

A GIRL OF THE LIMBERLOST

By GENE STRATTON-PORTER

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SYNOPSIS

Although a good scholar, Elnora Comstock, entering high school, is ashamed by her country dress. She needs \$20 for books and tuition fees. Her mother is unsympathetic, and Elnora tells her troubles to Wesley Sinton, an old neighbor.

When Elnora was born her father was drowned in a swamp, embittering her mother's life. Elnora determines to raise money by gathering forest specimens. The Sintons buy clothes for her.

Elnora, getting her books cheaply, finds a market with the Bird Woman for butterflies, Indian relics, etc.

[Continued from last week.]

With the first streak of red above the Limberlost Margaret Sinton was busy with the gingham and the intricate paper pattern she had purchased. Wesley cooked the breakfast and worked until he thought Elnora would be gone, then he started to bring her mother.

"Now you be mighty careful," cautioned Margaret. "I don't know how she will take it."

"I don't either," said Wesley philosophically. "but she's got to take it some way. That dress has to be finished by school time in the morning."

Wesley had not slept well that night. By the time he reached the front gate and started down the walk between the rows of asters and lady slippers he was perspiring, and every plausible and convincing speech had fled his brain. Mrs. Comstock helped him. She met him at the door.

"Good morning," she said. "Did Margaret send you for something?"

"Yes," said Wesley. "She sent me for you. She's got a job that's too big for her, and she wants you to help."

"Of course I will," said Mrs. Comstock. It was no one's affair now (one of the previous days had been, or how the endless hours of the present would drag. "What is she doing in such a rush?"

Now was his chance.

"She's making a dress for Elnora," answered Wesley. He saw Mrs. Comstock's form straighten, and her face harden, so he continued hastily. "You see Elnora has been helping us at harvest time, butchering, and with unexpected visitors for years. We've made out that she's saved us a considerable sum, and as she wouldn't ever touch any pay for anything we just went to town and got a few clothes we thought would fix her up a little for the high school. We want to get a dress done today mighty bad, but Margaret is slow about sewing, and she never can finish alone, so I came for you."

"And it's such a simple little matter, so dead easy; and all so between old friends like that, you can't look above your boots while you explain it," sneered Mrs. Comstock. "Wesley Sinton, what put the idea into your head that Elnora would take things bought with money when she wouldn't take the money?"

Then Sinton's eyes came up straightly.

"Finding her on the trail last night sobbing as hard as I ever saw any one at a funeral. She wasn't complaining at all, but she's come to me all her life with her little hurts, and she couldn't hide how she'd been laughed at, twitted and run face to face against the fact that there was books and tuition unexpected, and nothing will ever make me believe you didn't know that, Kate Comstock."

"If any doubts are troubling you on that subject, sure I know it! She was so anxious to try the world I thought I'd just let her take a few knocks and see how she liked it."

"As if she'd ever taken anything but knocks all her life!" cried Wesley Sinton. "Kate Comstock, you are a heartless, selfish woman. You've never allowed Elnora any real love in her life. If ever she finds out that thing you'll lose her, and it will serve you right."

"She knows it now," said Mrs. Comstock icily, "and she'll be home tonight just as usual."

"Well, you are a brave woman if you dared put a girl of Elnora's make through what she suffered yesterday and will suffer again today and let her know you did it on purpose. I admire your nerve. But I've watched this since Elnora was born, and I got enough. Things have come to a pass where they go better for her or I interfere."

"As if you'd ever done anything but interfere all her life! Think I haven't watched you? Think I, with my heart raw in my breast and too numb to resent it openly, haven't seen you and Mag Sinton trying to turn Elnora against me day after day? When did you ever tell her what her father meant to me? When did you ever try to make her see the wreck of my life and what I've suffered? No, indeed!"

"Kate Comstock, that's unjust!" cried Sinton. "Only last night I tried to show her the picture I saw the day she

was born. I begged her to come to you and tell you pleasant what she needed and ask you for what I happen to know you can well afford to give her."

"I can't!" cried Mrs. Comstock. "You know I can't!"

"Then get so you can!" said Wesley Sinton. "Any day you say the word you can sell \$6,000 worth of rare timber off this place easy. I'll see to clearing and working the fields cheap as dirt, for Elnora's sake. I'll buy you more cattle to fatten. All you've got to do is sign a lease to pull thousands from the ground in oil, as the rest of us are doing all around you."

"Cut down Robert's trees!" shrieked Mrs. Comstock. "Tear up his land! Cover everything with horrid, greasy oil! I'll die first!"

"You mean you'll let Elnora go like a beggar and hurt and mortify her past bearing. I've got to the place where I tell you plain what I am going to do. Maggie and I went to town last night, and we got what things Elnora needs most urgent to make her look a little

like the rest of the high school girls. Now here it is in plain English. You can help get these things ready and let us give them to her as we want."

"She won't touch them!" cried Mrs. Comstock.

"Then you can pay us, and she can take them as her right!"

"I won't!"

"Then I will tell Elnora just what you are worth, what you can afford and how much of this she owns. I'll loan her the money to buy books and decent clothes, and when she is of age she can sell her share and pay me."

Mrs. Comstock gripped a chair back and opened her lips, but no words came.

"And," Sinton continued, "if she is so much like you that she won't do that I'll go to the county seat and lay complaint against you as her guardian before the judge. I'll swear to what you are worth and how you are raising her and have you discharged or have the judge appoint some man who will see that she is comfortable, educated and decent looking!"

"You—you wouldn't!" gasped Mrs. Comstock.

"I won't need to, Kate!" said Sinton, his heart softening the instant the hard words were said. "You won't show it, but you do love Elnora! You can't help it! You must see how she needs things. Come, help us fix them and be friends. Maggie and I couldn't live without her, and you couldn't either. You've got to love such a fine girl as she is. Let it show a little!"

"You can hardly expect me to love her," said Mrs. Comstock coldly. "But for her a man would stand back of me now who would beat the breath out of your sneaking body for the cowardly thing with which you threaten me. After all I've suffered you'd drag me to court and compel me to tear up Robert's property. If I ever get they carry me. If they touch one tree or put down one greasy old oil well it will be over all I can shoot before they begin. Now, see how quick you can clear out of here!"

"You won't come and help Maggie with the dress?"

For answer Mrs. Comstock looked about swiftly for some object on which to lay her hands. Knowing her temper, Wesley Sinton left with all the haste consistent with dignity. But he did not go home. He crossed a field and in an hour brought another neighbor who was skillful with her needle. With sinking heart Margaret saw them coming.

"Kate is too busy to help today. She can't sew before tomorrow," said Wesley cheerfully as they entered.

That quieted Margaret's apprehension a little, though she had some doubts. Wesley prepared the lunch, and by 4 o'clock the pretty dress was finished as far as it possibly could be until it was fitted on Elnora.

CHAPTER V.

Wherein Mrs. Comstock Laughs the First Time in Sixteen Years.

THE neighbor left, and Margaret packed her purchases into the big market basket. Wesley took the hat, umbrella and raincoat, and they went down to Mrs. Comstock's. As they reached the step Margaret spoke pleasantly to Mrs. Comstock, who sat reading just inside the door, but she did not answer.

Wesley Sinton opened the door and went in, followed by Margaret.

"Kate," he said, "you needn't take out your mad over our little racket on Maggie. I ain't told her a word I said to you or you said to me. She's not so very strong, and she's sewed since 4 o'clock this morning to get this dress ready for tomorrow. It's done and we came down to try it on Elnora."

"Is that the truth, Mag Sinton?" demanded Mrs. Comstock.

"You heard Wesley say so," proudly affirmed Mrs. Sinton.

"I want to make you a proposition," said Wesley. "Wait till Elnora comes. Then we'll show her the things and see what she says."

"How would it do to see what she says without bribing her?" sneered Mrs. Comstock.

"If she can stand what she did yesterday and will today she can bear 'most anything," said Wesley. "Put away the clothes if you want to till we tell her."

"Well, you don't take this waist I'm working on," said Margaret, "for I have to baste in the sleeves and set the collar. Put the rest out of sight, if you like."

Mrs. Comstock picked up the basket and bundles, placed them inside her room and closed the door.

Margaret threaded her needle and began to sew. Mrs. Comstock returned to her book, while Wesley sidged and raged inwardly. He could see that Margaret was nervous and almost

in tears, but the lines in Mrs. Comstock's impassive face were set and cold. So they sat and the clock ticked off the time—she how two dusk, and Elnora. Margaret long since had taken the last stitch she could. Occasionally she and Wesley exchanged a few words. Mrs. Comstock regularly turned a leaf and once arose and moved nearer a window. Just when Margaret and Wesley were discussing whether he had not best go to town to meet Elnora, they heard her coming up the walk. Wesley dropped his tilted chair and squared himself. Margaret gripped her sewing and turned pleading eyes to the door. Mrs. Comstock closed her book and grimly smiled.

"Mother, please open the door!" called Elnora.

Mrs. Comstock arose and swung open the screen. Elnora stepped in beside her, bent half double, the whole front of her dress gathered into a sort of bag filled with a heavy load and one arm stacked high with books. In the dim light she did not see the Sintons.

"Please hand me the empty bucket in the kitchen, mother," she said. "I just had to bring these arrow points home, but I'm scared for fear I've soiled my dress and will have to wash it. I'm to clean them and take them to the banker in the morning, and oh, mother, I've sold enough stuff to pay for my books, my tuition and maybe a dress and some lighter shoes besides. Oh, mother, I'm so happy! Take the books and bring the bucket!"

Then she saw Margaret and Wesley. "Oh, glory!" she exulted. "I was just wondering how I'd ever wait to tell you, and here you are! It's too perfectly splendid to be true!"

"Tell us, Elnora," said Sinton.

"Well, sir," said Elnora, doubling down on the floor and spreading out her skirt, "set the bucket here, mother. These points are brittle and have to be put in one at a time. If they are chipped I can't sell them." And she told all that had happened.

Elnora laid the last arrow point in the pail and arose, shaking leaves and



"Please hand me the empty bucket in the kitchen, mother," she said.

bits of baked earth from her dress. She reached into her pocket and produced her money and waved it before their wondering eyes.

"And that's the joy part!" she exulted. "Put it up in the clock till morning, mother. That pays for the books and tuition and"—Elnora hesitated, for she saw the nervous grasp with which her mother's fingers closed on the bills. Then she went on, but more slowly and thinking before she spoke.

"What I get tomorrow pays for more books and tuition, and maybe a few, just a few, things to wear. These shoes are so dreadfully heavy and hot, and they make such a noise on the floor. There isn't another calico dress in the whole building, not among hundreds of us. Why, what is that? Aunt Margaret, what are you hiding in your lap?"

She snatched the waist and shook it out, and her face was beaming. "Have you taken to waists all fancy and buttoned in the back? I bet you this is mine!"

"I bet you so, too," said Margaret Sinton. "You undress right away and try it on, and if it fits it will be done for morning. There are some low shoes too!"

Elnora began to dance. "Oh, you dear people!" she cried. "I can pay for them tomorrow night! Isn't it too splendid! I was just thinking on the way home that I certainly would be compelled to have cooler shoes until later, and I was wondering what I'd do when the fall rains begin."

"I meant to get you some heavy dress skirts and a coat then," said Mrs. Comstock.

"I know you said so!" cried Elnora. "But you needn't now. I can get every single stitch I need myself. I'll be helping with the tax next, mother."

Elnora waved the waist and started for the bedroom. When she opened the door she gave a little cry.

"What have you people been doing?" she demanded. "I never saw so many interesting bundles in all my life. I'm sneered to death for fear I can't pay for all of them and will have to give up something."

"Wouldn't you take them if you could not pay for them, Elnora?" asked her mother instantly.

"Why, not unless you did," answered Elnora. "People have no right to wear things they can't afford, have they?"

"But from such old friends as Maggie and Wesley!" Mrs. Comstock's voice was oily with triumph.

"From them least of all," cried Elnora stoutly. "From a stranger sooner than from them, to whom I owe so much more than I ever can pay now."

"Well, you don't have to," said Mrs. Comstock. "Maggie just selected these things because she is more in touch with the world and has got such good taste. You can pay as long as your money holds out, and if there's more necessary maybe I can sell the butcher a calf, or if there's things too costly for us, of course, they can take them back. Anything that ain't used can be returned. They were only brought here on trial."

The girl began opening the packages. The hat came first.

"Mother," cried Elnora. "Mother, of course, you have seen this, but you haven't seen it on me. I must try it on."

"Don't you dare put that on your head until your hair is washed and properly combed," said Margaret. "While it dries you can eat your supper, and this dress will be finished. Then you can put on your new ribbon and your hat. That little round bundle on the top of the basket is your stockings."

Margaret sat down and began sewing swiftly and a little later opened the machine and ran several long seams.

Elnora was back in a few minutes, holding up her skirts and stepping daintily in the beautiful new shoes.

Wesley and Margaret scarcely breathed for a long time. Then Wesley went to do the feeding. Elnora set the table. When the water was hot Margaret pinned a big towel around Elnora's shoulders and washed and dried the lovely hair according to the instructions she had been given the previous night. As the hair began to dry it billowed out in a sparkling sheen that caught the light and gleamed and flashed.

"Now, the idea is to let it stand naturally, just as the curl will make it. Don't you do any of that nasty, untidy snarling, Elnora," cautioned Margaret. "Wash it this way every two weeks while you are in school, shake it out and dry it. Then part it in the middle and turn a front quarter on each side from your face. You tie the back at your neck with a string—so, and the ribbon goes in a big, loose bow. I'll show you." One after another Margaret Sinton tied the ribbons, creasing each of them so they could not be returned, as she explained that she was trying to see which was most becoming. Then she produced the raincoat, which carried Elnora into transports.

To Wesley and to Margaret the bright young face of Elnora, with its pink tints, its heavy dark browns, its

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