

A GIRL OF THE LIMBERLOST

By GENE STRATTON-PORTER

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SYNOPSIS

Although a good scholar, Elnora Comstock, entering high school, is abashed 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.

Mrs. Comstock's devotion to her husband's memory will not permit her to sell trees or have oil wells dug on her land. The Sintons bring Elnora new clothing.

Elnora is delighted with her outfit. Her mother says she must pay for it. Wesley and Margaret Sinton discuss the girl's affairs.

Pete Corson, a Limberlost frequenter, warns Elnora not to visit the Limberlost at night or go far into the swamp at any time.

Billy, a bright but untrained little chap, with a shiftless father and hungry brother and sister, gets Elnora's luncheon. Wesley, troubled by Corson's warning, investigates.

Sinton finds some one has been spying on Elnora. The girl feeds Billy again. She is "taken up" by the high school girls.

Billy's father dies, and the lad is taken home by Sinton, who makes provision for his brother and sister.

Margaret finds Billy mischievous, but her heart softens, and he is adopted. Pete helps Elnora to collect specimens. She buys a Mark Twain book for her mother.

[Continued from last week.]

Mrs. Comstock had started to walk slowly and meet Elnora. The girl had been so late that her mother reached the Sinton gate and came up the path until the picture inside became visible. Elnora had told her about Sinton taking Billy home. Mrs. Comstock had some curiosity to see how Margaret bore the unexpected addition to her family. Billy's voice, raised with excitement, was plainly audible. She could see Elnora holding him and hear his excited wail. Sinton's face was drawn and haggard and Margaret's set and defiant. A very imp of perversity entered the breast of Mrs. Comstock and danced there.

"Hoity, toity!" she said as she suddenly appeared in the door. "Blest if I ever heard a man making sounds like that before!"

Billy ceased suddenly. Mrs. Comstock was tall, angular, and her hair was prematurely white, for she was only thirty-six, though she looked fifty. But there was an expression on her usually cold face that was attractive just then, and Billy was in search of attractions.

"Do you like boys?" he questioned. "If there is anything I love it is a boy," said Mrs. Comstock assuringly. Billy was on the floor.

"Do you like dogs?" "Yes, almost as well as boys. I am going to buy a dog just as soon as I can find a good one."

Billy swept toward her with a whoop. "Do you want a boy?" he shouted. Katharine Comstock stretched out her arms and gathered him in.

"Of course I want a boy!" she rejoiced. "Maybe you'd like to have me?" offered Billy.

"Sure I would," triumphed Mrs. Comstock. "Any one would like to have you. You are just a real boy, Billy."

"Will you take Snap?" "I'd like to have Snap almost as well as you."

"Mother!" breathed Elnora imploringly. "Don't! Oh, don't! He thinks you mean it!"

"And so I do mean it," said Mrs. Comstock. "I'll take him in a jiffy. I throw away enough to feed a little tyke like him every day. His chatter would be great company while you are gone. Blood soon can be purified with right food and baths, and as for Snap I meant to get a bulldog, but possibly Snap will serve just as well. All I ask of a dog is to bark at the right time. I'll do the rest. Would you like to come and be my boy, Billy?"

Billy leaned against Mrs. Comstock, reached his arms around her neck and gripped her with all his puny might. "You can whip me all you want to," he said. "I won't make a sound."

Mrs. Comstock held him closely and her hard face was softening. Of that there could be no doubt.

"You like boys?" exclaimed Billy, and his head dropped against Mrs. Comstock in unspeakable content.

"Yes, and if I don't have to carry you the whole way home we must start right now," said Mrs. Comstock. "You are going to be asleep before you know it."

"Billy, are you going to leave without even saying goodby to me?" asked Sinton, with a great gulp in his throat.

Billy held tight to Mrs. Comstock and Elnora.

"Goodby!" he said casually. "I'll come and see you some time."

Wesley Sinton gave a smothered sob and strode from the room.

Mrs. Comstock started for the door, dragging at Billy as Elnora pulled back, but Mrs. Sinton was before them, her eyes flashing.

"Kate Comstock, you think you are mighty smart, don't you?" she cried. "I ain't in the lunatic asylum, where you belong, anyway," said Mrs. Comstock. "I am smart enough to tell a dandy boy when I see him, and I'm good and glad to get him. I'll love to have him!"

"Well, you won't have him!" exclaimed Margaret Sinton. "That boy is Wesley's. He got him and brought him here. You can't come in and take him like that. Let go of him!"

Wesley Sinton appeared behind Margaret in the doorway, and she turned to him. "Make Kate Comstock let go of our boy!" she demanded.

"Billy, she wants you now," said Wesley Sinton. "She won't whip you, and she won't let any one else. You can have stacks of good things to eat, ride in the carriage and have a great time. Won't you stay with us?"

Billy drew away from Mrs. Comstock and Elnora.

He faced Margaret, his eyes shrewd with unchildish wisdom. Necessity had taught him to strike the hot iron, to drive the hard bargain.

"Can I have Snap to live here all ways?" he demanded.

"Yes, you can have all the dogs you want," said Margaret Sinton.

"Can I sleep close enough so's I can touch you?"

"Yes, you can move your lounge up so that you can hold my hand," said Margaret.

"Do you love me now?" questioned Billy.

"I'll try to love you if you are a good boy," said Margaret.

"Then I guess I'll stay," said Billy, walking over to her.

Out in the night Elnora and her wretched father went down the road in the moonlight, and every few rods Mrs. Comstock laughed aloud.

"Mother, I don't understand you," sobbed Elnora.

"Well, maybe when you have gone to high school long you will," said Mrs. Comstock. "Anyway, you saw me bring Mag Sinton to her senses, didn't you?"

On Sunday, while Mrs. Comstock was in town with the Sintons, Elnora, although repeatedly cautioned not to enter the Limberlost alone, went after specimens and was soon carrying five fine cocoons of different species as her reward. She pushed back her hair and gazed around longingly. A few rods inside she thought she saw cocoons on a bush, to which she went and found several. Sense of caution was rapidly vanishing; she was in a fair way to forget everything and plunge into the swamp when she thought she heard footsteps coming down the trail. She went back and came out almost facing Pete Corson.

That ended her difficulty. She had known him since childhood. When she sat on the front bench of the Brushwood schoolhouse Pete had been one of

the cocoons Elnora had found. He questioned her as to what other kinds would be like. He began to use the eyes of a trained woodman and hunter in her behalf. He saw several so easily and moved through the forest so softly that Elnora forgot the moths in watching him. Presently she was carrying the specimens and he was making the trips of investigation to see which was a cocoon and which a curled leaf, or he was down on his knees digging around stumps. As he worked he kept asking questions. What kind of logs were best to look beside, what trees were pupae cases most likely to be under, on what bushes did caterpillars spin most frequently? Time passed, as it always does when one's occupation is absorbing.

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The man looked at her narrowly. She was young, wholesome and beautiful. She was innocent, intensely in earnest and she needed the money—he knew that.

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"Goodby!" said Elnora. "Let's start quick! And Pete, you look at these closely, and when you are hunting or going along the road if one dangles under your nose you cut off the little twig and save it for me, will you?"

"Yes, I'll save you all I see," promised Pete. He pushed back his hat and followed Elnora. She plunged fearlessly through bushes, over underbrush and across dead logs. One minute she was crying wildly that here was a big one, the next she was reaching for a limb above her head or on her knees overturning dead leaves under a hickory or oak tree or pushing aside black muck with her bare hands as she searched for buried pupae cases. For the first hour Pete bent back bushes and followed, carrying what Elnora discovered. Then he found one.

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Came Out Almost Facing Pete Corson.

the big boys at the back of the room. He had been rough and wild, but she never had been afraid of him, and often he had given her pretty things from the swamp.

"What luck?" she cried. "I promised mother I would not go inside the swamp alone, and will you look at the cocoons I've found! There are more just screaming for me to come get them, because the leaves will fall with the first frost, and then the jays and crows will begin to tear them open. I haven't much time, since I'm going to school. You will go with me, Pete! Please say yes! Just a little way!"

"What are those things?" asked the man, his keen black eyes fast upon her.

"They are the cases these big caterpillars spin for winter, and in the spring they come out great night moths, and I can sell them. Oh, Pete, I can sell them for enough to take me through high school and dress me so like the rest that I don't look different, and if I have very good luck I can save some for college. Pete, please go with me?"

"Why don't you go like you always have?"

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