

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 pile 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.

Wessner 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 Wessner 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.

The Bird Woman and the angel again visit Freckles, and Freckles falls in love with the angel. The angel kisses him.

Freckles is bound and gagged by Black Jack's gang, and the timber thieves start felling a very valuable tree.

Wessner is to kill Freckles after the tree is felled. The angel makes a daring effort to save Freckles and the tree.

McLean's men, notified by the angel, rush to save Freckles. All the timber thieves except Black Jack are captured.

(Continued from last week.)

CHAPTER XVII.

NURSING A HEARTACHE.

McLEAN rode down to the Limberlost and, stopping in the shade, sat waiting for Freckles.

Along the north line came Freckles, fairly staggering. When he turned east and reached Sleepy Snake creek, sliding through the swale like the long black snake for which it was named,

he sat down on the bridge and closed his burning eyes, but they would not stay shut. As if pulled by wires, the heavy lids flew open and the outraged nerves and muscles of his body danced, twitched and tingled.

He bent forward and idly watched the limpid little stream flowing beneath his feet. Stretching back into the swale, it came creeping between an impenetrable wall of magnificent wild flowers, vines and ferns. Milkweed, goldenrod, ironwort, fringed gentians, cardinal flowers and turtle head stood on the very edge of the creek, and every flower of them grew a double in the water. Wild clematis crowned with snow the heads of trees scattered here and there along the bank.

Freckles sat so still that presently the brim of his hat was covered with snake feeders, rasping their crisp wings and singing as they rested. Some of them settled on the club and one on his shoulder. He was so quiet and feathers, fur and gauze were so accustomed to him that all about the swale they went on with their daily life and forgot he was there.

The heron family waded about the mouth of the creek. Freckles idly wondered whether the nerve racking rasps they occasionally emitted indicated domestic felicity or a raging quarrel. A sheltpoke, with flaring crest, went stalking across a bare space near the creek's mouth. A stately brown bittern waded out into the clear flowing water, lifting his feet high at every step and setting them down gingerly, as if he dreaded wetting them, and with slightly parted beak, stood eagerly watching about him for worms. Behind him were some mighty trees of the swamp above, and below the bank glowed a solid wall of goldenrod.

No wonder the ancients had chosen yellow as the color to represent victory, for the fierce, conquering hue of the sun was in it. They had done well, too, in choosing purple as the color of royalty. It was a dignified, compelling color, and in its warm tone there was a hint of blood.

It was the Limberlost's hour to proclaim her sovereignty and triumph. Everywhere she flaunted her yellow banner and trailed the purple of her mantle, that was paler in the thistle heads, took on strength in the first opening asters, and glowed and burned in the ironwort.

Compellingly beautiful was the Limberlost, but cruel withal; far back in there bleached the uncoffined bones of her victims, and she had missed cradling him, oh, so narrowly!

Below the turtle log, a dripping silver gray head, with shining eyes, was cautiously lifted, and Freckles' hand slid around to his revolver. Higher and

higher came the head; a long, heavy, fur coated body rose, now half, now three-fourths out of the water.

Freckles looked at his shaking hand and doubted, but he gathered his forces, the shot rang out, and the otter lay still. He hurried down and tried to lift it. He could scarcely muster strength to carry it to the bridge.

The consciousness that he really could not go farther with it made Freckles realize the limit of human endurance. He could bear it little, if any, longer. Every hour the face of the angel wavered before him, and behind it the awful distorted image of Black Jack, as he swore to the punishment he would mete out to her.

Freckles stopped when he came to the first guard, and telling him of his luck, asked him to go for the otter and carry it up to the cabin, as he was anxious to meet McLean. Freckles passed the second guard without seeing him, and hurried up to the boss. He stood silent under the eyes of McLean.

The boss was dumfounded. Mrs. Duncan had led him to expect that he would find Freckles in a bad way, but this was almost deathly. The fact was apparent that the boy scarcely knew what he was doing. His eyes had a glazed, farsighted look in them, that wrung the heart of the man that loved him. Without a thought of preliminaries McLean leaped in the saddle and drew Freckles up to him.

"My poor lad!" he said. "My poor, dear lad; tell me, and we will try to right it!"

Freckles had twisted his fingers in Nellie's mane. At the kind words his face dropped on McLean's thigh and he shook with a nervous chill. McLean gathered him closer and waited.

"Freckles," said McLean at last. "Will you tell me, or must I set to work in the dark and try to find the trouble?"

"Oh, I want to tell you! I must tell you, sir," shuddered Freckles. "I cannot be hearing it the day out alone. I was coming to you when I remembered you would be here."

He lifted his face and gazed off across the swale, with his jaws set hard a minute, as if gathering his forces. Then he spoke.

"It's the angel, sir," he said. "Instinctively McLean's grip on him tightened."

"I tried hard the other day," said Freckles, "and I couldn't seem to make you see. It's only that there hasn't been an hour, waking or sleeping, since the day she parted the bushes and looked into me, that the face of her hasn't been before me in all the tinnerness, beauty and mischief of it. She talked to me friendly like. She trusted me entirely to take right care of her. She helped me with things about me books. She treated me like I was born a gentleman, and shared with me like I was of her own blood. She walked the streets of the town with me before her friends with all the pride of a queen. She forgot herself and didn't mind the Bird Woman, and run big risks to help me out that first day, sir. This last time she walked into that gang of murderers, took their leader and twisted him to the will of her. She outdone him and raced the life almost out of her trying to save me."

"Since I can remember, whatever the thing was that happened to me in the beginning has been my curse. I've been bitter, hard and smarting under it hopelessly. She came by and found me voice and put hope of life and success like other men into me in spite of it."

Freckles held up his maimed arm. "Look at it, sir!" he said. "A thousand times I've cursed it, hanging there helpless. She took it on the street, before all the people, just as if she didn't see that it was a thing to hide and shrink from. Again and again I've had the feeling with her, if I didn't entirely forget it, that she didn't see it was gone and I must pull her sleeve and be pointing it out to her. Her touch on it was so sacred like, at times since I've caught myself looking at the awful thing near like I was proud of it, sir. If I was born your son she couldn't be treating me more as her equal, and she can't help knowing you ain't truly me father. Nobody can know the ugliness or the ignorance of me better than I do and all me lack of birth, home, relatives and money and what's it all to her?"

Freckles stepped back from McLean, squared his shoulders and with a royal lift of his head looked straight into the boss' eyes.

"You saw her in the beautiful little room of her and you can't be forgetting how she begged and pleaded with you for me. She touched me body, and 'twas sanctified. She laid her lips on me brow, and 'twas sacrament. Nobody knows the height of her better than me. Nobody's studied my depths closer. There's no bridge for the great distance between us, sir, and, clearest of all, I'm for realizing it. But she risked terrible things when she came to me among that gang of thieves. She

wore herself past bearing to save me from such an easy thing as death! Now, here's me, a man, a big, strong man, and letting her live under that fearful oath, so worse than any death 'twould be for her, and lifting not a finger to save her. I cannot bear it, sir. It's killing me by inches! If any evil comes to her through Black Jack it comes from her angel like goodness to me. Somewhere he's hiding! Somewhere he is waiting his chance! Somewhere he is reaching out for her! I tell you I cannot, I dare not be bearing it longer!"

"Freckles, be quiet!" said McLean, his eyes humid. "Believe me, I did not understand. I know the angel's father well. I will go to him at once. I have transacted business with him for the last three years. I will make him see! I am only just beginning to realize your agony and the real danger there is for the angel. I will see that she is fully protected every hour of the day and night until Jack is located and disposed of. And I promise you further that if I fail to move her father or make him understand the danger I will maintain a guard over her until Jack is caught."

McLean slid from Nellie's back, and went to examine the otter.

"What do you want to do with it, Freckles?" asked McLean. "Do you know that it is very valuable?"

"I was for almost praying so, sir," said Freckles. "As I saw it coming up the bank I thought this: Once somewhere in a book there was a picture of a young girl, and she was just a breath like the beautifulness of the angel. Her hands were in a muff as big as her body, and I thought it was so pretty. I think she was some queen, or the like. Do you suppose I could have this skin tanned and made into such a muff as that—an enormous big one, sir?"

"Of course you can," said McLean. "That's a fine idea and it's easy enough. It would be a mighty fine thing for you to give to the angel as a little reminder of the Limberlost before it is despoiled, and as a souvenir of her trip for you."

Freckles lifted a face with a glow of happy color creeping into it and eyes lighting with a former brightness. Throwing his arms about McLean, he cried "Oh, how I love you! Oh, I wish I could make you know how I love you!"

McLean strained him to his breast. "God bless you, Freckles," he said. "I do know! We're going to have some good old times out of this world together, and we can't begin too soon. Would you rather sleep first, or get a bite of lunch and have the drive with me, and then rest? I don't know but sleep will come sooner and deeper to take the ride and have your mind set at ease before you lie down. Suppose you go."

"Suppose I do," said Freckles, with a glimmer of the old light in his eyes and newly found strength to shoulder the otter. Together they turned into the swale.

McLean noticed and spoke of the big black chickens.

"They've been hanging round out there for several days past," said Freckles. "I'll tell you what I think it means. I think the old ratter has killed something too big for him to swallow, and he's keeping guard and won't let me chickens have it. I'm just sure, from the way the birds have acted out there all summer, that it is the ratter's den. You watch them

(Continued on page 7, Col. 1.)

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