

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 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."

Some of the trees he is guarding are worth \$1,000 each. Freckles' books arrive. He receives a call from Wesner.

Wesner attempts to bribe Freckles to betray his trust, and Freckles whips him. McLean overhears them and witnesses the fight.

Freckles' honesty saves a precious tree. He finds the nest of the vultures and is visited by a beautiful young girl.

She calls Freckles McLean's son. Freckles calls her "the angel" and helps the Bird Woman in taking photographs. McLean promises to adopt Freckles.

Freckles and the angel become very friendly. Assisted by the Bird Woman, they drive Wesner and Black Jack, timber thieves, from the Limberlost.

McLean fears more trouble, but Freckles insists upon being the sole guard of the timber. Freckles calls upon the angel's father.

The angel receives him as her equal, and her father is kind. Mrs. Duncan has exciting adventures in the Limberlost.

(Continued from last week.)

CHAPTER XII.

WITH HIS SWAMP ANGEL.

ARAH DUNCAN had not followed the trail many rods when her trouble began. She was not Freckles, and not a bird of the line was going to be fooled into thinking she was. They kept whizzing from their nests and darting from all sorts of unexpected places about her head and feet with quiet whirrs that kept her starting and jumping. Before Freckles was halfway to the town poor Mrs. Duncan was hysterical and the Limberlost had neither song nor performed for her.

"I wouldn't stay in this place for a million a month," she had said, and the sound of her voice brought no comfort, for it was so little like she had thought it that she glanced hastily about to see if it had really been she that spoke.

Her chin was quivering like a terrified child's. Almost into her face went a night hawk stretched along a limb for its daytime nap. Mrs. Duncan sprang down the trail, lighting on a frog. The croak it gave as she crushed it sickened her. She screamed wildly and jumped to one side. That carried her into the swale, where the grasses reached almost to her waist, and her horror of snakes returning she made a flying leap for an old log lying along the line. She lit on it squarely, but it was so damp and rotten that she sank straight through it to her knees. She caught at the wire as she went down and, missing, raked her wrist over a barb until she laid it open in a bleeding gash. Her fingers closed convulsively around the second strand.

She was too frightened to scream now. Her tongue stiffened. She clung frantically to the sagging wire and finally managed to grasp it with the other hand. Then she could reach the top wire, and so she drew herself up and found solid footing. She picked up the club that she had dropped in order to extricate herself. Leaning heavily on it, she got back to the trail.

The wind rose higher, the changes from light to darkness were more abrupt, and the thunder came nearer and louder. In swarms the blackbirds rose from the swale and came flocking to the interior with a clamoring cry, "T-check, t-check." Grackles marshaled to their tribal call, "Trail-a-tee, trail-a-tee." Red winged blackbirds swept low, calling to belated mates, "Fol-low-me, fol-low-me." Huge jenny crows gathered about her, crying, as if warning her to flee before it was everlasting too late. A heron, fishing the nearby pool for Freckles' "find-out" frog, fell into trouble with a muskrat and let out a rasping note. Mrs. Duncan was too shaken to run far.

Several bees struck her and were angrily buzzing about before she noticed them. Then the humming swelled to a roar on all sides. A great, convulsive sob shook her, and she ran into the bushes, now into the swale, anywhere to avoid the swarming bees, ducking, dodging, fighting for her very life. Presently the humming seemed to grow a little fainter. She found the trail again and ran with all her might from a few of her angry pursuers.

And as she ran, straining every muscle, she suddenly became aware that crossing the trail before her was a great, round, black body with brown markings on its back, like painted geometrical patterns. She tried to stop, but the louder buzzing behind warned

her she dared not. Gathering her skirts still higher, with hair flying about her face and her eyes almost bursting from their sockets, she ran straight toward it. The sound of her feet and the humming of the bees alarmed the rattler, and it stopped squarely across the trail, lifting its head above the grasses of the swale and rattling inquiringly—rattled until the bees were outdone.

Straight at it went the panic stricken woman, running wildly and uncontrollably. She took one great leap, clearing its body on the path, and then flew on with winged feet. The snake, coiling to strike, missed Mrs. Duncan and landed among the bees instead. They settled over and about it, and, realizing that it had found trouble, it sank among the grasses and went thrashing toward the deep willow fringed low ground where its den was until the swale looked as if a mighty reaper were cutting a wide swath. The mass of enraged bees darted angrily about, searching for it, and, colliding with the scrub thorn, began a temporary settling there to discover whether it was a suitable place. Mrs. Duncan staggered on a few steps farther, fell face down on the path, where Freckles found her, and lay still.

Freckles worked with her until she drew a long, quivering breath and opened her eyes.

When she saw him bending over her she closed them tightly and, gripping him, struggled to her feet. He helped her up, and, with his arm about and hair carrying her, they made their way to the clearing. Then, brawny Scotsman though she was, she keeled over again. The children added their wailing to Freckles' panic.

This time he was so near the cabin that he could carry her into the house and lay her on the bed. He sent the oldest boy scudding down the corduroy for the nearest neighbor, and between them they undressed her and discovered that she was not bitten. They bathed and bound up the bleeding wrist and coaxed her back to consciousness. She lay sobbing and shuddering. The first intelligent word she said was, "Freckles, look at that jar on the kitchen table and see if my yeast is no running over."

Several days went by before she could give Duncan and Freckles any detailed account of what had happened to her. She could not rest until she sent for McLean and begged him to save Freckles from further risk about that place of horrors. The boss went down to the swamp with his mind fully made up to do so.

Freckles laughed. "Why, Mr. McLean, don't you let a woman's nervous system set you worrying over me," he said. "I'm not denying how she felt, because I've been through it myself, but that's all over and gone. It's the height of me glory to fight it out with the old swamp and all that's in it or will be coming to it and then to turn it over to you, as I promised you and myself I'd do, sir. You couldn't break the heart of me entire quicker than to be taking it from me now when I'm just on the home stretch. You mustn't let a woman get mixed up with business, for I've always heard about how it's bringing trouble."

The Bird Woman and the angel arrived on time for the third of the series and found McLean on the line talking to Freckles. The boss was filled with enthusiasm over a marsh article of the Bird Woman's that he had just read. He begged to be allowed to accompany her into the swamp and watch the method by which she secured an illustration in such a location.

The Bird Woman explained to him that it was an easy matter with the subject she then had in hand, and as Little Chicken was too small to be frightened by him and large enough to be getting troublesome, she was glad of his company. They went to the chicken log together, leaving to the happy Freckles the care of the angel, who had brought her banjo and a roll of songs. The Bird Woman told them that they might go to Freckles' room and practice until she finished with Little Chicken, and then she and McLean would come to the concert.

It was almost three hours before they finished and came down the west trail. As they reached the bushes at the entrance the voice of the angel stopped them, for it was commanding and filled with much impatience.

"Freckles James Ross McLean," she was saying, "you fill me with dark blue despair! You're singing as if your voice was glass and liable to break at any minute. Why don't you sing as you did a week ago? You are a fraud! You led me to think that there was the making of a great singer in you, and now you are singing—do you know how badly you are singing?"

"Yes," said Freckles meekly. "I'm thinking I'm too happy to be singing well today. The music don't come right only when I'm lonesome and sad. The world's for being all sunshine at present, for among you and Mr. McLean and the Bird Woman I'm after being that happy that I can't keep me thoughts on me notes. It's more than sorry I am to be disappointing you. Play it over, and I'll be beginning again, and this time I'll hold hard."

"Well," said the angel, "it seems to me that if I had all the things to be proud of that you have I'd lift up my head and sing!"

"And what is it I've to be proud of, ma'am?" politely inquired Freckles.

"Why, a whole worldful of things," cried the angel explosively. "For one thing, you can be good and proud over the way you've kept the timber thieves out of this lease and the trust your father has in you. You can be proud over the way every one speaks of you. I heard a man say a few days ago that the Limberlost was full of disagreeable

things—positive dangers, unhealthy as it could be, and that since the memory of the first settlers it has been a rendezvous for runaways, thieves and murderers. This swamp is named for a man that got here and wandered around 'till he starved. That man I was talking with said he wouldn't take your job for \$1,000 a month—in fact, he said he wouldn't have it for any money, and you've never missed a day or lost a tree. Proud! Why, I should think you would just parade around about proper over that!"

"And you can always be proud that you are born an Irishman. My father is Irish, and if you want to see him just get up and strut give him a twenty opening to enlarge on his rags. He says that if the Irish had decent territory they'd lead the world. He says they've always been handicapped by lack of space and of fertile soil. He says if Ireland had been as big and fertile as Indiana, why, England wouldn't file as Indiana, why, England wouldn't

(Continued on page 3, Col. 1)

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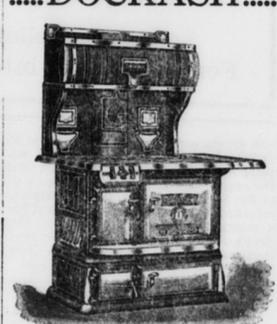
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