

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.

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. 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. 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.

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, secured 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 Emperors.

[Continued from last week.] A long time Philip Ammon sat in deep thought. At last he raised his head.

"Well, why not?" he said. "Years could make me no surer than I am now, and life is short. Please ask Banks to get me some coffee and toast, and I will bathe and dress so I can take the early train."

"Go to your bath. I will attend to your packing and everything. And Phil, if I were you I would leave no addresses."

"Not an address!" said Ammon. "Not even for Polly."

When the train pulled out the elder Ammon went home to find Hart Henderson waiting.

"Where is Phil?" he demanded. "He did not feel like facing his friends at present, and I am just back from driving him to the station. He said he might go to Siam or Patagonia. He would leave no address."

Henderson almost staggered. "He's not gone—and left no address? You don't mean it! He'll never forgive her!"

"Never is a long time, Hart," said Mr. Ammon. "And it seems even longer to those of us who are well acquainted with Phil. Last night was not the last straw. It was the whole straw stack. It crushed Phil so far as she is concerned."

Twice Henderson opened his lips to speak of Edith Carr's despair. Twice he looked into the stern, inflexible face of Mr. Ammon and could not betray her. He held out the ring.

"I have no instructions as to that," said the elder Ammon, drawing back. "Possibly Miss Carr would have it as a keepsake."

"I am sure not," said Henderson curtly. "Then suppose you return it to Peacock. I will phone him. He will give you the price of it, and you might add it to the children's fresh air fund."

"As you choose," said Henderson. "Good morning!"

Then he went to his home, but he could not think of sleep. He ordered breakfast, but he could not eat. He

paced the library for a time, but it was too small. Going out on the streets he walked until exhausted, then he called a hansom and was driven to his club. As he sauntered into the room an attendant hurried to him.

"You are wanted most urgently at the phone, Mr. Henderson," he said. "You have had three calls from Main 5770."

Henderson shivered as he picked down the receiver and gave the call. "Is that you, Hart?" came Edith's voice.

"Yes."

"Did you find Phil?"

"No; he has been home and gone again."

"Gone!"

The cry tore Henderson's heart. "Shall I come and tell you, Edith?"

"No. Tell me now."

"When I got to the house Banks said Mr. Ammon and Phil were out in the motor, so I waited. Mr. Ammon came back soon. Edith, are you alone?"

"Yes. Go on."

"Call your maid. I can't tell you until some one is with you."

"Tell me instantly!"

"Edith, he said he had been to the station. He said Phil had started to Siam or Patagonia, he didn't know which, and left no address. He said—"

Distinctly Henderson heard her fall. He set the buzzer ringing and in a few seconds heard voices, so he knew she had been found. Then he crept into a private den and shook with a hard, nervous chill.

The next day Edith Carr started on her trip to Europe. Henderson felt certain she hoped to meet Philip there. He was sure she would be disappointed, though he had no idea where Ammon could have gone. But after much thought he decided he would see Edith soonest by remaining at home, so he spent the summer in Chicago.

"Elnora," said Mrs. Comstock, "there's some one coming down the road."

"Coming here, do you think?"

"Yes; coming here, I suspect."

Elnora glanced quickly at her mother and then turned to the road as Philip Ammon reached the gate.

"Careful, mother," the girl instantly warned. "If you change your treatment of him a hair's breadth he will suspect. Come with me to meet him."

She dropped her work and sprang up. "Well, of all the delightful surprises!" she cried.

She was a trifle thinner than during the previous summer. On her face there was a more mature, patient look. He caught both hands where she offered but one.

"Elnora," he cried, "if you were engaged to me and we were at a ball among hundreds where I offended you very much and didn't even know I had done anything and if I asked you before all of them to let me explain, to forgive me, to wait, would your face grow distorted and unfamiliar with anger? Would you drop my ring on the floor and insult me repeatedly? Oh, Elnora, would you?"

Elnora's big eyes seemed to leap, while her face grew very white. She wrenched away her hands.

"Hush, Phil, hush!" she protested. "That fever has you again! You are



"Mrs. Comstock, I came here to ask Elnora to marry me."

dreadfully ill. You don't know what you are saying."

"I am sleepless and exhausted; I'm heartsick, but I am well as I ever was. Answer me, Elnora, would you?"

"Answer nothing!" cried Mrs. Comstock. "Hang your coat there on your nail, Phil, and come split some kindling. Elnora, clean away that stuff and set the table. Can't you see the boy is starved and tired? He's come home to rest and get a decent meal. Come on, Phil."

Mrs. Comstock marched away, and Ammon hung his coat in its old place and followed. Out of sight and hearing she turned on him.

"Do you call yourself a man or a hound?" she flared.

"Mrs. Comstock, I came here to ask Elnora to marry me."

"The more fool you, then!" cried Mrs. Comstock. "This time yesterday you were engaged to another woman, no doubt. Now, for some little flareup you come racing here to use Elnora as a tool to spite the other girl. A week of sane living and you will be sorry and ready to go back to Chicago or,

if you really are man enough to be sure of yourself, she will come to claim you. When you patch up your affairs and go sailing away together, where does my girl come in?"

"I am a lawyer, Mrs. Comstock," said Ammon. "It appeals to me as beneath your ordinary sense of justice to decide a case without hearing the evidence. It is due me that you hear me first."

"Hear your side?" flashed Mrs. Comstock. "I'd a heap sight rather hear the girl!"

"I wish to my soul that you had heard and seen her last night. Mrs. Comstock," said Ammon. "Then my way would be clear."

He gave his version of the previous night.

"Do you believe me?" he finished.

"Yes," said Mrs. Comstock.

"May I stay?"

"Oh, it looks all right for you, but what about her?"

"Nothing so far as I am concerned. Her plans were all made to start to Europe today. I suspect she is on the way by this time. Elnora is very sensible, Mrs. Comstock. Hadn't you better let her decide this?"

"The final decision rests with her, of course," admitted Mrs. Comstock. "But look you one thing! She's all I have. So far as I know you've always been a man and you may stay. But if you bring tears and heartache to her don't have the assurance to think I'll bear it tamely. I'll get right up and fight like a catamount if things go wrong for Elnora!"

"I have no doubt but you will," replied Ammon, "and I don't blame you in the least if you do. I have the utmost devotion to offer Elnora, a good home, fair social position, and my family will love her dearly. Think it over, I know it is sudden, but my father advised it."

They prepared and ate supper. Afterward they sat in the arbor and talked, or Elnora played until time for Ammon to go.

"Will you walk to the gate with me?" he asked Elnora as he arose.

"Not tonight," she answered lightly. "Come early in the morning if you like, and we will go over to Sleepy Snake creek and hunt moths and gather dandelions for dinner."

Ammon leaned toward her. "May I tell you tomorrow why I came?" he asked.

"I think not," replied Elnora. "The fact is I don't care why you came. It is enough for me that we are your very good friends and that in trouble you have found us a refuge. I fancy we had better live a week or two before you say anything. There is a possibility what you have to say may change in that length of time."

"It will not change one iota!" cried Ammon.

"Then it will have the grace of that much age to give it some small touch of favor," said the girl. "Come early in the morning."

She lifted the violin and began to play a dainty fairy dance.

"Well, bless my soul!" softly ejaculated the astounded Mrs. Comstock. "To think I was worrying for fear you couldn't take care of yourself!"

Elnora laughed as she played.

The month which followed was a repetition of the previous June, with moths, nights, specimen gathering and perfect nights filled with music, save that Philip was now Elnora's avowed suitor.

Edith Carr, sick at heart, sailed for Europe. At the end of a month Philip asked Elnora to be his wife, but she pleaded for more time, saying she must be absolutely sure of herself and of him before she could say yes. But she consented to wear a beautiful emerald ring which he had had sent from Chicago.

CHAPTER XXIV.

Wherein Chicago Comes to the Limberlost.

HONK, honk, honk! Hart Henderson set the alarm of the big automobile going as it shot from behind the trees lining the Brushwood road. The picture of a vine covered cabin, a great drooping tree, a green clad girl and a man bending over her very closely flashed into view. Edith Carr caught her breath with a snap. Polly Ammon gave Tom Levering a quick touch and wickedly winked at him.

Several days before Edith had returned from Europe suddenly. She and Henderson had called at the Ammon residence, saying that they were going to motor down to the Limberlost to see Philip a few hours and urged that Polly and Tom accompany them. Mrs. Ammon thought it better to have Polly along to support Philip than to allow him to confront Edith unexpectedly and alone. Polly was full of spirit. She did not like Edith and did not relish the thought of her as a sister. Two days before her father had extracted a promise of secrecy, given her Philip's address and told her to send him the finest emerald ring she could select. Polly knew how that ring would be used. What she did not know was that the girl who accompanied her went back to the store afterward, made an excuse to the clerk that she had been sent to be absolutely sure that the address was right and so secured it for Edith Carr.

Two days later Edith had induced Hart Henderson to take her to Onabasha. By the aid of maps they located the Comstock land and passed it merely to see the place. Henderson hated that trip and implored Edith not to take it, but she made no effort to conceal from him what she suffered, and it was more than he could endure.

The sunlight etched with distinctness the scene at the west end of the chain. Instinctively, to save Edith, Henderson set the whistle blowing. He had thought to go on to the city, but Polly Ammon stood, crying, "Phil,

Phil!" Tom Levering was on his feet shouting and waving, while Edith in her most imperial manner ordered him to turn into the lane leading through the woods beside the cabin.

"Fix it some way that I get a minute alone with her," she commanded as he stopped the car.

"That is my sister Polly, her fiancé Tom Levering, a friend of mine named Henderson and"—began Ammon.

"Edith Carr," volunteered Elnora.

"And Edith Carr," repeated Philip Ammon. "Elnora, be brave for my sake. Their coming can make no difference in any way. I won't let them stay but a few minutes. Come with me!"

"Do I look scared?" inquired Elnora serenely. "This is why you have not had your answer. I have been waiting just six weeks for that motor. You may bring them to me at the arbor."

She could see that Miss Carr was splendidly beautiful, while she moved with the hauteur and grace supposed to be the prerogatives of royalty. And she had instantly taken possession of Philip Ammon. But Ammon also had a brain which was working with rapidity. He knew Elnora was watching so he swung around to the others.

"Give her up, Tom," he cried. "I didn't know I wanted to see the little nuisance so badly, but I do. How are father and mother? Polly, be good to Elnora," he whispered.

"Um-huh," assented Polly. And aloud, "I never saw such a beauty. Thomas Asquith Levering, you come straight here and take my hand!"

Edith's move to compel Ammon to approach Elnora beside her had been easy to see; also its failure. Henderson stepped into Ammon's place as he turned to his sister. Instead of taking Polly's hand Levering ran to open the gate. Edith passed through first, but Polly darted in front of her on the run, with Phil holding her arm, and swept up to Elnora. Polly looked for the ring and saw it. That settled matters with her.

"You lovely, lovely, darling girl!" she cried, throwing her arms around Elnora and kissing her. With her lips near Elnora's ear, Polly whispered, "Sister—dear, dear sister!"

Elnora drew back, staring at Polly in confused amazement. She was a beautiful girl, dressed in some wonderful way. Her eyes were sparkling and dancing, and as she turned to make way for the others she kept one of Elnora's hands in hers. Edith bowed low, muttered something and touched Elnora's fingers. In that instant only pity was in Elnora's breast for the flashing dark beauty.

"Come into the shade," she urged. "You must have found it warm on these country roads. Won't you lay aside your dust coats and have a cool drink? Philip, would you ask mother to come and bring that pitcher in the springhouse?"

They entered the arbor, exclaiming at the dim, green coolness. Mrs. Comstock came deliberately, talking to Ammon as she approached. Elnora gave her one searching look, but could discover only an extreme brightness of eye to denote any unusual feeling. Polly instantly went to her and held up her face to be kissed. Mrs. Comstock's eyes twinkled, and she made the greeting hearty.

Soon the pitcher was empty, and Elnora picked it up and went to refill it. While she was gone Henderson asked Philip about some trouble he was having with his car. They went to the woods and began a minute examination to find a defect which did not exist. Polly and Levering were having an animated conversation with Mrs. Comstock. Henderson saw Edith arise, follow the garden path next the woods and stand waiting under the willow which Elnora would pass on her return. It was for that meeting he had made the trip. He got down on the ground, tore up the car, worked, asked for help and kept Philip busy screwing bolts and applying the oil can. All the time Henderson kept an eye on Edith and Elnora under the willow. But he took pains to lay the work he asked Philip to do where that scene would be out of his sight. When Elnora came around the corner with the pitcher she found herself facing Edith Carr.

"I want a minute with you," said Miss Carr.

"Very well," replied Elnora, walking on.

"Set the pitcher on the bench there," commanded Edith Carr as if speaking to a servant.

"I prefer not to offer my guests a warm drink," said Elnora. "I'll come back if you really wish to speak with me."

"I came solely for that," said Edith Carr.

"It would be a pity to travel so far in this dust and heat for nothing. I'll only be gone a second."

Elnora set the pitcher before her mother. "Please serve this," she said. "Miss Carr wishes to speak with me."

The girl slowly and gravely walked back to the willow.

"Will you be seated?" she asked politely.

Edith Carr glanced at the bench, while a shudder shook her.

"No. I prefer to stand," she said. "Did Mr. Ammon give you the ring you are wearing, and do you consider yourself engaged to him?"

"By what right do you ask such personal questions as those?" inquired Elnora.

"By the right of a betrothed wife. I have been promised to Philip Ammon ever since I wore short skirts. All our lives we have expected to marry. An agreement of years cannot be broken in one insane moment. Always he has loved me devotedly. Give me ten minutes with him and he will be mine for all time."

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