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A GIRL OF THE LIMBERLOST

By GENE STRATTON-PORTER

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SYNOPSIS

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

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

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

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

Elinora 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 Elinora 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 Elinora's luncheon. Wesley, troubled by Corson's warning, investigates.

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

Margaret finds Billy mischievous, but her heart softens, and he is adopted. Pete helps Elinora 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 Elinora. The girl had been so late that her mother reached the Sinton gate and came up the path until the picture inside became visible. Elinora 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 Elinora holding him and hear his excited talk. Sinton's face was drawn and haggard and Margaret's set and defiant. A very imp of versatility 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 assuredly. 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.

Katherine 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 Elinora 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 not be a doubt.

"You like boys!" exulted 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 goodbye to me?" asked Sinton, with a great gulp in his throat.

Billy held tight to Mrs. Comstock and Elinora.

"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 Elinora 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 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 in the carriage and have a great time. Won't you stay with us?"

Billy drew away from Mrs. Comstock and Elinora.

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 always?" he demanded.

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

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

"Yes, son 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 Elinora and her mother went down the road in the moonlight, and every few rods Mrs. Comstock laughed aloud.

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

"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, Elinora, 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



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?"

"Well, the truth is, I had a little scare," said Elinora. "I never did mean to go alone. Sometimes I sort of wandered farther than I intended, chasing things. You know Duncan gave me Freckles' books, and I have been gathering moths like he did. Lately I found I could sell them. If I can make a complete collection I can get \$300 for it. Three such collections would take me almost through college and I've four years in the high school yet. That's a long time. I might get them."

"Can every kind there be found here?"

"No; not all of them, but when I get more than I need of one kind I can trade them with collectors farther north and west so I can complete sets. It's the only way I see to earn the money. Look what I have already. Big gray ecopropus come from this kind, brown polyphemus from that and green luna from these. You aren't working on Sunday. Go with me just an hour, Pete!"

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.

"You didn't tell me what scared you," he said.

"Oh, I thought I did! Why, you know, I had Freckles' box packed full of moths and specimens, and one evening I sold some to the Bird Woman. Next morning I found a note telling me it wasn't safe to go inside the swamp. That sort of scared me. I think I'll go alone rather than miss the chance, but I'd be so happy if you would take care of me. Then I could go anywhere I chose, because if I minded you could pull me out. You will take care of me, Pete?"

That was the finishing stroke.

"Yes, I'll take care of you," promised Pete Corson.

"Goody!" said Elinora. "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 Elinora. 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 Elinora discovered. Then he found one.

"Is this the kind of thing you are looking for?" he asked bashfully as he presented a wild cherry twig.

"Oh, Pete, that's a promethea! I didn't even hope to find one."

"What's the bird like?" asked Pete.

"Almost black wings," said Elinora, "with clay colored edges and the most wonderful wine colored flush over the under side if it's a male and stronger wine above and below if it's a female. Oh, aren't I happy?"

"How would it do to make what you have into a bunch that we could leave here and come back for them?"

"That would be all right."

Relieved of his load, Pete began work. First he narrowly examined

the cocoons Elinora 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 Elinora forgot the moths in watching him. Presently she was carrying the traps 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.

When the Sintons had taken Mrs. Comstock home they stopped to see if Elinora was safe. She was not at home, and they had not seen her along the way. Mrs. Comstock called about the edge of her woods and received no reply. Then Sinton turned and drove back to the Limberlost. He left Margaret and Mrs. Comstock holding the

[Continued on page 7, Col. 1.]

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