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A GIRL OF THE LIMBERLOST

By
GENE STRATTON-PORTER

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(Continued.)

added to her bank account. She slowly walked home, for the visit to the swamp had brought back full force the experience of the morning. Again and again she examined the crude little note, for she did not know what it meant, yet it bred vague fear.

CHAPTER VIII.

Wherein Mrs. Comstock Indulges In
"Frills" and Billy Reappears.

IT was Wesley Sinton who really wrestled with the problem as he drove about his business. He did not have to ask himself what it meant; he knew. The old Corson gang was still holding together. Elder members who had escaped the law had been joined by a younger brother of Jack's, and they met in the thickest of the few remaining fast places of the swamp to drink, gamble and loaf. Then, suddenly, there would be a robbery in some country house where a farmer that day had sold his wheat or corn and not paid a visit to the bank, or in some neighboring village.

The home of Mrs. Comstock and Elnora adjoined the swamp. Sinton's land lay next, and not another residence or man easy to reach in case of trouble. Whoever wrote that note had some human kindness in his breast, but the fact stood revealed that he feared his strength if Elnora was delivered into his hands. Where had he been the previous night when he heard that prayer? Was that the first time he had been in such proximity? Sinton drove fast, for he wished to reach the swamp before Elnora and the Bird Woman would go there for more moths.

At almost 4 he came to the case, and dropping on his knees studied the ground, every sense alert. He found two or three little heel prints. Those were made by Elnora or the Bird Woman. What Sinton wanted to learn was whether all the rest were the footprints of one man. It was easily seen they were not. There were deep even tracks made by fairly new shoes and others where a well worn heel cut deeper on the inside of the print than at the outer edge. Undoubtedly some of Corson's old gang were watching the case and the visits of the women to it. There was no danger that anyone would attack the Bird Woman. She never went to the swamp at night, and on her trips in the daytime every one knew that she carried a revolver, understood how to use it and pursued her work in a fearless manner.

Sinton was afraid for Elnora, yet he did not want to add the burden of fear to Katharine Comstock's trouble or to disturb the joy of Elnora in her work. He stopped at the cabin and slowly went up the walk. Mrs. Comstock was sitting on the front step with some sewing. She dropped her work on her lap, laid her hands on it and looked into his face with a sneer.

"You didn't let any grass grow under your feet," she said.

Sinton saw her white, drawn face and comprehended.

"I want to pay a debt and see about this opening of the ditch, Kate."

"You said you were going to prosecute me."

"Good gracious, Kate!" cried Sinton. "Is that what you have been thinking all day? I told you before I left yesterday that I would not need to do that. I want to ask you if you ever see anything about the swamp that makes you think the old Corson gang is still alive?"

"Can't say that I do," said Mrs. Comstock. "There's kind of dancing lights there sometimes, but I supposed it was just people passing along the road with lanterns."

"Kate, I have got to tell you something. Elnora stopped at the case this morning, and somebody had been into it in the night."

"Broke the lock?"

"No. Used a duplicate key. Today I heard there was a man here last night. I want to nose around a little."

Sinton went to the east end of the cabin and looked up at the window.

There was no way any one could have reached it without a ladder, for the logs were hewed and mortar filled the cracks even. Then he went to the west end. The willow faced him as he turned the corner. He examined the trunk carefully. There was no mistake about small particles of black swamp muck adhering to the sides of the tree. He reached the low branches and climbed the willow. There was earth on the large limb crossing Elnora's window. He stood on it, holding the branch as had been done the night before, and looked into the room. He could see very little, but he knew that if it had been dark outside and sufficiently light for Elnora to study inside he could have seen vividly. He brought his face close to the netting, and he could see the bed with its head to the east, at its foot the table with the

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children and the coast before it, and then he knew where the man had been who had heard Elnora's prayer.

Mrs. Comstock had followed around the corner and stood watching him. "Do you think some slinking hulk was up there peekin' in at Elnora?" she demanded indignantly.

"There is muck on the trunk and plenty on the limb," said Sinton. "Hain't you better get a saw and let me take this branch off?"

"No, I hain't," said Mrs. Comstock. "First place, Elnora's climbed from that window on that limb all her life, and it's hers; second place, no one gets ahead of me after I've had warning. Any crow that perches on that roost again will get its feathers somewhat scattered. Look along the fence there and see if you can find where he came in."

The place was easy to find as was a trail leading for some distance west of the cabin.

"You just go home and don't fret yourself," said Mrs. Comstock. "I'll take care of this. If you should hear the dinner bell at any time in the night you come down. But I wouldn't say anything to Elnora. She best keep her mind on her studies if she's going to school."

When the work was finished that night Elnora took her books and went to her room to prepare some lessons, but every few minutes she looked toward the swamp to see if there were lights near the case. Mrs. Comstock raked together the coals in the cooking stove, got out the lunch box, and, sitting down, she studied it grimly. At last she arose.

"Wonder how it would do to show Mag Sinton a frill or two," she murmured.

Mrs. Comstock was up early and without a word handed Elnora the luncheon case as she left the next morning.

"Thank you, mother," said Elnora and went on her way.

She walked down the road, looking straight ahead until she came to the corner, where she usually entered the swamp. She paused, glanced that way and smiled. Then she turned and looked back. There was no one coming in any direction. She kept to the road until well around the corner, then she stopped and sat on a grassy spot, laid her books beside her and opened the lunch box. She scarcely could believe her senses. Half the bread compartment was filled with dainty sandwiches of bread and butter sprinkled with the yolk of egg and the rest with three large slices of the most fragrant spice cake imaginable. The meat dish contained shaved cold ham, of which she knew the quality; the salad was tomatoes and celery, and the cup held pre-

served pear, clear as amber. There was milk in the bottle, two tissue wrapped cucumber pickles in the folding drinking cup and a fresh napkin in the ring. No lunch was ever daintier or more palatable. Of that Elnora was perfectly sure. And her mother had prepared it for her.

She glanced around her and then to her old refuge, the sky. "She does love me!" cried the happy girl. "Sure as you're born she loves me; she just hasn't found it out yet!"

She was to go to the Bird Woman's after school for the last load from the case. Saturday she would take the arrow points and specimens to the bank. That would exhaust her present supplies and give her enough money ahead to pay for books, tuition and clothes for at least two years. She would work early and late gathering nuts. In October she would sell all the ferns she could find. She must collect specimens of all tree leaves before they fell, gather nests and cocoons later and keep her eyes wide open for anything the grades could use. She would see the superintendent that night about selling specimens to the ward buildings. She must be ahead of anyone else if she wanted to furnish these things. So she approached the bridge.

That it was occupied could be seen from a distance. As she came up she found the small boy of yesterday awaiting her with a confident smile.

"We brought you something!" he announced without greeting. "This is Jimmy and Belle—and we brought you a present."

He offered a parcel wrapped in brown paper.

"Why, how lovely of you!" said Elnora. "I supposed you had forgotten me when you ran away so fast yesterday."

"Naw, I didn't forget you," said the boy. "I wouldn't forget you, not ever! Why, I was ist a-burrying to take them things to Jimmy and Belle. My, they was glad!"

Elnora glanced at the children. They sat on the edge of the bridge, obviously clad in a garment each, very dirty and unkempt, a little boy and a girl of about seven and nine. Elnora's heart began to ache.

"Say," said the boy, "ain't you going to look what we have gave you?"

"I thought it wasn't polite to look before people," answered Elnora. "Of course I will if you would like to have me."

Elnora opened the package. She had been presented with a quarter of a stale loaf of baker's bread and a big piece of ancient bologna.

"But don't you want this your selves?" she asked in surprise.

"Gosh, no! I mean ist plain no," said the boy. "We always have it. We got stacks this morning. Pa's come out of it now, and he's so sorry he got more 'an ever we can eat. Have you had any before?"

SHE FAINTED WITH THE AGONY

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Miss MAGGIE JANNACK

MOUNTAIN, ONT., DEC. 14th, 1910

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THIS DATE IN HISTORY

JANUARY 11

1785—Eleventh Continental Congress assembled at New York.

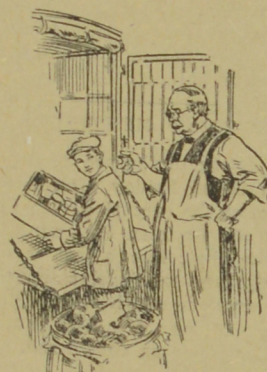
1825—Bayard Taylor noted American author, born. Died Dec. 13, 1878.

1843—Francis Scott Key, author of The Star-Spangled Banner, died in Baltimore. Born in Frederick County, Md., Aug. 1, 1779.

1861—Alabama adopted an ordinance of succession.

1872—Congress accepted from Rhode Island a statue of Roger William.

1897—Anglo-American arbitration treaty signed at Washington.



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