



CLASSIC LIVING BOOK

FRECKLES

Gene Stratton Porter

COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED

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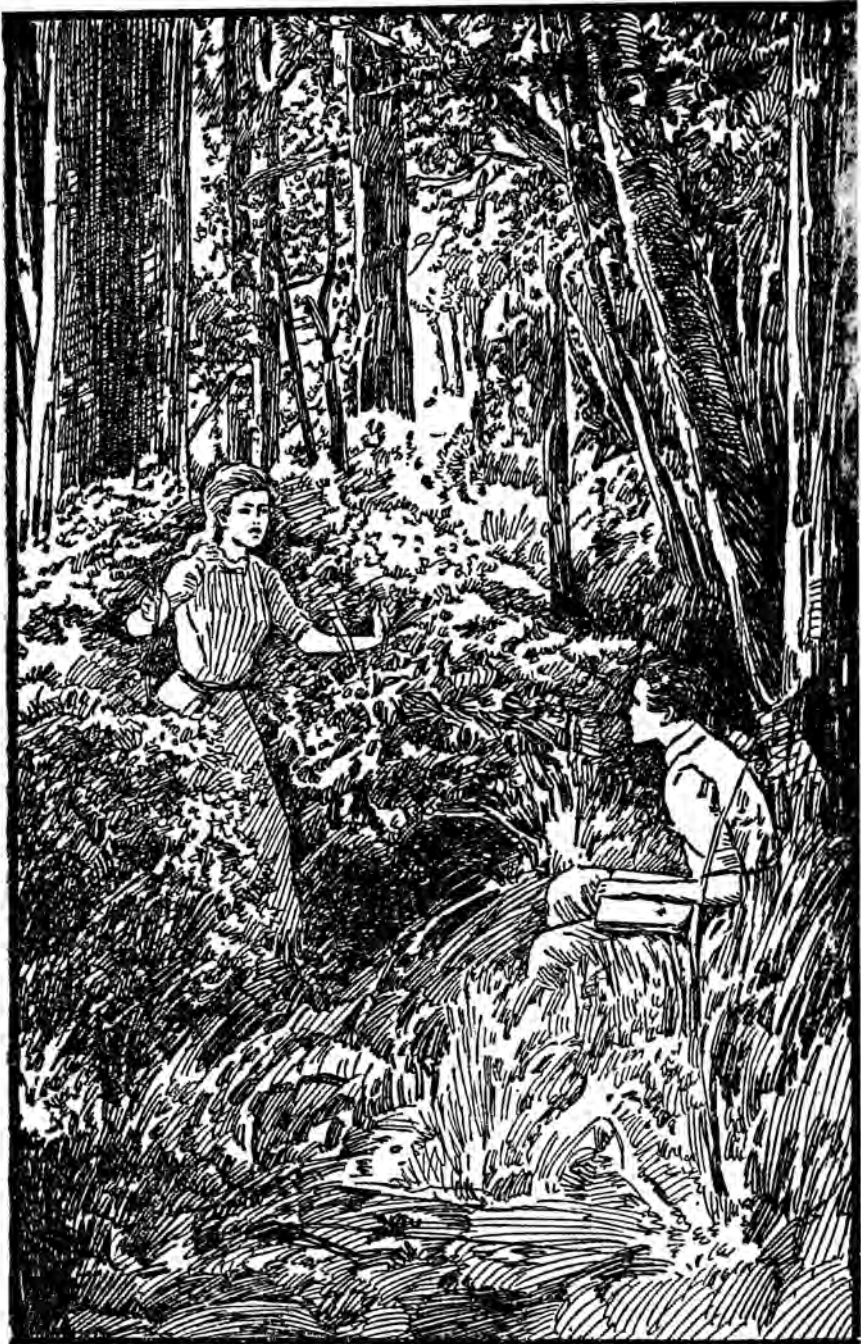
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by

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“The bushes parted and the face of an angel looked through”

Contents

1.	Wherein Great Risks Are Taken and the Limberlost Guard Is Hired	3
2.	Wherein Freckles Proves His Mettle and Finds Friends	14
3.	Wherein a Feather Falls and a Soul Is Born	27
4.	Wherein Freckles Faces Trouble Bravely and Opens the Way for New Experiences	47
5.	Wherein an Angel Materializes and a Man Worships	77
6.	Wherein a Fight Occurs and Women Shoot Straight	92
7.	Wherein Freckles Wins Honor and Finds a Footprint on the Trail	105
8.	Wherein Freckles Meets a Man of Affairs and Loses Nothing by the Encounter	112
9.	Wherein the Limberlost Falls upon Mrs. Duncan and Freckles Comes to the Rescue	127
10.	Wherein Freckles Strives Mightily and the Swamp Angel Rewards Him	135
11.	Wherein the Butterflies Go on a Spree and Freckles Informs the Bird Woman	143
12.	Wherein Black Jack Captures Freckles and the Angel Captures Jack	153
13.	Wherein the Angel Releases Freckles, and the Curse of Black Jack Falls upon Her	171
14.	Wherein Freckles Nurses a Heartache and Black Jack Drops Out	185
15.	Wherein Freckles and the Angel Try Taking a Picture, and Little Chicken Furnishes the Subject	199
16.	Wherein the Angel Locates a Rare Tree and Dines with the Gang	208
17.	Wherein Freckles Offers His Life for His Love and Gets a Broken Body	219
18.	Wherein Freckles refuses Love Without Knowledge of Honorable Birth, and the Angel Goes in Quest of it	235
19.	Wherein Freckles Finds His Birthright and the Angel Loses Her Heart	255
20.	Wherein Freckles returns to the Limberlost, and Lord O'More Sails for Ireland Without Him	268

To all good Irishmen in general
and one CHARLES DARWIN PORTER
in particular

CHARACTERS:

FRECKLES, a plucky waif who guards the Limberlost timber leases and dreams of Angels.

THE SWAMP ANGEL, in whom Freckles' sweetest dream materializes.

MCLEAN, a member of a Grand Rapids lumber company, who befriends Freckles.

MRS. DUNCAN, who gives mother-love and a home to Freckles.

DUNCAN, head teamster of McLean's timber gang.

THE BIRD WOMAN, who is collecting camera studies of birds for a book.

LORD AND LADY O'MORE, who come from Ireland in quest of a lost relative.

THE MAN OF AFFAIRS, brusque of manner, but big of heart.

WESSNER, a Dutch timber-thief who wants rascality made easy.

BLACK JACK, a villain to whom thought of repentance comes too late.

SEARS, camp cook.

CHAPTER I

Wherein Great Risks Are Taken and the Limberlost Guard Is Hired

Freckles came down the corduroy that crosses the lower end of the Limberlost. At a glance he might have been mistaken for a tramp, but he was truly seeking work. He was intensely eager to belong somewhere and to be attached to almost any enterprise that would furnish him food and clothing.

Long before he came in sight of the camp of the Grand Rapids Lumber Company, he could hear the cheery voices of the men, the neighing of the horses, and could scent the tempting odors of cooking food. A feeling of homeless friendlessness swept over him in a sickening wave. Without stopping to think, he turned into the newly made road and followed it to the camp, where the gang was making ready for supper and bed.

The scene was intensely attractive. The thickness of the swamp made a dark, massive background below, while above towered gigantic trees. The men were calling jovially back and forth as they unharnessed tired horses that fell into attitudes of rest and crunched, in deep content, the grain given them. Duncan, the brawny Scotch head-teamster, lovingly wiped the flanks of his big bays with handfuls of pawpaw leaves, as he softly whistled, "O wha will be my dearie, O!" and a cricket beneath the leaves at his feet accompanied

him. The green wood fire hissed and crackled merrily. Wreathing tongues of flame wrapped around the big black kettles, and when the cook lifted the lids to plunge in his testing-fork, gusts of savory odors escaped.

Freckles approached him.

"I want to speak with the Boss," he said.

The cook glanced at him and answered carelessly: "He can't use you."

The color flooded Freckles' face, but he said simply: "If you will be having the goodness to point him out, we will give him a chance to do his own talking."

With a shrug of astonishment, the cook led the way to a rough board table where a broad, square-shouldered man was bending over some account-books.

"Mr. McLean, here's another man wanting to be taken on the gang, I suppose," he said.

"All right," came the cheery answer. "I never needed a good man more than I do just now."

The manager turned a page and carefully began a new line.

"No use of your bothering with this fellow," volunteered the cook. "He hasn't but one hand."

The flush on Freckles' face burned deeper. His lips thinned to a mere line. He lifted his shoulders, took a step forward, and thrust out his right arm, from which the sleeve dangled empty at the wrist.

"That will do, Sears," came the voice of the Boss sharply. "I will interview my man when I finish this report."

He turned to his work, while the cook hurried to the fires. Freckles stood one instant as he had braced himself to meet the eyes of

the manager; then his arm dropped and a wave of whiteness swept him. The Boss had not even turned his head. He had used the possessive. When he said "my man," the hungry heart of Freckles went reaching toward him.

The boy drew a quivering breath. Then he whipped off his old hat and beat the dust from it carefully. With his left hand he caught the right sleeve, wiped his sweaty face, and tried to straighten his hair with his fingers. He broke a spray of ironwort beside him and used the purple bloom to beat the dust from his shoulders and limbs. The Boss, busy over his report, was, nevertheless, vaguely alive to the toilet being made behind him, and scored one for the man.

McLean was a Scotchman. It was his habit to work slowly and methodically. The men of his camps never had known him to be in a hurry or to lose his temper. Discipline was inflexible, but the Boss was always kind. His habits were simple. He shared camp life with his gangs. The only visible signs of wealth consisted of a big, shimmering diamond stone of ice and fire that glittered and burned on one of his fingers, and the dainty, beautiful thoroughbred mare he rode between camps and across the country on business.

No man of McLean's gangs could honestly say that he ever had been overdriven or underpaid. The Boss never had exacted any deference from his men, yet so intense was his personality that no man of them ever had attempted a familiarity. They all knew him to be a thorough gentleman, and that in the great timber city several millions stood to his credit.

He was the only son of that McLean who had sent out the finest ships ever built in Scotland. That his son should carry on this business after the father's death had been his ambition. He had

sent the boy through the universities of Oxford and Edinburgh, and allowed him several years' travel before he should attempt his first commission for the firm.

Then he was ordered to southern Canada and Michigan to purchase a consignment of tall, straight timber for masts, and south to Indiana for oak beams. The young man entered these mighty forests, parts of which lay untouched since the dawn of the morning of time. The clear, cool, pungent atmosphere was intoxicating. The intense silence, like that of a great empty cathedral, fascinated him. He gradually learned that, to the shy wood creatures that darted across his path or peeped inquiringly from leafy ambush, he was brother. He found himself approaching, with a feeling of reverence, those majestic trees that had stood through ages of sun, wind, and snow. Soon it became difficult to fell them. When he had filled his order and returned home, he was amazed to learn that in the swamps and forests he had lost his heart and it was calling—forever calling him.

When he inherited his father's property, he promptly disposed of it, and, with his mother, founded a home in a splendid residence in the outskirts of Grand Rapids. With three partners, he organized a lumber company. His work was to purchase, fell, and ship the timber to the mills. Marshall managed the milling process and passed the lumber to the factory. From the lumber, Barthol made beautiful and useful furniture, which Uptegrove scattered all over the world from a big wholesale house. Of the thousands who saw their faces reflected on the polished surfaces of that furniture and found comfort in its use, few there were to whom it suggested mighty forests and trackless swamps, and the man, big of soul and body, who cut his way through them, and with the eye of experi-

ence doomed the proud trees that were now entering the homes of civilization for service.

When McLean turned from his finished report, he faced a young man, yet under twenty, tall, spare, heavily framed, closely freckled, and red-haired, with a homely Irish face, but in the steady gray eyes, straightly meeting his searching ones of blue, there was unswerving candor and the appearance of longing not to be ignored. He was dressed in the roughest of farm clothing, and seemed tired to the point of falling.

"You are looking for work?" questioned McLean.

"Yis," answered Freckles.

"I am very sorry," said the Boss with genuine sympathy in his every tone, "but there is only one man I want at present—a hardy, big fellow with a stout heart and a strong body. I hoped that you would do, but I am afraid you are too young and scarcely strong enough."

Freckles stood, hat in hand, watching McLean.

"And what was it you thought I might be doing?" he asked.

The Boss could scarcely repress a start. Somewhere before accident and poverty there had been an ancestor who used cultivated English, even with an accent. The boy spoke in a mellow Irish voice, sweet and pure. It was scarcely definite enough to be called brogue, yet there was a trick in the turning of the sentence, the wrong sound of a letter here and there, that was almost irresistible to McLean, and presaged a misuse of infinitives and possessives with which he was very familiar and which touched him nearly. He was of foreign birth, and despite years of alienation, in times of strong feeling he committed inherited sins of accent and construction.

"It's no child's job," answered McLean. "I am the field manager

of a big lumber company. We have just leased two thousand acres of the Limberlost. Many of these trees are of great value. We can't leave our camp, six miles south, for almost a year yet; so we have blazed a trail and strung barbed wires securely around this lease. Before we return to our work, I must put this property in the hands of a reliable, brave, strong man who will guard it every hour of the day, and sleep with one eye open at night. I shall require the entire length of the trail to be walked at least twice each day, to make sure that our lines are up and that no one has been trespassing."

Freckles was leaning forward, absorbing every word with such intense eagerness that he was beguiling the Boss into explanations he had never intended making.

"But why wouldn't that be the finest job in the world for me?" he pleaded. "I am never sick. I could walk the trail twice, three times every day, and I'd be watching sharp all the while."

"It's because you are scarcely more than a boy, and this will be a trying job for a work-hardened man," answered McLean. "You see, in the first place, you would be afraid. In stretching our lines, we killed six rattlesnakes almost as long as your body and as thick as your arm. It's the price of your life to start through the marshgrass surrounding the swamp unless you are covered with heavy leather above your knees.

"You should be able to swim in case high water undermines the temporary bridge we have built where Sleepy Snake Creek enters the swamp. The fall and winter changes of weather are abrupt and severe, while I would want strict watch kept every day. You would always be alone, and I don't guarantee what is in the Limberlost. It is lying here as it has lain since the beginning of time, and it is alive

with forms and voices. I don't pretend to say what all of them come from; but from a few slinking shapes I've seen, and hair-raising yells I've heard, I'd rather not confront their owners myself; and I am neither weak nor fearful.

"Worst of all, any man who will enter the swamp to mark and steal timber is desperate. One of my employees at the south camp, John Carter, compelled me to discharge him for a number of serious reasons. He came here, entered the swamp alone, and succeeded in locating and marking a number of valuable trees that he was endeavoring to sell to a rival company when we secured the lease. He has sworn to have these trees if he has to die or to kill others to get them; and he is a man that the strongest would not care to meet."

"But if he came to steal trees, wouldn't he bring teams and men enough: that all anyone could do would be to watch and be after you?" queried the boy.

"Yes," replied McLean.

"Then why couldn't I be watching just as closely, and coming as fast, as an older, stronger man?" asked Freckles.

"Why, by George, you could!" exclaimed McLean. "I don't know as the size of a man would be half so important as his grit and faithfulness, come to think of it. Sit on that log there and we will talk it over. What is your name?"

Freckles shook his head at the proffer of a seat, and folding his arms, stood straight as the trees around him. He grew a shade whiter, but his eyes never faltered.

"Freckles!" he said.

"Good enough for everyday," laughed McLean, "but I scarcely can put 'Freckles' on the company's books. Tell me your name."

"I haven't any name," replied the boy.

"I don't understand," said McLean.

"I was thinking from the voice and the face of you that you wouldn't," said Freckles slowly. "I've spent more time on it than I ever did on anything else in all me life, and I don't understand. Does it seem to you that anyone would take a newborn baby and row over it, until it was bruised black, cut off its hand, and leave it out in a bitter night on the steps of a charity home, to the care of strangers? That's what somebody did to me."

McLean stared aghast. He had no reply ready, and presently in a low voice he suggested: "And after?"

"The Home people took me in, and I was there the full legal age and several years over. For the most part we were a lot of little Irishmen together. They could always find homes for the other children, but nobody would ever be wanting me on account of me arm."

"Were they kind to you?" McLean regretted the question the minute it was asked.

"I don't know," answered Freckles. The reply sounded so hopeless, even to his own ears, that he hastened to qualify it by adding: "You see, it's like this, sir. Kindnesses that people are paid to lay off in job lots and that belong equally to several hundred others, ain't going to be soaking into any one fellow so much."

"Go on," said McLean, nodding comprehendingly.

"There's nothing worth the taking of your time to tell," replied Freckles. "The Home was in Chicago, and I was there all me life until three months ago. When I was too old for the training they gave to the little children, they sent me to the closest ward school as long as the law would let them; but I was never like any of the other

children, and they all knew it. I'd to go and come like a prisoner, and be working around the Home early and late for me board and clothes. I always wanted to learn mighty bad, but I was glad when that was over.

"Every few days, all me life, I'd to be called up, looked over, and refused a home and love, on account of me hand and ugly face; but it was all the home I'd ever known, and I didn't seem to belong to any place else.

"Then a new superintendent was put in. He wasn't for being like any of the others, and he swore he'd weed me out the first thing he did. He made a plan to send me down the State to a man he said he knew who needed a boy. He wasn't for remembering to tell that man that I was a hand short, and he knocked me down the minute he found I was the boy who had been sent him. Between noon and that evening, he and his son close my age had me in pretty much the same shape in which I was found in the beginning, so I lay awake that night and ran away. I'd like to have squared me account with that boy before I left, but I didn't dare for fear of waking the old man, and I knew I couldn't handle the two of them; but I'm hoping to meet him alone some day before I die."

McLean tugged at his mustache to hide the smile on his lips, but he liked the boy all the better for this confession.

"I didn't even have to steal clothes to get rid of starting in me Home ones," Freckles continued, "for they had already taken all me clean, neat things for the boy and put me into his rags, and that went almost as sore as the beatings, for where I was we were always kept tidy and sweet-smelling, anyway. I hustled clear into this State before I learned that man couldn't have kept me if he'd

wanted to. When I thought I was good and away from him, I commenced hunting work, but it is with everybody else just as it is with you, sir. Big, strong, whole men are the only ones for being wanted."

"I have been studying over this matter," answered McLean. "I am not so sure but that a man no older than you and similar in every way could do this work very well, if he were not a coward, and had it in him to be trustworthy and industrious."

Freckles came forward a step.

"If you will give me a job where I can earn me food, clothes, and a place to sleep," he said, "if I can have a Boss to work for like other men, and a place I feel I've a right to, I will do precisely what you tell me or die trying."

He spoke so convincingly that McLean believed, although in his heart he knew that to employ a stranger would be wretched business for a man with the interests he had involved.

"Very well," the Boss found himself answering, "I will enter you on my pay rolls. We'll have supper, and then I will provide you with clean clothing, wading-boots, the wire-mending apparatus, and a revolver. The first thing in the morning, I will take you the length of the trail myself and explain fully what I want done. All I ask of you is to come to me at once at the south camp and tell me as a man if you find this job too hard for you. It will not surprise me. It is work that few men would perform faithfully. What name shall I put down?"

Freckles' gaze never left McLean's face, and the Boss saw the swift spasm of pain that swept his lonely, sensitive features.

"I haven't any name," he said stubbornly, "no more than one somebody clapped on to me when they put me on the Home books, with not the thought or care they'd name a house cat. I've seen how

they enter those poor little abandoned devils often enough to know. What they called me is no more my name than it is yours. I don't know what mine is, and I never will; but I am going to be your man and do your work, and I'll be glad to answer to any name you choose to call me. Won't you please be giving me a name, Mr. McLean?"

The Boss wheeled abruptly and began stacking his books. What he was thinking was probably what any other gentleman would have thought in the circumstances. With his eyes still downcast, and in a voice harsh with huskiness, he spoke.

"I will tell you what we will do, my lad," he said. "My father was my ideal man, and I loved him better than any other I have ever known. He went out five years ago, but that he would have been proud to leave you his name I firmly believe. If I give to you the name of my nearest kin and the man I loved best—will that do?"

Freckles' rigid attitude relaxed suddenly. His head dropped, and big tears splashed on the soiled calico shirt. McLean was not surprised at the silence, for he found that talking came none too easily just then.

"All right," he said. "I will write it on the roll—James Ross McLean."

"Thank you mightily," said Freckles. "That makes me feel almost as if I belonged, already."

"You do," said McLean. "Until someone armed with every right comes to claim you, you are mine. Now, come and take a bath, have some supper, and go to bed."

As Freckles followed into the lights and sounds of the camp, his heart and soul were singing for joy.