FRECKLES

GENE STRATTON-PORTER

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CONTENTS:

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 experience 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.

CHAPTER II

Wherein Freckles Proves His Mettle and Finds Friends

Next morning found Freckles in clean, whole clothing, fed, and rested. Then McLean outfitted him and gave him careful instruction in the use of his weapon. The Boss showed him around the timber-line, and engaged him a place to board with the family of his head teamster, Duncan, whom he had brought from Scotland with him, and who lived in a small clearing he was working out between the swamp and the corduroy. When the gang was started for the south camp, Freckles was left to guard a fortune in the Limberlost. That he was under guard himself those first weeks he never knew.

Each hour was torture to the boy. The restricted life of a great city orphanage was the other extreme of the world compared with the Limberlost. He was afraid for his life every minute. The heat was intense. The heavy wading-boots rubbed his feet until they bled. He was sore and stiff from his long tramp and outdoor exposure. The seven miles of trail was agony at every step. He practiced at night, under the direction of Duncan, until he grew sure in the use of his revolver. He cut a stout hickory cudgel, with a knot on the end as big as his fist; this never left his hand. What he thought in those first days he himself could not recall clearly afterward.

His heart stood still every time he saw the beautiful marsh-grass begin a sinuous waving AGAINST the play of the wind, as McLean had told him it would. He bolted half a mile with the first boom of the bittern, and his hat lifted with every yelp of the sheitpoke. Once he saw a lean,

shadowy form following him, and fired his revolver. Then he was frightened worse than ever for fear it might have been Duncan's collie.

The first afternoon that he found his wires down, and he was compelled to plunge knee deep into the black swamp-muck to restring them, he became so ill from fear and nervousness that he scarcely could control his shaking hand to do the work. With every step, he felt that he would miss secure footing and be swallowed in that clinging sea of blackness. In dumb agony he plunged forward, clinging to the posts and trees until he had finished restringing and testing the wire. He had consumed much time. Night closed in. The Limberlost stirred gently, then shook herself, growled, and awoke around him.

There seemed to be a great owl hooting from every hollow tree, and a little one screeching from every knothole. The bellowing of big bullfrogs was not sufficiently deafening to shut out the wailing of whip-poor-wills that seemed to come from every bush. Nighthawks swept past him with their shivering cry, and bats struck his face. A prowling wildcat missed its catch and screamed with rage. A straying fox bayed incessantly for its mate.

The hair on the back of Freckles' neck arose as bristles, and his knees wavered beneath him. He could not see whether the dreaded snakes were on the trail, or, in the pandemonium, hear the rattle for which McLean had cautioned him to listen. He stood motionless in an agony of fear. His breath whistled between his teeth. The perspiration ran down his face and body in little streams.

Something big, black, and heavy came crashing through the swamp close to him, and with a yell of utter panic Freckles ran—how far he did not know; but at last he gained control over himself and retraced his steps. His jaws set stiffly and the sweat dried on his body. When he reached the place from which he had started to run, he turned and with measured steps made his way down the

line. After a time he realized that he was only walking, so he faced that sea of horrors again. When he came toward the corduroy, the cudgel fell to test the wire at each step.

Sounds that curdled his blood seemed to encompass him, and shapes of terror to draw closer and closer. Fear had so gained the mastery that he did not dare look behind him; and just when he felt that he would fall dead before he ever reached the clearing, came Duncan's rolling call: "Freckles! Freckles!" A shuddering sob burst in the boy's dry throat; but he only told Duncan that finding the wire down had caused the delay.

The next morning he started on time. Day after day, with his heart pounding, he ducked, dodged, ran when he could, and fought when he was brought to bay. If he ever had an idea of giving up, no one knew it; for he clung to his job without the shadow of wavering. All these things, in so far as he guessed them, Duncan, who had been set to watch the first weeks of Freckles' work, carried to the Boss at the south camp; but the innermost, exquisite torture of the thing the big Scotchman never guessed, and McLean, with his finer perceptions, came only a little closer.

After a few weeks, when Freckles learned that he was still living, that he had a home, and the very first money he ever had possessed was safe in his pockets, he began to grow proud. He yet side-stepped, dodged, and hurried to avoid being late again, but he was gradually developing the fearlessness that men ever acquire of dangers to which they are hourly accustomed.

His heart seemed to be leaping when his first rattler disputed the trail with him, but he mustered courage to attack it with his club. After its head had been crushed, he mastered an Irishman's inborn repugnance for snakes sufficiently to cut off its rattles to show Duncan. With this victory, his greatest fear of them was gone.

Then he began to realize that with the abundance of food in the swamp, flesh-hunters would not come on the trail

and attack him, and he had his revolver for defence if they did. He soon learned to laugh at the big, floppy birds that made horrible noises. One day, watching behind a tree, he saw a crane solemnly performing a few measures of a belated nuptial song-and-dance with his mate. Realizing that it was intended in tenderness, no matter how it appeared, the lonely, starved heart of the boy sympathized with them.

Before the first month passed, he was fairly easy about his job; by the next he rather liked it. Nature can be trusted to work her own miracle in the heart of any man whose daily task keeps him alone among her sights, sounds, and silences.

When day after day the only thing that relieved his utter loneliness was the companionship of the birds and beasts of the swamp, it was the most natural thing in the world that Freckles should turn to them for friendship. He began by instinctively protecting the weak and helpless. He was astonished at the quickness with which they became accustomed to him and the disregard they showed for his movements, when they learned that he was not a hunter, while the club he carried was used more frequently for their benefit than his own. He scarcely could believe what he saw.

From the effort to protect the birds and animals, it was only a short step to the possessive feeling, and with that sprang the impulse to caress and provide. Through fall, when brooding was finished and the upland birds sought the swamp in swarms to feast on its seeds and berries, Freckles was content with watching them and speculating about them. Outside of half a dozen of the very commonest they were strangers to him. The likeness of their actions to humanity was an hourly surprise.

When black frost began stripping the Limberlost, cutting the ferns, shearing the vines from the trees, mowing the succulent green things of the swale, and setting the leaves

swirling down, he watched the departing troops of his friends with dismay. He began to realize that he would be left alone. He made especial efforts toward friendliness with the hope that he could induce some of them to stay. It was then that he conceived the idea of carrying food to the birds; for he saw that they were leaving for lack of it; but he could not stop them. Day after day, flocks gathered and departed: by the time the first snow whitened his trail around the Limberlost, there were left only the little black-and-white juncos, the sapsuckers, yellow-hammers, a few patriarchs among the flaming cardinals, the blue jays, the crows, and the quail.

Then Freckles began his wizard work. He cleared a space of swale, and twice a day he spread a birds' banquet. By the middle of December the strong winds of winter had beaten most of the seed from the grass and bushes. The snow fell, covering the swamp, and food was very scarce and difficult to find. The birds scarcely waited until Freckles' back was turned to attack his provisions. In a few weeks they flew toward the clearing to meet him. During the bitter weather of January they came halfway to the cabin every morning, and fluttered around him as doves all the way to the feeding-ground. Before February they were so accustomed to him, and so hunger-driven, that they would perch on his head and shoulders, and the saucy jays would try to pry into his pockets.

Then Freckles added to wheat and crumbs, every scrap of refuse food he could find at the cabin. He carried to his pets the parings of apples, turnips, potatoes, stray cabbage-leaves, and carrots, and tied to the bushes meat-bones having scraps of fat and gristle. One morning, coming to his feeding-ground unusually early, he found a gorgeous cardinal and a rabbit side by side sociably nibbling a cabbage-leaf, and that instantly gave to him the idea of cracking nuts, from the store he had gathered for Duncan's children, for the squirrels, in the effort to add them to his

family. Soon he had them coming—red, gray, and black; then he became filled with a vast impatience that he did not know their names or habits.

So the winter passed. Every week McLean rode to the Limberlost; never on the same day or at the same hour. Always he found Freckles at his work, faithful and brave, no matter how severe the weather.

The boy's earnings constituted his first money; and when the Boss explained to him that he could leave them safe at a bank and carry away a scrap of paper that represented the amount, he went straight on every payday and made his deposit, keeping out barely what was necessary for his board and clothing. What he wanted to do with his money he did not know, but it gave to him a sense of freedom and power to feel that it was there—it was his and he could have it when he chose. In imitation of McLean, he bought a small pocket account-book, in which he carefully set down every dollar he earned and every penny he spent. As his expenses were small and the Boss paid him generously, it was astonishing how his little hoard grew.

That winter held the first hours of real happiness in Freckles' life. He was free. He was doing a man's work faithfully, through every rigor of rain, snow, and blizzard. He was gathering a wonderful strength of body, paying his way, and saving money. Every man of the gang and of that locality knew that he was under the protection of McLean, who was a power, this had the effect of smoothing Freckles' path in many directions.

Mrs. Duncan showed him that individual kindness for which his hungry heart was longing. She had a hot drink ready for him when he came from a freezing day on the trail. She knit him a heavy mitten for his left hand, and devised a way to sew and pad the right sleeve that protected the maimed arm in bitter weather. She patched his clothing—frequently torn by the wire—and saved kitchen scraps for his birds, not because she either knew or

cared anything about them, but because she herself was close enough to the swamp to be touched by its utter loneliness. When Duncan laughed at her for this, she retorted: "My God, mannie, if Freckles hadna the birds and the beasts he would be always alone. It was never meant for a human being to be so solitary. He'd get touched in the head if he hadna them to think for and to talk to."

"How much answer do ye think he gets to his talkin', lass?" laughed Duncan.

"He gets the answer that keeps the eye bright, the heart happy, and the feet walking faithful the rough path he's set them in," answered Mrs. Duncan earnestly.

Duncan walked away appearing very thoughtful. The next morning he gave an ear from the corn he was shelling for his chickens to Freckles, and told him to carry it to his wild chickens in the Limberlost. Freckles laughed delightedly.

"Me chickens!" he said. "Why didn't I ever think of that before? Of course they are! They are just little, brightly colored cocks and hens! But 'wild' is no good. What would you say to me 'wild chickens' being a good deal tamer than yours here in your yard?"

"Hoot, lad!" cried Duncan.

"Make yours light on your head and eat out of your hands and pockets," challenged Freckles.

"Go and tell your fairy tales to the wee people! They're juist brash on believin' things," said Duncan. "Ye canna invent any story too big to stop them from callin' for a bigger."

"I dare you to come see!" retorted Freckles.

"Take ye!" said Duncan. "If ye make juist ane bird licht on your heid or eat frae your hand, ye are free to help yoursel' to my corn-crib and wheat bin the rest of the winter."

Freckles sprang in air and howled in glee.

"Oh, Duncan! You're too, aisy" he cried. "When will you come?"

"I'll come next Sabbath," said Duncan. "And I'll believe the birds of the Limberlost are tame as barnyard fowl when I see it, and no sooner!"

After that Freckles always spoke of the birds as his chickens, and the Duncans followed his example. The very next Sabbath, Duncan, with his wife and children, followed Freckles to the swamp. They saw a sight so wonderful it will keep them talking all the remainder of their lives, and make them unfailing friends of all the birds.

Freckles' chickens were awaiting him at the edge of the clearing. They cut the frosty air around his head into curves and circles of crimson, blue, and black. They chased each other from Freckles, and swept so closely themselves that they brushed him with their outspread wings.

At their feeding-ground Freckles set down his old pail of scraps and swept the snow from a small level space with a broom improvised of twigs. As soon as his back was turned, the birds clustered over the food, snatching scraps to carry to the nearest bushes. Several of the boldest, a big crow and a couple of jays, settled on the rim and feasted at leisure, while a cardinal, that hesitated to venture, fumed and scolded from a twig overhead.

Then Freckles scattered his store. At once the ground resembled the spread mantle of Montezuma, except that this mass of gaily colored feathers was on the backs of living birds. While they feasted, Duncan gripped his wife's arm and stared in astonishment; for from the bushes and dry grass, with gentle cheeping and queer, throaty chatter, as if to encourage each other, came flocks of quail. Before anyone saw it arrive, a big gray rabbit sat in the midst of the feast, contentedly gnawing a cabbage-leaf.

"Weel, I be drawed on!" came Mrs. Duncan's tense whisper.

"Shu-shu," cautioned Duncan.

Lastly Freckles removed his cap. He began filling it with handfuls of wheat from his pockets. In a swarm the grain-

eaters arose around him as a flock of tame pigeons. They perched on his arms and the cap, and in the stress of hunger, forgetting all caution, a brilliant cock cardinal and an equally gaudy jay fought for a perching-place on his head.

"Weel, I'm beat," muttered Duncan, forgetting the silence imposed on his wife. "I'll hae to give in. 'Seein' is believin'. A man wad hae to see that to believe it. We mauna let the Boss miss that sight, for it's a chance will no likely come twice in a life. Everything is snowed under and thae craturs near starved, but trustin' Freckles that complete they are tamer than our chickens. Look hard, bairns!" he whispered. "Ye winna see the like o' yon again, while God lets ye live. Notice their color against the ice and snow, and the pretty skippin' ways of them! And spunky! Weel, I'm heat fair!"

Freckles emptied his cap, turned his pockets and scattered his last grain. Then he waved his watching friends good-bye and started down the timber-line.

A week later, Duncan and Freckles arose from breakfast to face the bitterest morning of the winter. When Freckles, warmly capped and gloved, stepped to the corner of the kitchen for his scrap-pail, he found a big pan of steaming boiled wheat on the top of it. He wheeled to Mrs. Duncan with a shining face.

"Were you fixing this warm food for me chickens or yours?" he asked.

"It's for yours, Freckles," she said. "I was afeared this cold weather they wadna lay good without a warm bite now and then."

Duncan laughed as he stepped to the other room for his pipe; but Freckles faced Mrs. Duncan with a trace of every pang of starved mother-hunger he ever had suffered written large on his homely, splotched, narrow features.

"Oh, how I wish you were my mother!" he cried.

Mrs. Duncan attempted an echo of her husband's laugh.

"Lord love the lad!" she exclaimed. "Why, Freckles, are ye no bright enough to learn without being taught by a woman that I am your mither? If a great man like yoursel' dinna ken that, learn it now and ne'er forget it. Ance a woman is the wife of any man, she becomes wife to all men for having had the wifely experience she kens! Ance a man-child has beaten his way to life under the heart of a woman, she is mither to all men, for the hearts of mithers are everywhere the same. Bless ye, laddie, I am your mither!"

She tucked the coarse scarf she had knit for him closer over his chest and pulled his cap lower over his ears, but Freckles, whipping it off and holding it under his arm, caught her rough, reddened hand and pressed it to his lips in a long kiss. Then he hurried away to hide the happy, embarrassing tears that were coming straight from his swelling heart.

Mrs. Duncan, sobbing unrestrainedly, swept into the adjoining room and threw herself into Duncan's arms.

"Oh, the puir lad!" she wailed. "Oh, the puir mither-hungry lad! He breaks my heart!"

Duncan's arms closed convulsively around his wife. With a big, brown hand he lovingly stroked her rough, sorrel hair.

"Sarah, you're a guid woman!" he said. "You're a michty guid woman! Ye hae a way o' speakin' out at times that's like the inspired prophets of the Lord. If that had been put to me, now, I'd 'a' felt all I kent how to and been keen enough to say the richt thing; but dang it, I'd 'a' stuttered and stammered and got naething out that would ha' done onybody a mite o' good. But ye, Sarah! Did ye see his face, woman? Ye sent him off lookin' leke a white light of holiness had passed ower and settled on him. Ye sent the lad away too happy for mortal words, Sarah. And ye made me that proud o' ye! I wouldna trade ye an' my share o' the Limberlost with ony king ye could mention."

He relaxed his clasp, and setting a heavy hand on each shoulder, he looked straight into her eyes.

"Ye're prime, Sarah! Juist prime!" he said.

Sarah Duncan stood alone in the middle of her two-roomed log cabin and lifted a bony, clawlike pair of hands, reddened by frequent immersion in hot water, cracked and chafed by exposure to cold, black-lined by constant battle with swamp-loam, calloused with burns, and stared at them wonderingly.

"Pretty-lookin' things ye are!" she whispered. "But ye hae juist been kissed. And by such a man! Fine as God ever made at His verra best. Duncan wouldna trade wi' a king! Na! Nor I wadna trade with a queen wi' a palace, an' velvet gowns, an' diamonds big as hazelnuts, an' a hundred visitors a day into the bargain. Ye've been that honored I'm blest if I can bear to souse ye in dish-water. Still, that kiss winna come off! Naething can take it from me, for it's mine till I dee. Lord, if I amna proud! Kisses on these old claws! Weel, I be drawed on!"