

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...

When Elnora was born her father was drowned in a swamp, embittering her mother's life...

Elnora, getting her books cheaply, finds a market with the Bird Woman for but-terflies, 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...

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

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

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. Fete helps Elnora to collect specimens. She buys a Mark Twain book for her mother.

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.

Elnora, having musical talent, is told by Margaret of her father's violin in secret keeping. Margaret gets the violin for the girl.

Her high school course completed, Elnora needs money for graduation expenses. She needs two yellow Emperor moths to complete a collection. Graduation exercises begin.

Mrs. Comstock will not help Elnora to get a graduation gown. The girl is dressed by the Bird Woman, but Mrs. Comstock later gives hand embroidered garments to her.

She ran upstairs and in an incredibly short time came down wearing one of her gingham school dresses. With a cold, hard face she passed her mother and went into the night...

A half hour later Margaret and Billy stopped for Mrs. Comstock with the carriage. She had determined fully that she would not go before they called. With the sound of their voices a sort of horror of being left seized her, so she put on her hat, locked the door and went out to them.

Wesley was waiting before the big church to take care of the team. As they stood watching the people enter the building Mrs. Comstock felt herself growing ill without knowing why. When they went inside among the lights, saw the flower decked stage and the masses of finely dressed people she grew no better. She could hear Margaret and Billy softly commenting on what was being done.

"That first chair in the very front row is Elnora's," exulted Billy. "cos she's got the highest grades and so she gets to lead the procession to the platform."

"The first chair?" "Lead the procession!" Mrs. Comstock was dumfounded. A wave of positive illness swept over her. What had she done? What would become of Elnora?

CHAPTER XV.

Wherein Elnora is Graduated With the Bird Woman's Help.

AS Elnora rode to the city she answered Wesley's questions in monosyllables so that he thought she was nervous or rehearsing her speech and did not care to talk. Several times the girl tried to tell him and realized that if she said the first word it would bring a torrent of tears. The Bird Woman opened the screen and stared unbelievably.

"Why, I thought you would be ready; you are so late!" she said. "If you have waited to dress here we will have to hurry."

"I have nothing to put on," said Elnora.

In bewilderment the Bird Woman drew her inside.

"Did-did" she faltered, "did you think you would wear that?"

"No. I thought I would telephone Ellen that there had been an accident and I could not come. I don't know yet how to explain. I'm too sick to think. Oh, do you suppose I can get something made by Tuesday so that I can graduate?"

"Yes, and you'll get something on you tonight, so that you can lead your class, as you have done for four years. Go to my room and take off that gingham quickly. Anna, drop everything and come help me."

The Bird Woman ran to the telephone and called Ellen Brownlee.

"Elnora has had an accident. She will be a little late," she said. "You

have got to make them wait. Have them play an extra musical number before the march."

Then she turned to the maid. "Tell Benson to have the carriage at the gate just as soon as he can get it there. Then come to my room. Bring the thread box from the sewing room, that roll of wide white ribbon on the cutting table and gather all the white pins from every dresser in the house. But first come with me a minute."

"I want that trunk with the Swamp Angel's stuff in it from the cedar closet," she panted as they reached the top of the stairs.

They hurried down the hall together and dragged the big trunk to the Bird Woman's room. She opened it and began tossing out white stuff.

"How lucky that she left these things!" she cried. "Here are white shoes, gloves, stockings, fans, everything."

"I am all ready but a dress," said Elnora.

The Bird Woman began opening closets and pulling out drawers and boxes. "I think I can make it this way," she said.

She snatched up a creamy lace yoke with long sleeves that recently had been made for her and held it out. Elnora slipped into it, and the Bird Woman began smoothing out wrinkles and sewing in pins. It fitted very well with a little lapping in the back. Next, from among the Angel's clothing she caught up a white silk waist with low neck and elbow sleeves, and Elnora put it on. It was large enough, but distressingly short in the waist, for the Angel had worn it at a party when she was sixteen. The Bird Woman loosened the sleeves and pushed them to a puff on the shoulders, catching them in places with pins. She began on the wide draping of the yoke, fastening it front, back and each shoulder.

She pulled down the waist and pinned it. Next came a soft white silk dress skirt of her own. By pinning her waist band quite four inches above Elnora's, the Bird Woman could secure a perfect Empire sweep with the clinging silk. Then she began with the wide white ribbon that was to trim a new frock for herself, bound it three times around the high waist effect she had managed, tied the ends in a knot and let them fall to the floor in a beautiful sash.

"Elnora," she said, "forgive me, but tell me truly, is your mother so extremely poor as to make this necessary?"

"No," answered Elnora. "She is—is different."

The Bird Woman turned the girl facing the tall mirror.

"Oh!" panted Elnora. "Is that me? You are a genius! Why, I will look as well as any of them."

The organ began rolling out the march as they came in sight. Elnora took her place at the head of the procession, while every one wondered.

Mrs. Comstock gripped her hands together and shut her eyes. It seemed an eternity to the suffering woman before Margaret caught her arm and whispered: "Oh, Kate! For any sake look at her! Here! The aisle across!"

Mrs. Comstock opened her eyes and, directing them where she was told, gazed intently and slid down in her seat on the verge of a collapse. She was saved by Margaret's tense grip and her command, "Here, idiot, stop that!"

In the blaze of light Elnora climbed the steps to the palm embowered platform, crossed it and took her place. Sixty young men and women, each of them dressed the best possible, followed her. There were many, fine looking men in that class which Elnora led. There were girls of beauty and grace, but not one of them was handsomer or clothed in better taste than she.

Billy thought the time would never come when Elnora would see him, but at last she caught his eye, then Mar-

get and Wesley got faint signs of recognition in turn, but there was no softening of the girl's face and no hint of a smile when she saw her mother.

Heart sick, Katharine Comstock gripped her seat and tried to prove to herself that she was justified in what she had done, but she could not.

When at last the exercises were over she climbed into the carriage and rode home without a word. She did not hear what Margaret and Billy were saying. She scarcely heard Sinton, who drove behind, when he told her

that Elnora would not be home until Wednesday. Early the next morning Mrs. Comstock was on her way to Onabasha. She was waiting when the Brownlee store opened. She examined ready made white dresses, but they had only one of the right size, and it was marked \$40. Mrs. Comstock did not hesitate over the price, but whether the dress would be suitable. She would have to ask Elnora. She inquired her way to the home of the Bird Woman and knocked.

"Is Elnora Comstock here?" she asked the maid.

"Yes, but she is still in bed. I was told to let her sleep as long as she would."

"Maybe I could sit here and wait," said Mrs. Comstock. "I want to see about getting her a dress for tomorrow. I am her mother."

"Then you don't need wait or worry," said the girl cheerfully. "There are two women up in the sewing room at work on a dress for her right now. It will be done in time, and it will be a beauty."

Mrs. Comstock turned and trudged back to the Limberlost. The bitterness in her soul became a physical actuality and water would not wash the taste of wormwood from her lips. She was too late. She was not needed. Another woman was mothering her girl. Another woman would prepare a beautiful dress such as Elnora had worn last night. The girl's love and gratitude would go to her. Mrs. Comstock tried the old process of blaming someone else, but she felt no better. She nursed her grief as closely as ever in the long days of the girl's absence.

Among Elnora's graduation gifts was a queerly shaped package brought to the Bird Woman's by Billy. The Bird Woman bent over her as she opened it and tested the fabric with her fingers.

"Why, bless my soul!" she cried. "Hand woven, hand embroidered linen, fine as silk. It's priceless! I haven't seen such things in years. My mother had garments like those when I was a child, but my sisters had them cut up for collars, belts and fancy waists while I was small. Look at the exquisite work!"

"Where could it have come from?" cried Elnora.

She shook out a petticoat with a hand wrought ruffle a foot deep, then an old fashioned chemise the neck and sleeve work of which was elaborate and perfectly wrought. On the breast was pinned a note that she hastily opened.

"I was married in these," it read, "and I had intended to be buried in them, but perhaps it would be more sensible for you to graduate and get married in them yourself if you would like. Your mother."

"From my mother!" Wide eyed, Elnora looked at the Bird Woman. "Do you suppose she can be insane?"

"Yes," said the Bird Woman, "stark, staring mad—wildly insane if she does not love you and care what becomes of you."

Elnora arose and held the petticoat to her. "Will you look at it!" she cried. "Only imagine her not getting my dress ready and then turning around and sending me such a petticoat as this! Ellen would pay \$100 for it and never blink. I suppose mother has had it all my life, and I never saw it before."

"Go take your bath and put on those things," said the Bird Woman. "For-

get everything and be happy. She is not insane; she is embittered."

Soon Elnora was ready for her dress. She never had looked so well as when she again headed the procession across the flower and palm decked stage of the high school auditorium. When she looked into the eyes of a white faced woman next to Wesley and Margaret she slipped a hand to her side and raised her skirt the fraction of an inch, just enough to let the embroidered edge of a petticoat show a trifle. When she saw the look of relief which flooded her mother's face Elnora knew that forgiveness was in her heart and that she would go home in the morning.

It was late afternoon before she arrived, and a dray followed with a load of packages. Mrs. Comstock was overwhelmed. She sat half dazed and made Elnora show her each costly and beautiful or simple and useful gift.

(Continued on page 7, Col. 1.)

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