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PROLOGUE.

It was in the woods that the girl of the Limberlost found her education, her love, her happiness and other good things, so, rightly, the air of the trees is in this story of her life. Here is a tale for lovers of the woods and for others who like a simple story well told by one who knows the forest, can tell about "home folks" and can find the interest in everyday lives. Through these pages flutter the brilliant butterfly of tangled romance, the more sober butterfly, no less beautiful, of noble, quiet lives, well lived, and the gray moth of sorrow borne needlessly for many years. And if you listen closely you may hear the buzz of the little, busy existence of Billy, a youngster worth your knowing.

CHAPTER I.

Wherein Elnora Goes to High School.

Elnora Comstock, have you lost your senses?" demanded the angry voice of Katharine Comstock as she glared at her daughter.

"Why, mother?" faltered the girl. "Don't you 'why mother' me!" cried Mrs. Comstock. "You know very well what I mean. You've given me no peace until you've had your way about this going to school business. I've fixed you good enough, and you're ready to start. But no child of mine walks the streets of Onabasha looking like a play actress woman. You wet your hair and comb it down modest and decent and then be off or you'll have no time to find where you belong."

Elnora gave one despairing glance at the white face, framed in a most becoming riot of reddish brown hair, which she saw in the little kitchen mirror. Then she untied the narrow black ribbon, wet the comb and plastered the waving curls close to her head, bound them fast, pinned on the skimpy black hat and started for the back door.

Mrs. Comstock watched the girl down the long walk to the gate and out of sight on the road in the bright sunshine of the first Monday of September.

"I bet a dollar she gets enough of it by night!" Mrs. Comstock said positively.

Elnora walked by instinct, for her eyes were blinded with tears. She left the road where it turned south at the corner of the Limberlost, climbed a snake fence and entered a path worn by her own feet. Dodging under willow and scrub oak branches, she at last came to the faint outline of an old trail made in the days when the previous timber of the swamp was guarded by armed men. This path she followed until she reached a thick clump of bushes. From the debris in the end of a hollow log she took a key that unlocked the padlock of a large weather beaten old box, inside of which lay several books, a butterfly apparatus and an old cracked mirror. The walls were lined thickly with gaudy butterflies, dragon flies and moths. She set up the mirror, and, once more pulling the ribbon from her hair, she shook the bright mass over her shoulders, tossing it dry in the sunshine. Then she straightened it, bound it loosely and replaced her hat. She tugged vainly at the low brown calico collar and gazed despairingly at the generous length of the narrow skirt. She lifted it as she would have liked it to be cut if possible. That disclosed the heavy leather high shoes, at sight of which she looked positively ill and hastily dropped the skirt. Lacking the case again, she hid the key and hurried down the trail.

She followed it around the north end of the swamp and then struck into a footpath crossing a farm in the direc-

tion of the spires of the city to the northeast. Again she climbed a fence and was on the open road. For an instant she leaned against the fence, staring before her, then turned and looked back. Behind her lay the land on which she had been born to drudgery and a mother who made no pretense of loving her. Before her lay the city, through whose schools she hoped to find means of escape and the way to reach the things for which she cared. When she thought of how she looked she leaned more heavily against the fence and groaned. When she thought of turning back and wearing such clothing in ignorance all the days of her life she set her teeth firmly and went hastily toward Onabasha.

She approached the great stone high school building, entered bravely and inquired her way to the office of the superintendent. There she learned that she should have come the week before and arranged for her classes.

"I finish, last spring at Brushwood school, district No. 9," said Elnora. "I have been studying all summer. I am quite sure I can do the first year work if I have a few days to get started."

"Of course, of course," assented the superintendent. "Almost invariably country pupils do good work. You may enter first year, and if you don't fit we will find it out speedily. Your teachers will tell you the list of books you must have, and if you will come with me I will show you the way to the auditorium. It is now time for opening exercises. Take any seat you find vacant." He was gone.

Elnora stood before the entrance and stared into the largest room she ever had seen. The door sloped down to a yawning stage, on which a band of musicians, grouped around a grand piano, were tuning their instruments. Every one else was seated, but no one paid any attention to the white faced girl stumbling half blindly down the aisle next the farthest wall. So she went on to the very end facing the stage. No one moved, and she could not summon courage to crowd past others to several empty seats she saw. At the end of the aisle she paused in desperation as she stared back at the whole forest of faces, most of which were now turned upon her.

In one burning flash came the full realization of her scanty dress, her pitiful little hat and ribbon, her big, heavy shoes, her ignorance of where to go or what to do, and from a sickening wave which crept over her she felt she was going to become very ill. Then out of the mass she saw a pair of big brown boy eyes three seats from her, and there was a message in them. Without moving his body he reached forward and with a pencil touched the back of the seat before him. Instantly Elnora took another step, which brought her to a row of vacant front seats.

She heard the giggle behind her. The knowledge that she wore the only hat in the room burned her. Every matter of moment and some of none at all cut and stung. She had no books. Where should she go when this was over? What would she give to be on the trail going home!

Before she realized what was coming every one had risen and the room was emptying rapidly. Elnora hurried after the nearest girl and in the press at the door touched her sleeve timidly. "Will you please tell me where the freshmen go?" she asked huskily.

The girl gave her one surprised glance and drew away. "Same place as the fresh women," she answered, and those nearest her laughed.

Elnora stopped praying suddenly, and the color swept into her face. "I'll wager you are the first person I meet when I find it," she said and stopped short. "Not that! Oh, I must not do that!" she thought in dismay. "Make an enemy the first thing I do—oh, not that!"

She followed with her eyes as the young people separated in the hall, some climbing stairs, some disappearing down side halls, some entering

doors near by. She saw the girl overtake the brown eyed boy and speak to him, and he glanced back at Elnora, and now there was a scowl on his face. Then she stood alone in the hall.

Presently a door opened and a young woman came out and entered another room. Elnora waited until she returned and hurried to her. "Would you tell me where the freshmen are?" she panted.

"Straight down the hall, three doors to your left," was the answer as the girl passed.

"One minute, please—oh, please!" begged Elnora. "Do I knock or just open the door?"

"Go in and take a seat," replied the teacher.

"What if there aren't any seats?" gasped Elnora.

"Classrooms are never half filled. There will be plenty," was the answer.

Elnora removed her hat. There was no place to put it, so she carried it in her hand. She looked infinitely better without it. After several efforts she at last opened the door and, stepping inside, faced a smaller and more concentrated battery of eyes.

"Be seated," said the professor in charge of the class, and then, because he saw Elnora was desperately embarrassed, he proceeded to lend her a book and to ask her if she had studied algebra. She said she had a little, but not the same book they were using. He asked her if she felt that she could do the work they were beginning, and she said she did.

That was how it happened that three minutes after entering the room she was compelled to take her place at the blackboard beside the girl of the hall, whose flushed face and angry eyes avoided meeting Elnora's. Being compelled to concentrate on her proposition, she forgot herself. When the professor asked that all pupils sign their work she firmly wrote "Elnora Comstock" under her demonstration. Then she took her seat and waited with white lips and trembling limbs as one after another the professor called the names on the board, while their owners arose and explained their propositions or fumbled if they had not found a correct solution. She was so eager to catch their forms of expression and prepare herself for her recitation that she never took her eyes from the work on the board until clearly and distinctly "Elnora Comstock" called the professor.

The dazed girl stared at the board. One tiny curl added to the top of the first curve of the "m" in her name had transformed it from a good old English patronymic that any girl might bear proudly to Comstock. Elnora stared speechless. When and how did it happen? She could feel the wave of smothered laughter in the air around her. A rush of anger turned her face scarlet and her soul sick. A hot answer was on her lips. The voice of the professor addressed her straightly.

"This proposition seems to be beautifully demonstrated, Miss Comstock," he said. "Surely you can tell us how you did it."

That word of praise saved her. She was tall, straight and handsome as she arose.

"Of course I can explain my work," she said in natural tones. "What I can't explain is how I happened to be so stupid as to make a mistake in



"Did you really let that gawky piece of calico get ahead of you?"

writing my own name. I must have been a little nervous. Please excuse me."

She went to the board, swept off the signature under one stroke, then, without a tremor, rewrote it clearly. "My name is Comstock," she said distinctly. She turned to her seat and, following the formula used by the others, made her first high school recitation.

The face of Professor Henley was a study. As Elnora took her seat he looked at her steadily. "It puzzles me," he said deliberately, "how you can write as beautiful a demonstration and explain it as clearly as ever has been done in any of my classes and still be so disturbed as to make a mistake in your own name. Are you very sure you did that yourself, Miss Comstock?"

"It is impossible that any one else should have done it," answered Elnora steadily.

"I am very glad you think so," said the professor. "Being freshmen, all of you are strangers to me. I should hate to begin the year with you feel-

ing there was one among you small enough to do a trick like that. The next proposition, please."

When the hour was gone the class filed back to the study room, and Elnora followed in desperation, because she did not know where else to go. She could not study as she had no books, and when the class again left the room to go to another professor for the next recitation she went also. At least they could put her out if she did not belong there. Noon came at last, and she kept with the others until they dispersed on the sidewalk. She was so abnormally self-conscious she fancied all the hundreds of that laughing throng saw and jested at her. When she passed the brown eyed boy walking with the girl of her encounter she knew, for she heard him say, "Did you really let that gawky piece of calico get ahead of you?" The answer was indistinct.

After noon she returned to the high school, followed some other pupils to the restroom, hung her hat and found her way to the study where she had been in the morning. Twice that afternoon with aching head she faced strange professors in different branches. Once she escaped notice, the second time the worst happened. She was asked a question she could not answer.

"Have you not decided on your course and secured your books?" inquired the professor.

"I have decided on my course," replied Elnora; "I do not know who to ask for my books."

"Ask?" the professor was bewildered. "I understood the books were furnished," faltered Elnora.

"Only to those bringing an order from the township trustee," replied the professor.

"No! Oh, no!" cried Elnora. "I will get them tomorrow," and gripped her desk for support, for she knew that was not true. Four books, ranging perhaps at a dollar and a half apiece! Would her mother get them? Of course she would not, could not.

Did not Elnora know the story by heart? There was enough land, but no one to do clearing and farm. Tax on all those acres, recently the new gravel road tax added, the expense of living and only the work of two women to meet all of it. She was insane to think she could come to the city to school. Her mother had been right. The girl decided that if only she lived to get home she would stay there and lead any sort of life to avoid more of this torture. Bad as what she wished to escape had been, it was nothing like this. She never could live down the movement that went through the class when she inadvertently revealed the fact that she had expected her books to be furnished. Her mother would not get them. That settled the question.

But the end of misery is never in a hurry to come, for before the day was over the superintendent entered the room and explained that pupils from the country were charged a tuition of \$20 a year. That really was the end. Previously Elnora had canvassed a dozen wild plans for securing the money for books ranging all the way from offering to wash the superintendent's dishes to breaking into the bank. This additional expense made the thing so wildly impossible there was nothing to do but hold up her head until she was out of sight.

CHAPTER II.

Wherein is Told Something of Elnora's Family History.

DOWN the long corridor alone among hundreds, down the long street alone among thousands, out into the country she came at last. She sat on a log and began to sob in spite of her efforts at self control. At first it was physical breakdown, later thought came crowding. She must go home to feed chickens, calves and pigs, wear calico and coarse shoes and pass a library with averted head all her life. She sobbed again.

"For pity's sake, honey, what's the matter?" asked the voice of the nearest neighbor, Wesley Sinton, as he seated himself by Elnora. "There, there," he continued, smearing tears all over her face in an effort to dry them. "Was it so bad as that, now? Maggie has been just about wild over you all day. She's got nervous every minute. She said we were foolish to let you go. She said your clothes were not right and that they would laugh at you. Were your things right, Elnora?"

The girl broke into hysterical laughter. "Right!" she cried. "Right! Uncle Wesley, you should have seen me among them! I was a picture! They'll never forget me. No, they won't get the chance, for they'll see the same things tomorrow!"

"Now, that is what I call spunk, Elnora. Downright grit," said Wesley Sinton. "Don't you let them laugh you out. You've helped Margaret and me for years at harvest and busy times. What you've earned must amount to quite a sum. You can get yourself a good many clothes with it."

"Don't mention clothes, Uncle Wesley," sobbed Elnora. "I don't care how I look. If I don't go back all of them will know it's because I am so poor I can't buy my books."

"Oh, I don't know you are so poor," said Sinton meditatively. "There are 300 acres of good land, with fine timber as ever grew on it."

"It takes all we can earn to pay the tax, and mother wouldn't cut a tree for her life."

"Well, then, maybe I'll be compelled to cut one for her," suggested Sinton. "Anyway, stop tearing yourself to pieces and tell me. If it isn't clothes, what is it?"

"It's books and tuition. Over \$20 in all."

(Continued on page 7, Col. 1.)

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