

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.

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 Lumberlost.

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 Lumberlost.

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 stolen. 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.

Freckles guards the angel against Black Jack's vengeance. He tells McLean of his hopeless love for the angel.

Black Jack is killed by a rattlesnake. The Bird Woman gets a photograph of the baby vulture. Freckles and the angel find a valuable tree.

(Continued from last week.)

CHAPTER XIX.

FRECKLES OFFERS HIS LIFE.

THE gang had been carefully sifted, and McLean now felt that there was not a man in it that was not trustworthy.

They had all heard of the angel's plucky ride for Freckles' relief, and several of them had been in the rescue party. When she was ensconced on the wagon load of tenting she sat on a roll of canvas like a queen on her throne. There was not a man of the gang that would not have fought for her.

As they raced toward the wagon—"Let me tell about the tree, please," she begged Freckles.

"Why, sure," said Freckles. He would probably have said the same if she had proposed to cut off his head. When McLean rode up he found her sitting on the wagon, flushed and glowing.

"Everybody listen!" cried the angel. "I have something to say. Freckles has been guarding here over a year now, and he presents the Lumberlost to you, with every tree in it saved, and for good measure he has just this morning located the rarest one of all—the one around in from the east line that Wessner spoke of that first day, nearest the one you took out at first. All together! Everybody! Hurrah for Freckles!"

With flushing cheeks and gleaming eyes she led in three cheers and a tiger. Freckles slipped back into the swamp and held himself tight for fear he might burst wide open with pride and with his love for her.

The angel subsided on the canvas and explained to McLean about the maple. The boss was mightily pleased. He took Freckles and set out to relocate and examine the tree. The angel was interested in the making of the camp and preferred to remain with the men. With her sharp eyes she was watching every detail of construction, but when it came to the stretching of the dining hall canvas she proceeded to take command. The men were driving the rope pins when the angel rose on the wagon and, leaning forward, spoke to Duncan who was directing the work.

"I believe if you would swing that around a few feet farther you would find it better. Mr. Duncan," she said. "That way will let the hot sun in at noon, and the sides will cut off the best breeze."

"That's a fact," said Duncan, studying the condition. So by shifting the pins a little they obtained comfort, for which they blessed the angel every day.

When Freckles joined in the work about the camp he caught glimpses of her enthroned on a soapbox cleaning beans. She called to him that they were invited to stay for dinner and that they had accepted the invitation.

She was having the time of her life when McLean came back, jubilant from his trip to the tree. How jubilant he only told the angel, for he had been obliged to lose faith in some trusted men of late and had learned discretion by what he suffered. He planned to begin clearing out a road to the tree that same afternoon and to set two guards every night, for it promised to be a rare treasure.

"I am coming to see it felled," cried the angel. "Tell me, angel," the boss said jestingly: "I think I have a right to know. Who really did locate that tree?"

"Freckles," she answered promptly and emphatically. The boss smiled significantly at Freckles, who had just come up, for they had planned that they would instruct the company to reserve enough of the veneer from that very tree to make the most beautiful dressing table they could design for the angel's share of the discovery.

"What will you have for yours?" asked McLean of Freckles. "If it's all the same to you, I'll be taking mine out in music lessons—begging your pardon—voice culture," said Freckles with a grimace.

The angel gave McLean the head of the table. She took the foot, with Freckles on her right, and the lumber gang, washed, brushed and straightened until they felt unfamiliar with themselves and each other, filled the sides.

It was several days before they completed a road to the noble, big tree and were ready to fell it. When the saw was well in Freckles began watching down the road where it met the trail leading from Little Chicken's tree. He had gone to the tree ahead of the gang and taken down the blue ribbon. Carefully folded, it now lay over his heart. He was promising himself a good deal of comfort with that ribbon when he should go to the city next month to begin his studies and dream the summer over again. It would help to make things tangible. When he was dressed as other men and about his work he knew where he meant to home that precious bit of blue. It should be his good luck token, and he would wear it always to keep bright in memory the day on which the angel had called him her knight.

How he would study, and, oh, how he would sing! If he could fulfill McLean's expectations, and make the angel proud of him! If he could only be a real knight!

The angel broke from McLean. "Now, Freckles, you" she cried. "It's your turn. Please get up!" A pitiful spasm swept Freckles' face. The angel took hold of his hand.

"Freckles, get up!" It was half command, half entreaty. "Easy, angel, easy. Let me rest a bit first," implored Freckles. She knelt beside him. He reached his arm about her and drew her up closely. He looked at McLean in an agony of entreaty that brought the boss to his knees on the other side.

"Oh, Freckles!" McLean cried. "Not that! Surely we can do something! We must! Let me see!" He tried to unfasten Freckles' neck-band, but his fingers shook so clumsily that the angel pushed them away and herself laid Freckles' chest bare. With just one hasty glance she gathered the clothing together and slipped her arm under his head. Freckles lifted eyes of agony to hers.

"You see?" he said. The angel nodded dumbly. Freckles turned to McLean. "Thank you for everything," he panted. "Where are the boys?"

"They are all here," said the boss, "except a couple that have gone for doctors. Mrs. Duncan, and the Bird Woman."

"It's no use trying to do anything," said Freckles. "You won't forget the muff and the Christmas box. The muff especial?"

There was a movement above them so pronounced that it attracted Freckles' attention, even in that extreme hour. He looked up, and a pleased smile flickered into his drawn face.

"Why, if it ain't my little chicken!" he cried hoarsely. "He must be making his very first trip from the log. Now Duncan can have his big watering trough."

"It was little chicken that made me late," faltered the angel. "I was so anxious to get here early I forgot to bring his breakfast from the carriage. He must have been very hungry, for when I passed the log he started after me. He was so wabby, and so slow getting from tree to tree and through the bushes, I just had to walk on him. For I couldn't drive him back."

A spasm of fierce pain shook Freckles, and a look of uncertainty crossed his face.

"All summer I've been thanking God for the falling of the feather and all the delights it's brought me," he muttered. "but this looks like—"

He raised questioning eyes to McLean.

"I can't help being Irish, but I can help being superstitious," he said. "I mustn't be laying it to the Almighty, nor to me bird, must I?"

"No, dear lad," said McLean, stroking the brilliant hair. "The choice lay with you. You could have stood a rooted dolt like all the rest of us. It was through your great love and your high courage that you made the sacrifice."

"Don't you be so naming it, sir!" cried Freckles. "It's just the reverse if I could be giving me body the hundred times over to save her with every I'd be doing it and take joy with every pain."

He turned with a smile of adoring tenderness to the angel. She scarcely seemed to hear or understand what was coming, but she bravely tried to answer that smile.

"Is me forehead covered with dirt?" he asked. She shook her head.

"You did once," he gasped. Instantly she laid her lips on his forehead, then on each cheek, and then in a long kiss on his lips.

"Freckles," said McLean brokenly. "You will never know how I love you. You won't go without saying good-by to me?"

That word stung the angel to quick comprehension. She started as if rousing from sleep.

"Goodby?" she cried sharply. "Goodby! What do you mean? Who's saying goodby? Where could Freckles go when he is hurt like this, but to the hospital? You call up the men. We must start right away."

"It's no use, angel," said Freckles. "I'm thinking ivry bone in me breast is smashed. You'll have to be letting me go."

"I will not," said the angel dully. "You are alive. You are breathing, and no matter how badly your bones are broken, what are great surgeons foot to fix you up and make you well again?"

"Oh, angel!" moaned Freckles. "I can't! You don't know how bad it is. I'll die the minute you are for trying to lift me!"

"Of course you will, if you make up your mind to do it," said the angel. "Really you have to do it. Freckles, no matter how it hurts you, for you did this for me, and now I must save you, so you might as well promise. You will promise, Freckles?"

"Angel, darlin' angel," pleaded Freckles, "you ain't understanding, and I can't for the life of me be telling you, but, indade, it's best to be letting me go."

He appealed to McLean. "Dear boss, you know! You be telling that, for me, living is far worse pain than dying. Tell her you know death is the best thing could ever be happening to me!"

The angel sprang to her feet. "Then that's all right," she said, with a tinge of her old-time briskness. "You just keep sawing away like a steam engine and I will do all the rest."

The eager men gathered about her. "It's going to be a tough pull to get Freckles out," she said, "but it's our only chance. You four there get on those wagon horses and ride to the sleeping tent. Get the stoutest cot, a couple of comforts and a pillow. Ride back with them some way to save time. If you meet any other men of the gang send them on here to help carry the cot. We won't risk the jolt of driving with him. The rest of you clear a path out to the road, and, Mr. McLean, you take Nellie and ride to town. Tell my father how Freckles is hurt and that he risked it to save me. Tell him I'm going to take Freckles to Chicago on the noon train and I want him to hold it for us a little late. If he can't then have a special ready at the station and another on the Pittsburgh at Fort Wayne, so we can go straight through. You needn't mind leaving us. The Bird Woman will be here soon."

When they stood ready to lift Freckles the angel bent over him in a passion of tenderness.

"Dear old Lumberlost guard, we're going to lift you now," she said. "I suspect you will faint from the pain of it, but we will be just as easy as ever we can, and don't you dare forget your promise!"

A whimsical half smile touched Freckles' quivering lips.

"Angel, can a man be remembering a promise when he ain't knowing?" he asked.

"You can," said the angel stoutly. "because a promise means so much more to you than it does to most men."

A look of strength flashed into Freckles' face at her words.

"I am ready," he said. With the first touch his eyes closed, a mighty groan was wrenched from him, and he lay senseless. The angel gave Duncan one panic stricken look. Then she set her lips and gathered her forces again.

"I guess that's a good thing," she said. "Maybe he won't feel how we are hurting him. Oh, boys, are you being quick and gentle?"

She stepped to the side of the cot and bathed Freckles' face. Taking his hand in hers, she gave the word to start. She told the men to ask every able-bodied man they met to join them so that they could change carriers often and make good time.

The Bird Woman insisted upon taking the angel into the carriage and following the cot, but the angel refused to leave Freckles and suggested that the Bird Woman drive ahead, pack them some clothing, and be at the station ready to accompany them to Chicago. All the way the angel walked beside the cot, shading Freckles' face and holding his hand. At every pause to change carriers she moistened his face and lips and counted each breath with heartbreaking anxiety.

She scarcely knew when her father joined them, and, taking the branch from her, slipped an arm about her waist and almost carried her along. To the city streets and the swarm of curious, staring faces she paid no more attention than she had to the trees of the Lumberlost. When the train pulled in and the gang placed Freckles aboard, Duncan made a place for the angel beside the cot.

With the best physician to be found, and with the Bird Woman and McLean in attendance, the four hours' run to Chicago began. Not for an instant would the angel yield her place, or allow any one else to do anything for him. The Bird Woman and McLean regarded her in amazement. The only time she spoke was to ask McLean if he was sure the special would be ready on the Pittsburg line. He replied that it was made up and waiting.

At 5 o'clock Freckles lay stretched on the operating table of Lake View hospital, while three of the greatest surgeons in Chicago bent over him. At their command, McLean picked up the unwilling angel and carried her out to the nurses to be bathed, have her bruises attended to, and be put to bed.

In a place where it is difficult to surprise people, they were astonished when women as they removed the angel's dainty stained and torn clothing, peeled off those muck baked to her limbs, soaked the dried loam from her sicken hair and washed the beautiful, scratched, bruised, dirt covered body. The angel fell fast asleep long before they had finished, and lay deeply unconscious, while the fight for Freckles' life was being waged.

Three days later she was up early and hovering near Freckles' door. The surgeon was with him. The angel had been told that the word he brought that morning would be final, so she curled up in a window seat, dropped the curtains behind her, and, in dire anxiety, waited the opening of that closed door.

Just as it unclosed, McLean came hurrying down the hall and up to the surgeon, but with one glance at his face he stepped back in dismay, and the angel, who had risen, sank to the seat again, too dazed to come forward. The men faced each other. The angel, with parted lips and frightened eyes, bent forward in tense anxiety.

"I thought he was doing nicely?" faltered McLean.

"He bore the operation well," replied the surgeon, "and his wounds are not necessarily fatal. I told you that yesterday, but I did not tell you that something else would probably kill him, and it will. He need not die from the accident, but he will not live the day out because he so evidently prefers death to life. If he were full of hope and ambition to live, my work would be easy. If all of you love him as you prove you do, and there is unlimited means to give him anything he wants, why should he desire death?"

"Is he dying?" demanded McLean.

"He is," said the surgeon. "He will not live this day out, unless some strong reaction sets in at once. He is so low that, preferring death to life, nature cannot overcome his inertia. If he is to live, he must be made to desire life."

"Then he must die," said McLean.

"Does that mean that you know what he desires and cannot, or will not, supply it?"

"It means," said McLean desperately, "that I know what he wants, but it is as far removed from my power to give it to him as it would be to give him a star. The thing for which he will die he can never have."

"Then you must prepare for the end very shortly," said the surgeon, turning abruptly away.

McLean caught his arm roughly.

"Look here!" he cried in desperation. "You say that as if I could do something if I would. I tell you the peak is due to the past expression. I would do anything—spend any sum. You have noticed and repeatedly commented on the young girl with me. It is that child that he wants! He worships her to adoration, and knowing he can never be anything to her, he prefers death to life. In God's name, what can I do about it?"

"Barring that missing hand, I never handled a finer man," said the surgeon, "and she seems perfectly devoted to him, why cannot he have her?"

"Why?" echoed McLean. "Why? Well, for a good many reasons. I told you he was my son. You probably knew that he was not. A little over a year ago I had never seen him. He joined one of my lumber gangs from the road. He is a stray, left at one of your homes for the friendless here in Chicago. When he grew up the superintendent bound him out to a brutal man. He ran away and landed in one of my lumber camps. He has no name or knowledge of legal birth. The angel—we have talked of her. She has ancestors reaching back to Plymouth Rock and across the sea for generations back of that. She is an idolized, petted only child, and there is great wealth. He sees it more plainly than any one else could. There is nothing for the boy but death if it is the angel that is required to save him."

The angel stood between them.

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"That he will never say," said McLean at last, "and you don't understand, angel. I don't know how you came here. I wouldn't have had you hear that for the world, but since you have, dear, you must be told that it isn't your friendship or kindness Freckles wants; it is your love."

"Well, I do love him," she said simply. McLean's arms dropped helplessly.

"You don't understand," he reiterated patiently. "It isn't the love of a friend, or a comrade, or a sister, that Freckles wants from you; it is the love of a sweetheart. And if to save the life he has offered for you you are pulvis enough to sacrifice your future—in the absence of your father it will become my plain duty, as the protector in whose hands he has placed you, to prevent such rashness. My very words you speak and the manner in which you say them proves that you are a mere child and have not dreamed what love is."

"I have never had to dream of love," she said proudly. "I have never known anything else in all my life but to love every one and to have every one love me. And there has never been any one so dear as Freckles. If you will remember, we have been through a good deal together. I do love Freckles, just as I say I do. I don't know anything about the love of sweethearts, but I love him with all the love in my heart, and I think that will satisfy him."

"Surely it ought!" muttered the man of knives and lancets.

"As for my father," continued the angel, "he at once told me what he learned from you about Freckles. I've known all you know for several weeks. That knowledge didn't change your love for him a particle. I think the Bird Woman loved him more. Why should you two have all the fine perceptions there are? My father is never unreasonable. He won't expect me not to love Freckles, or not to tell him so, if the telling will save him."

She darted past McLean into Freckles' room, closed the door and turned the key.

Freckles lay raised on a flat pillow, his body immovable in a plaster cast, his maimed arm, as always, hidden. The angel's heart ached at the change in his appearance. He seemed so weak, so utterly hopeless and so alone. She could see that the night had been one long terror.

For the first time she tried putting herself in Freckles' place. What would it mean to have no parents, no home, no name? No name? That was the worst of all. That was to be lost, indeed—utterly and hopelessly lost. The angel lifted her hands to her dazed head and reeled as she tried to face that proposition. She dropped on her knees by the bed, slipped her arm under the pillow, and, leaning over Freckles, set her lips on his forehead. He smiled faintly.

(Continued next week.)

—Don't read an out-of-date paper. Get all the news in the WATCHMAN.

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