

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 Sinton family 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 Sinton family 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'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.

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.

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

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

The young man is Philip Ammon of Chicago, seeking health. He is engaged to Edith Carr, a society girl, and has a sister, Polly, engaged to Tom Levering. He intends to send violets to Edith on her birthday. Elnora is appointed teacher of natural history.

Philip, interested in Elnora, forgets the violets, but Elnora sends them to him at his temporary home in Onabasha.

The young man, called home, asks Elnora to kiss him goodbye. She refuses, although she loves him. Elnora still needs the Emperor.

[Continued from last week.] "This is the place," said the boy, and went his way, whistling. Elnora was three blocks from the high school building on the same street. She was before a quaint old house, fresh with paint and covered with vines.

Inside she could see bare polished floors, walls freshly papered in low toned harmonious colors, straw rugs and madras curtains. It seemed to be a restful, homelike place to which she had come, and a second later down an open stairway came a tall, dark eyed woman with cheeks faintly pink and a crown of fluffy snow white hair.

Elnora stepped inside the door "Mother!" she cried. "You my mother! I don't believe it! You are perfectly beautiful, and this house is a little paradise, but how will we ever pay for it? We can't afford it!"

"Humph! Have you forgotten I telegraphed you I'd found some money I didn't know about? All I've done is paid for and plenty more to settle for all I propose to do."

Mrs. Comstock glanced around with supreme satisfaction.

"I may get homesick as a pup before spring," she said, "but if I do I can go back. If I don't I'll sell some timber and put a few oil wells where they don't show much. I can have land enough cleared for a few fields and put a tenant on our farm, and we will buy this and settle here. It's for sale."

Mrs. Comstock invited Elnora's friends to visit her and proved herself a bright and interesting hostess. She digested a subject before she spoke and when she advanced a view her point was sure to be original and tersely expressed. Before three months people waited to hear what she had to say.

Elnora never mentioned Philip Ammon, neither did Mrs. Comstock. Early in December came a note and a big box from him. It contained several books on nature subjects which would be a great help in school work and a number of conveniences Elnora could not afford. Soon after Elnora wrote Ammon:

Dear Friend—I am writing to thank you for the books and the box of conveniences sent me for my work. I can use every-

thing with fine results. Hope I am giving good satisfaction in my position. You will be interested to learn that when the summer's work was classified and planned I again had my complete collection save a yellow Emperor. I have tried everywhere I know. So has the Bird Woman. We cannot find a pair for sale. Fate is against me, at least this season. I shall have to wait until next year and try again.

Thank you very much for helping me with my collection and for the books and things. Sincerely yours, Elnora Comstock.

Ammon was disappointed over that note and instead of keeping it he tore it into bits and dropped them into the wastebasket.

Throughout the winter Elnora and her mother enjoyed the city thoroughly and the change of life it afforded. But signs of spring did wonderful things to the hearts of the country bred women. They decided to keep the city house during the summer, but to go back to the farm to live just as soon as school closed.

CHAPTER XXII.

Wherein Philip Ammon is Scorned by Edith Carr, and Hart Henderson Appears on the Scene.

EDITH CARR stood in a vine inclosed side veranda of the Lake Shore clubhouse waiting while Philip Ammon gave some important orders. In a few days she would sail for Paris to select a wonderful trousseau she had planned for her marriage in October. Tonight Philip was giving a club dance in her honor. As she stood waiting she smiled softly. She was robed in a French cretonne suggested and designed by Philip. He had said to her, "I know a competent judge who says the distinctive feature of June is her exquisite big night moths. I want you to be the very essence of June that night, as you will be the embodiment of love. Be a moth. The most beautiful of them is either the pale green Luna or the yellow Imperialis. Be my moon lady or my gold Empress."

Now she stood, tall, lithe, of grace in-born, her dark waving hair high piled and crossed by gold bands studded with amethysts and at one side an enameled lavender orchid rimmed with diamonds, which flashed and sparkled. The soft yellow robe of lightest weight velvet fitted her form perfectly, while from each shoulder fell a great velvet wing lined with lavender and fecked with embroidery of that color in imitation of the moth. Philip had said that her gloves, fan and slippers must be lavender because the feet of the moth were that color. These accessories had been made to order and embroidered with gold. In her heart she thought of herself as "Imperialis Regalis," as the Yellow Empress. But in all the fragmentary thought crossing her brain the one that never came was that of Philip Ammon as the emperor, Philip the king of her heart, and at least her equal in all things.

"Ah, my luck!" cried a voice behind her. Edith Carr turned and smiled exquisitely.

"I thought you were on the ocean," she said.

"I only reached the dock," replied the man, "when I had a letter that recalled me by the first limited. Edith, you are the most superb woman in every respect that I have ever seen. One glimpse is worth the whole journey."

He half closed his eyes and smilingly stared straight at her. He was taller than she, a lean man, with close cropped light hair, steel gray eyes, a square chin and "man of the world" written all over him.

Edith Carr flushed. "I thought you realized when you went away that you were to stop that Hart Henderson," she cried.

"I did, but this letter of which I tell you called me back to start it all over again. One of your most intimate chums wrote it. It contained the hazard that possibly I had given up too soon. It said that in a fit of petulance you had broken your engagement with Ammon twice this winter, and he had come back because he knew you did not really mean it. I have come back to haunt you until the ceremony is over. Then I go, not before. I was insane!"

The girl laughed merrily. "Not half so insane as you are now, Hart!" she cried easily. "You know that Philip Ammon has been devoted to me all my life. Well, now I'll tell you something else, because this looks serious for you. I love him with all my heart. Not while he lives shall he know it, and I will laugh at him if you tell him, but the fact remains. I intend to marry him, but no doubt I shall tease him constantly. It's good for a man to be uncertain. If you could see Ammon's face at the quarterly return of his ring you would understand the fun of it. My little fits of temper don't count with Phil. He's been raised on them."

"Just the same I'll wait and see it an accomplished fact," said Henderson. "And, Edith, because I love you with the sort of love it is worth a woman's while to inspire I want your happiness before my own. Go careful from now on. Don't strain that patched engagement of yours any further. I've known Philip all my life. He loves you, yes! He is long suffering for you, yes! But men know he has a limit. When the limit is reached he will stand fast, and all the powers can't move him. You don't seem to think it, but you can go too far."

"Is that all?" laughed Edith Carr sarcastically.

"No, there is one thing more," said Henderson. "Here or hereafter, now and so long as I breathe, I am your slave. If you need me it is not necessary to speak; only give me the faintest sign. All your life I will be somewhere near you waiting for it."

At that instant Philip Ammon entered. He was in full evening dress and exceptionally handsome. "Everything

is ready," he said. "They are waiting for us to lead the march. It is formed." Edith Carr smiled entrancingly. "Do you think I am ready?"

Philip looked what he thought and offered his arm. Edith Carr nodded carelessly to Henderson and moved away.

The last half of the program was well under way. Never had girl been more complimented and petted in the same length of time than Edith Carr. A partner's dance was called and the floor was filled with couples waiting for the music. Ammon stood whispering delightful things to Edith facing him. From out of the night, in at the wide front entrance to the pavilion there swept in slow, wavering flight a great yellow moth and fluttered toward the center cluster of glaring electric lights.

"Why, isn't that?"—she began excitedly.

"It's a yellow Emperor! This is fate!" cried Ammon. "The last one Elnora needs for her collection. I must have it! Excuse me!"

He ran toward the light. "Hats! Handkerchiefs! Fans! Anything!" he panted. "Every one hold up something and stop that!"

"He wants it for Edith!" ran in a murmur around the hall. The girl's face flushed, while she bit her lip in vexation. Instantly every one began holding up something to keep the moth from flying back into the night. One fan held straight before it served, and the moth gently settled on it.

"Hold steady!" cried Ammon. "Don't move for your life!" He rushed toward the moth, made a quick sweep and held it up between his fingers. "All right!" he called. "Thanks, every one! Excuse me a minute."

He ran to the office.

"An ounce of gasoline, quick!" he ordered. "A cigar box, a cork and the glue bottle."

He poured some glue into the bottom of the box, set the cork in it firmly, dashed the gasoline over the moth repeatedly, planned it to the cork, poured the remainder of the liquid over it, closed the box and fastened it. Then he laid a bill on the counter.

"Pack that box with cork around it in one twice its size, tie securely and express to this address at once."

"Keep the change," called Ammon as he ran back to the pavilion.

Edith Carr stood where he left her, thinking rapidly. She heard the murmur that went up when Philip started to capture the exquisite golden creature she was impersonating. She saw the flash of surprise that went over unrestrained faces when he ran from the room without even showing it to her.

He had spoken of a country girl he had met who played the violin wonderfully, and at times he had showed a disposition to exalt her as a standard of womanhood. Miss Carr had ignored

what he said and talked of something else. It was that girl who was collecting moths! No doubt she was the competent judge who was responsible for the yellow costume Philip had devised. Had Edith Carr been in her room she would have torn off the dress at the thought.

Being in a circle of her best friends, which to her meant her keenest rivals and hardest critics, she grew rigid with anger. Her breath hurt her painful chest. No one thought to speak to the musicians, and, seeing the floor filled, they began the waltz.

Edith Carr grew very white as she stood alone. The idolized only daughter of the Carr family hoped that she would drop dead from mortification, but nothing happened. She was too perverse to step aside laughingly and say that she was waiting for Philip. Then came Tom Levering dancing with Polly Ammon. Being in the scales with the Ammon family, Tom scented trouble from afar, so he whispered to Polly. "Edith is standing in the middle of the floor, and she's awful mad about something."

They hurried to Edith. "Come, dear," said Polly. "We are going to wait with you until Phil gets back. Let's go for a drink. I am so thirsty!"

"My betrothed left me here," Edith said. "Here I shall remain until he returns for me, and then—he will be my betrothed no longer!"

Polly grasped Edith's arm. "Oh, Edith!" she implored. "Don't make a scene here, and tonight. He can explain! It's only a breath since I saw him go out. I thought he had returned."

"He has been gone just long enough to show every one of his guests that he will leave me standing alone, like a neglected fool, for any passing whim of his. Explain! His explanation would sound well! Do you know for whom he caught that moth? It is being sent to a girl he flirted with all last summer."

Speech unloosed the fountain. She stripped off her gloves to free her hands. At that instant the dancers parted to admit Philip. Instantly they stopped as they approached and with wondering faces walked in Edith and Philip, Polly and Tom.

"Mighty good of you to wait!" cried Ammon, his face beaming with delight over his success in capturing the yellow Emperor. "I thought when I heard the music you were going on."

"How did you think I was going on?" demanded Edith Carr in frigid tones.

"I thought you would step aside and wait a few seconds for me or dance with Henderson. It was most important to have that moth. It just completes a valuable collection for a person who needs the money. Come!"

He held out his arms.

"I 'step aside' for no one!" stormed

[Continued on page 7, Col. 1.]

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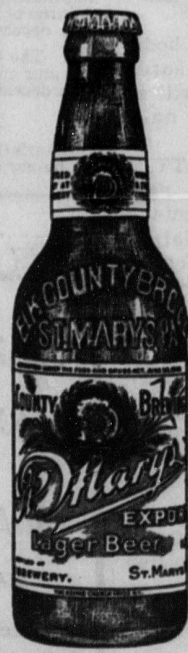
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