

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 feeling 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.) "Dear Freckles," she said, "there is a story in your eyes this morning, tell me?"

Freckles drew a long, wavering breath.

"Angel," he begged, "be generous! Be thinking of me a little. I'm so homesick and worn out, dear angel, be giving me back me promise. Let me go?"

"Why, Freckles!" faltered the angel. "You don't know what you are asking. Let go?" I cannot. I love you better than any one, Freckles. I think you are the very finest person I ever knew. I have our lives all planned. I want you to go to be educated and learn all there is to know about singing just as soon as you are well enough. By the time you have completed your education I shall have finished college, and then I want," she choked on it a second. "I want you to be my real knight, Freckles, and come to me and tell me that you—like me—a little. I have been counting on you for my sweetheart from the very first, Freckles, I can't give you up unless you don't like me. But you do like me—just a little—don't you, Freckles?"

Freckles lay whiter than the coverlet, his eyes on the ceiling and his breath wheezing. The angel awaited his answer a second, and when none came, she dropped her crimsoning face beside him on the pillow and whispered:

"Freckles, I—I'm trying to make love to you. Can't you help me just a little bit? It's awful hard all alone! I don't know how, when I really mean it, but Freckles, I love you. I must have you, and now I guess—I guess maybe I'd better kiss you next."

She bravely laid her feverish, quivering lips on his. Her breath, like clover bloom, was in his nostrils, and her hair touched his face.

"Freckles," she panted, "Freckles! I didn't think it was in you to be mean!"

"Mean, angel! Mean to you?" gasped Freckles.

"Yes," said the angel, "downright mean. When one kisses you, if you had any mercy at all you'd kiss back, just a little bit. Now, I'm going to try it over, and I want you to help me a little. You aren't too sick to help me just a little, Freckles?"

"Tell me, Freckles," she whispered softly.

"If I can," said Freckles, in biting irony. "It's just this, angels are from above. Outcasts are from below. You're a sound body and you're beautiful of all. You have everything that loving, careful raising and money can give you. I have so much less than nothing that I don't suppose I had any right to be born. It's a sure thing—nobody wanted me afterward. So, of course, they didn't before. Some of them should have been telling you long ago."

"If that's all you have to tell, Freckles, I've known that quite awhile," said the angel stoutly. "Mr. McLean told my father, and he told me. That only makes me love you more, to pay for all you've missed."

"Then I'm wondering at you," said Freckles, in a voice of awe. "Can't you see that if you were willing and your father would come and offer you to me, I couldn't be touching the soles of your feet, in love—me, whose people brawled over me, cut off my hand, and threw me away to freeze and to die! Me, who has no name just as much because I've no right to any, as because I don't know it. When I was little, I planned to find me father and mother when I grew up. Now I know me mother deserted me, and me father was maybe a thief and surely a liar. The pity of me suffering and the watching over me has gone to your head, dear angel, and it's me must be thinking for you. If you could be forgetting me lost hand, where I was raised, and that I had no name to give you, and if you would be taking me as I am, some day people such as mine must be might come upon you. I used to pray every night and morning and many times the day to see me mother. Now I only pray to die quickly and never risk the sight of her. Tain't no ways possible, angel! It's a wildness of your dear head. Oh, do, for mercy sake, kiss me once more and be letting me go!"

"Not for a minute!" cried the angel. "Not for a minute, if those are all the reasons you have. There are thousands of young couples who come to this country and start a family with none of their relatives here. Chicago is a big city, and grown people could be wiped out in a lot of ways, and who would there ever be to find to whom their little children belonged? It's all so plain to me. Oh, if I could only make you see!"

She buried her face in the pillow and presently lifted it, transfigured.

"Now I have it!" she cried. "Oh, dear heart! I can make it so plain! Freckles, can you imagine you see the old Lumberlost trail? Well, when we followed it, you know, there were places where ugly prickly thistles overgrew the path, and you went ahead with your club and bent them back to keep them from stinging through my clothing. Other places there were great shining pools where lovely, snow white lilies grew, and you waded in and gathered them for me. Oh, dear heart, don't you see? It's this! Everywhere the wind carried that thistledown, other thistles sprang up and grew prickly and wherever those lily seeds sank to the mire the pure white of other lilies bloomed. But, Freckles, there was never a place anywhere about the Lumberlost, or in the whole world, where the thistledown floated and sprang up and blossomed into white lilies! Thistles grow from thistles and lilies grow other lilies. Dear Freckles, think hard! You must see it! You are lily, straight through! You never, never could have drifted from the thistle patch."

"Where did you get the courage to go into the Lumberlost and face its terrors? You inherited it from the blood of a brave father, dear heart. Where did you get the pluck to hold for over a year a job that few men would have taken at all? You got it from a plucky mother, you bravest of boys. You waded single handed into a man almost twice your size and fought like a demon, just at the suggestion that you could be deceptive and dishonest. Could your mother or your father have been untruthful? Here you are, so hungry and starved out that you are dying for love. Where did you get all that capacity for loving? You didn't inherit it from hardened, heartless people who would disfigure you and purposely leave you to die, that's one sure thing. Yet you will spend miserable years torturing yourself with the idea that your own mother might have cut off that hand. Shame on you, Freckles! Your mother would have done this!"

The angel deliberately turned back the cover, slipped up the sleeve and laid her lips on the scars.

"Freckles," she cried, "come to your senses! Be a thinking, reasoning man! You just must see it! Like breeds like in this world! You must be some sort of reproduction of your parents, and I am not afraid to vouch for them, not for a minute."

"And then, too, if more proof is needed here it is: Mr. McLean says that you are the most perfect gentleman he ever knew, and he has traveled the world over. Then there's your singing. I don't believe there ever was a mortal with a sweeter voice than yours, and while that doesn't prove anything there is a point that does. Just the little training you had from that choirmaster won't account for the wonderful accent and ease with which you sing. Somewhere in your close blood is a marvellously trained vocalist; and every one of us believe that, Freckles."

"Why does my father refer to you constantly as being of fine perceptions and honor? Because you are, Freckles. Why does the Bird Woman leave her precious work and stay here to help look after you? I never heard of her losing any time over any one else. It's because she loves you. And why does Mr. McLean turn all of his valuable business over to hired men and watch over you personally? And why is he hunting excuses every day to spend money on you? My father says McLean is full Scotch close with a dollar. He is a hard headed business man, Freckles, and he is doing it because he finds you worthy of it. Worthy of all we can all do and more than we know how to do, dear heart! Freckles, are you listening to me? Oh, won't you see it? Won't you believe it?"

"Oh, angel," chattered the bewildered Freckles, "are you truly meaning it? Could it be?"

"Of course it could," flashed the angel, "because it just is!"

"But you can't prove it," wailed Freckles. "It ain't giving me a name or me honor!"

"Freckles," said the angel sternly. "You are unreasonable! Why, I did prove every word I said! Everything proves it! You look here! If you knew for sure that I could give you your name and your honor, and prove to you that your mother did love you, why, then would you just go to breathing like perpetual motion and bang on for dear life and get well?"

A great light leaped into Freckles' eyes.

"If I knew that, angel," he said solemnly, "you couldn't be killing me if you felt the biggest tree in the Lumberlost smash on me!"

"Then you go right to work," said the angel, "and before night I'll prove one thing to you: I can show you easily enough how much your mother loved you. That will be the first step, and then the rest will all come."

Freckles caught her sleeve.

"Me mother, angel! Me mother!" he marveled hoarsely. "Did you say you could be finding out today if me mother loved me? How? Oh, angel! All the rest don't matter, if only me mother didn't do it!"

"Well, I'd be glad to let you see them," she said, "but the fact is we haven't them. I do hope we haven't made some mistake. I was thoroughly convinced, and so was the superintendent. We let his people take those things away yesterday. Who are you, and what do you want with them?"

The angel looked at the matron dazed and speechless.

"There couldn't have been a mistake," she continued, seeing the girl's distress. "Freckles was here when I took charge, ten years ago. These people had it all proved plain as day that he belonged to them. They had him traced to where he ran away down in Illinois last fall, and there they completely lost track of him. I'm sorry you seem so terribly disappointed, but it was all right. The man was his uncle, and as like the boy as he could possibly be. He was almost killed to go back without him. If you know where Freckles is, they'd give big money to find out."

"Who are they?" stammered the angel. "Where are they going back to?"

"They are Irish folks, Miss," said the matron. "They have been in Chicago and over the country for the last three months, hunting him everywhere. They have given up and are starting home today. They?"

"Did they leave an address? Where could I find them?" burst in the angel.

"They left a card, and I notice the morning paper has the man's picture and is full of them. They've advertised a great deal in the city papers. It's a wonder you haven't seen something."

"Trains don't run right. We never get Chicago papers," snapped the angel. "Please give me that card quickly. They may get away from me. I simply have to catch them!"

The matron came back with a card. "Their addresses are on there," she said. "Both here in Chicago and at their home. They made them full and plain, and I was to cable at once if I got the least clew of him at any time. If they've left the city, you can stop them in New York. You're sure to catch them before they sail—if you hurry."

The matron caught up a paper and thrust it into the angel's hand as she rushed for the street.

(Continued next week.)

"So there's another rupture of Mount Vociferous," said Mrs. Partington, as she put on her specs. "The paper tells us about the burning lather running down the mountain, but it don't tell how it got afire."

Medical.

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