim stretch of forest, decorated its entrance, cleared and smoothed its aisle and carpeted its altar? What veriest work of God was in these mighty living pillars and the arched dome of green! How like stately cathedral windows were the long openings between the trees, filled with rifts of blue, rays of gold and the shifting emerald of leaves! Where could be found mosaics to match this aisle paved with living color and glowing lights? Was Freckles a devout Christian and did he worship here? Or was he an untaught heathen and down this vista of entrancing loveliness did Pan come piping and dryads, nymphs and fairies dance for him?

Who can fathom the heart of a boy? McLean had been thinking of Freckles as a creature of unswerving honesty, courage and faithfulness. Here was evidence of a heart acting for beauty, art, companionship, worship. It was writ large all over the floor, walls and furnishing of that little Lumberlost clearing.

When Duncan came McLean told him the story of the fight, and they laughed until they cried. Then they started around the line in search of the tree.

Said Duncan, "Now the boy is in for sore trouble!"

"I hope not," answered McLean. "You never in all your life saw a cur

and I'm going to town. If I was making a living taking bird pictures seems to me I'd be mighty glad for a chance to take one like that."

"Then you be sure to tell her to come," said Freckles.

The next morning Freckles hurried about the trail, and on his way down the east side he slipped in to see the chickens. The mother bird was on the nest. He was afraid the other egg might just be hatching, so he did not venture to disturb her. He made the round and reached his study early. He had his lunch along and did not need to start on the second trip until

"What a perfectly delightful little brogue you speak," she said. "My father is Irish, and half ought to be enough to entitle me to do that much. 'Maybe-if I'd-be telling you,'" she imitated, rounding and accenting each word carefully.

"If you was understanding the danger," he continued desperately. "Oh, I don't think there is much!" She tilted on the morass.

"If you killed one snake here it's probably all there is near, and anyway, the Bird Woman says a rattlesnake is a gentleman and always gives warning before he strikes. I don't hear any rattling. Do you?"

"Would you be knowing it if you did?" asked Freckles almost impatiently.

How the laugh of the young thing rippled!

"Would I be knowing it?" she mocked. "Well, you should see the swamps of Michigan where they dump rattlers out of the marl dredges three and four at a time."

Freckles stood astounded. She did know. She was not in the least afraid. She was depending on a rattlesnake to live up to his share of the contract and rattle in time for her to move. The one characteristic an Irishman admires in a woman above all others is courage. Freckles worshipped anew.

He changed his tactics. "I'd be pleased to be receiving you at me front door," he said, "but as you have arrived at the back, will you come in and be seated?"

He waved toward a bench. The angel came instantly.

"Oh, how lovely and cool!" she cried. As she moved across his room Freckles had hard work to keep from falling on his knees, for they were very weak, and he was hard driven by an impulse to worship.

"Did you arrange this?" she asked. "Yes," said Freckles simply. "Some one must come with a big canvas and copy each side of it," she said. "I never saw anything so beautiful. How I wish I might stay here with you! I will, some day, if you will let me; but now, if you can spare the time, will you help me look for the carriage? If the Bird Woman comes back and finds me gone she will be almost distracted."

"Did you come in on the west road?" asked Freckles.

"I think so," she said. "The man who told the Bird Woman said that was the only place where the wires were down. We drove away in, and it was dreadful—over stumps and logs, and in to the hubs. I suppose you know, though. I should have stayed in the carriage, but I was so tired, I never dreamed of getting lost. I suspect I will get scolded finely. I go with the Bird Woman half the time."

"An—an' was you looking for me?" quavered the boy, incredulous.

"I hoped I might find you," said the angel. "You see, I didn't do as I was told, and I'm lost. The Bird Woman said I should stay in the carriage until she came back. She's been gone hours. It's a perfect Turkish bath in there, and I'm all lumpy with mosquito bites. Just when I thought that I couldn't bear it another minute, along comes the biggest Papilio Ajax you ever saw. I knew how pleased she'd be, so I ran after it. It flew so slow and so low that I thought a dozen times I had it. Then all at once it went out of sight over the trees, and I couldn't find my way back to save me. I think I've walked over an hour. I have been mired to my knees. A thorn raked my arm until it is bleeding, and I'm so tired and warm."

She parted the bushes still further. Freckles saw that her little blue cotton frock clung to her, limp with perspiration. It was torn across the breast. One sleeve hung open from shoulder to elbow. A thorn had raked her arm until it was covered with blood, and the gnats and mosquitoes were clustering about it. Her feet were in lace hoes and low shoes.

Freckles gasped. In the Lumberlost in low shoes! He caught an armful of moss from his carpet and buried it in the ooze in front of her for a footing.

"Get out here where I can see where you are stepping. Quick, for the life of you!" he ordered.

"Why?" she inquired.

"Did anybody let you come here and not be telling you of the snakes?" urged Freckles.

"We met Mr. McLean on the corduroy, and he did say something about snakes, I believe. The Bird Woman put on leather leggings, and a nice, parballed time she must be having! Worst dose I ever had, and I'd nothing to do but be coming out of there?" groaned Freckles.

She laughed as if it were a fine joke. "Maybe if I'd be telling you I killed a rattler curled up on that same place you're standing as long as me body and the thickness of me arm you'd be moving where I can see your footing," he urged insistently.

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during the summer vacations. My father says I learn a lot more than I do at school, and get it straight. I never came within a smell of getting lost before. I thought, at first, it was going to be horrid, but since I've found you, maybe it will be good fun after all."

When the clock stops.

When the clock has stopped you may have seen the wife or husband take it up and shake it to start it again. Sometimes they succeed. Some little clogging particle is removed by the shock and the clock starts again. But it does not go very long before it runs down. Another shock perhaps starts it, but the clock soon stops again, and presently has to be overhauled by the clock doctor. It's something the same way with the liver. It stops its useful and necessary offices, sometimes, and the man or woman affected tries to jar it into starting, with some powerful pill or potion. Perhaps they succeed. But the success does not last. The liver soon stops again, and finally they have to go to a doctor. The value of Dr. Pierce's Golden Medical Discovery in such cases, is that it carries off the clogging particles which interfere with the health of the body. It strengthens the liver, purifies the blood, and heals diseases of the stomach and organs of digestion and nutrition. There can be no substitute for "Golden Medical Discovery."

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WAS IT REAL OR WOULD IT VANISH?



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