

A GIRL OF THE LIMBERLOST

By GENE STRAITTON-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 crowned in a swamp, smothering her mother's life.

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.

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'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.

Billy, a bright but untrained little chap, with a shiftless father and hungry brother and sister, gets Elnora's luncheon.

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.

Her high school course completed, Elnora needs money for graduation expenses.

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.

Mrs. Comstock ignorantly destroys the moth needed by Elnora. She learns her husband was unfaithful and regrets her unkindness to Elnora.

Mrs. Comstock and Elnora, hunting specimens, are joined by a young man who offers his help.

[Continued from last week.]

CHAPTER XIX. Wherein Philip Ammon is Shown Limberlost Violets.

AMMON looked at the girl in wonder. In face and form she was as lovely as any one of her age and type he had ever seen.

Her school work far surpassed that of most girls of her age he knew. She differed in other ways. This vast store of learning she had gathered from field and forest was a wealth of attraction no other girl possessed.

Her frank matter of fact manner was an inheritance from her mother, but there was something more. Once, as they talked he thought "sympathy" was the word to describe it and again "comprehension."

As they went along the path they reached a large silene covered pool surrounded by decaying stumps and logs thickly covered with water hyacinths and blue flags.

"Is that the place?" he asked. Elnora assented. "The doctor told you?"

"Yes. It was tragic. Is that pool really bottomless?"

"So far as we ever have been able to discover."

"And you were born here?" He had not intended to voice that thought.

"Yes," she said looking into his eyes. "Just in time to prevent my mother from saving the life of my father. She came near never forgiving me. A little farther along is my violet bed. I want you to see."

She led him into a swampy half open space in the woods, stopped and stepped aside. Ammon uttered a cry of surprised delight. A few decaying logs were scattered around, the grass grew in tufts long and fine.

Blue flags waved, clusters of cowslips nodded gold heads, but the whole earth was purple with a thick blanket of violets nodding from stems a foot in length. Elnora knelt and slipping her fingers through the leaves and grasses to the roots, gathered a few violets and gave them to Philip.

"Can your city greenhouses surpass them?" she asked. "Ammon sat on a log to examine the blooms. "They are superb!" he said. "I never saw such length of stem or such rank leaves, while the flowers are the deep-

est blue, the truest violet I ever saw growing wild. They are colored exactly like the eyes of the girl I am going to marry."

Elnora handed him several others to add to those he held. "She must have wonderful eyes," she commented.

"No other blue eyes are quite so beautiful," he said. "In fact, she is altogether lovely."

"It is customary for a man to think the girl he is going to marry lovely. I wonder if I should find her so."

"You would," said Ammon. "No one ever fails to. She is tall as you, very slender, but perfectly rounded; you know about her eyes; her hair is black and wavy, while her complexion is clear and flushed with red."

Elnora knelt among the flowers as she looked at him. "Why, she must be the most beautiful girl in the whole world," she cried. Ammon laughed.

"No, indeed," he said. "She is not a particle better looking in her way than you are in yours. She is a type of dark beauty, but you are just as perfect. She is unusual in her combination of black hair and violet eyes, although every one thinks them black at a little distance. You are quite as unusual with your fair face, black brows and brown hair. Indeed, I know many people who would prefer your bright head to her dark one. It's all a question of taste—and being engaged to the girl," he added.

"Edith has a birthday soon. If these last will you let me have a box of them to send her?"

"I will help gather and pack them for you, so they will carry nicely. Is she interested in nature?"

"What interests Edith Carr? Let me think. First, I believe she takes pride in being just a little handsomer and better dressed than any girl of her set. She is interested in having a beautiful home, fine appointments about her, in being petted, praised and the acknowledged leader of society. She likes to find new things which amuse her and to always and in all circumstances have her own way about everything."

"Good gracious!" cried Elnora, starting at him. "But what does she do? How does she spend her time?"

"Spend her time?" repeated Ammon. "Well, she would call that a joke. Her days are never long enough. There is endless shopping to find the pretty things, regular visits to the dressmakers, calls, parties, theaters, entertainments. She is always rushed. I never get to see half as much of her as I would like."

"But I mean work," persisted Elnora. "In what is she interested that is useful to the world?"

"Me!" cried Ammon promptly. "I can understand that," laughed Elnora. "What I can't understand is how you can be in"—She stopped short in confusion, but she saw that he had finished the sentence as she had intended. "I beg your pardon," she cried. "I didn't mean to say that. But I cannot understand these people I hear about who live only for their own amusement. Perhaps it is very great. To me it seems the only pleasure in this world worth having is the joy we get out of living for those we love and those we can help. I hope you are not angry with me."

Ammon sat silently looking far away, with deep thought in his eyes. "You are angry," faltered Elnora. His look came back to her as she knelt before him among the flowers and he gazed at her steadily.

"No doubt I should be," he said, "but the fact is I am not. I cannot understand a life purely for personal pleasure myself. But she is only a girl, and this is her playtime. When she is a woman in her own home, then she will be different, will she not?"

Elnora never resembled her mother so closely as when she answered that question.

"I would have to be well acquainted with her to know, but I should hope so. To make a real home for a tired business man is a very different kind of work from that required to be a leader of society. It demands different talent and education. Of course, she means to change, or she would not have promised to make a home for you. I suspect our dope is cool now. Let's go try for some butterflies."

"You should hear my sister Polly!" said Ammon. "This was her last year in college. Lunches and sororities were all I heard her mention, until Tom Levering came on deck; now he is the leading subject."

"Is Edith Carr a college girl?"

"No. She is the very selectest kind of a private boarding school girl."

As they went back along the path together Elnora talked of many things, but Ammon answered absently. Evidently he was thinking of something else. But the moth bait recalled him, and he was ready for work as they made their way back to the woods. He wanted to try the Limberlost, but Elnora was firm about keeping on home ground. She did not tell him that lights hung in the swamp would be a signal to call up a band of men whose presence she dreaded. So they set out, Ammon carrying the dope, Elnora the net, Billy and Mrs. Comstock following with cyanide boxes and lanterns.

First they tried for butterflies and captured several fine ones with little trouble. They also called swarms of ants, beetles, bees and flies. When it grew dusk Mrs. Comstock and Ammon went to prepare supper. Elnora and Billy remained until the butterflies went to bed. Then they lighted the lanterns, repainted the trees and followed the home trail.

Mrs. Comstock and Elnora were finishing breakfast the next morning when they heard a cheery whistle down the road. Elnora with surprised eyes looked at her mother.

It was just sunrise, but the musician was Philip Ammon. He looked stronger than yesterday.

"I hope I am not too early," he said. "I am consumed with anxiety to learn if we have made a catch."

"We will have to wander along the roads and around the edge of the Limberlost today," said Elnora. "Mother is making strawberry preserves, and she can't come until she finishes. Suppose we go down to the swamp, and I'll show you what is left of the flower room that Terrence O'More, the big lumberman of Great Rapids, made when he was a homeless boy here. He was called Freckles. Of course, you have heard the story?"

"Yes, and I've met the O'Mores, who are frequently in Chicago society."

They went down the road to the swamp, climbed the snake fence, followed the path to the old trail and then turned south along it. Elnora indicated to Ammon the trail with remnants of sagging barbed wire.

"It was ten years ago," she said. "I was just a little schoolgirl, but I wandered widely even then, and no one cared. I saw him often. He had been in a city institution all his life, when he took the job of keeping limberlost thieves out of this swamp, before many trees had been cut. It was a strong man's work and he was a frail boy, but he grew harder as he lived out of doors, and he won."

"Some days his face was dreadfully sad, some days it was so determined a little child could see the force in it, and once it was radiant. That day the Swamp Angel was with him. I can't tell you what she was like. I never saw any one who resembled her. He stopped near here to show her a bird's nest. Then they went on to a sort of flower room he had made, and he sang for her. By the time he left I had got bold enough to come out on the trail, and I met the big Scotchman Freckles lived with. He saw me catching moths and butterflies, so he took me to the flower room and gave me everything there. I don't dare come alone often, and so I can't keep it up as he did, but you can see something of how it was."

Elnora led the way and Ammon followed. The outlines of the room were not distinct, because many of the trees were gone, but Elnora showed how it had been as nearly as she could.

"The swamp is almost ruined now," she said. "The maples, walnuts and cherries are all gone. The talking trees are the only things left worth while."

"The 'talking trees'! I don't understand," commented Ammon.

"No wonder!" laughed Elnora. "They are my discovery. You know all trees whisper and talk during the summer, but there are two that have so much to say they keep on the whole winter when the others are silent. The beeches and oaks so love to talk they cling to their dead, dry leaves. In the winter the winds are stiffest and blow most so these trees whisper, chatter, sob, laugh and at times roar until the sound is deafening. When the air is cold and clear, the world very white and the hark music swelling, then the talking trees tell the strengthening, uplifting things."

"You wonderful girl!" cried Ammon. "What a woman you will be!"

"If I am a woman at all worth while it will be because I have had such wonderful opportunities," said Elnora. "Not every girl is driven to the forest to learn what God has to say there. Here are the remains of Freckles' room. The time the Angel came here he sang to her and I listened. I never heard music like that. No wonder she loved him. Everyone who knew him did, and they do yet. Try that log, it makes a fairly good seat. This old store box was his treasure house, just as it's now mine. I will show you my dearest possession. I do not dare take it home because mother can't overcome her dislike for it. It was my father's, and in some ways I am like him. This is the strongest."

CHAPTER XX. Wherein the Limberlost Sings For Ammon.

ELNORA lifted the violin and began to play. She wore a school dress of green gingham, with the sleeves rolled to the elbows. She seemed a part of the setting all around her. Her head shone like a small dark sun, and her face never had seemed so rose flushed and fair. From the instant she drew the bow her lips

parted and her eyes fastened on something far away in the swamp, and never did she give more of that impression of feeling for her notes and repeating something audible only to her. Ammon was too near to get the best effect. He arose and stepped back several yards, leaning against a large tree, looking and listening with all his soul.

As he changed positions he saw that Mrs. Comstock had followed them and was standing on the trail, where she could not have helped hearing everything Elnora had said. So to Ammon before her and the mother watching on the trail Elnora played the song of the Limberlost. To the man it was a revelation. He stood so stunned he forgot Mrs. Comstock. He tried to realize what a great city audience would say to that music from such a player with a like background, and he could not imagine.

He was wondering what he dared say, how much he might express, when the last note fell and the girl laid the violin in the case, closed the door, locked it and hid the key in the rotting wood at the end of a log. Then she came to him. Ammon stood looking at her curiously.

"I wonder," he said, "what people would say to that?"

"I did it in public once," said Elnora. "I think they liked it fairly well. I had a note yesterday offering me the leadership of the high school orchestra in Onabasha. I would gladly play for nothing just to be able to express myself."

"Give up the college idea," said Ammon. "Your mind does not need that sort of development. It is far past it."

"Do you really mean that you would give up all idea of going to college, if you were me?"

"If you could only realize it, my girl, you are in college, and have been always. You are in the school of experience, and it has taught you to think, and given you a heart. God knows I envy the man who wins it! I wouldn't even advise you to read too many books on your lines. You get your stuff first hand, and you know that you are right. What you should do is to begin early to practice self expression. Don't wait too long to tell us about the woods as you know them."

Not until then did he remember that Mrs. Comstock was somewhere very near.

"Should we go out to the trail and see if your mother is coming?" he asked.

"Here she is now," said Elnora. "Gracious, it's a mercy I got that violin put away in time! I didn't expect her so soon," whispered the girl, as she turned and went toward her mother. Mrs. Comstock's face was a study as she looked at Elnora.

"Have you found anything yet?" she asked.

"Nothing that I can show you," said Elnora. "I am not sure but I have found an idea that will revolutionize the whole course of my work, thought and ambitions."

"Ambitions! My, what a hefty word!" laughed Mrs. Comstock. "I guess we better let ambition lie. I've always heard it was safest asleep. If you ever get a bonafide attack, it will be time to attend it. Let's hunt specimens. It is June. Philip and I are in the grades. What is the miracle of June? What one thing epitomizes the whole month?"

"The birth of these big night moths," said Elnora promptly. Ammon clapped his hands. The tears started to Mrs. Comstock's eyes. She took Elnora in her arms and kissed her forehead.

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