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A GIRL
OF THE
LIMBERLOST
 GENE STRATTON-PORTER
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CHAPTER XX.
 Wherein the Limberlost Sings For Ammon.

ELNORA lifted the violin and began to play. She wore a school dress of green gingham, with the sleeves rolled to the elbows. She seemed a part of the setting all around her. Her head shone like a small dark sun, and her face never had seemed so rose flushed and fair. From the instant she drew the bow her lips parted and her eyes fastened on something far away in the swamp, and never did she give more of that impression of feeling for her notes and repeating something audible only to her. Ammon was too near to get the best effect. He arose and stepped back several yards, leaning against a large tree, looking and listening with all his soul.

As he changed positions he saw that Mrs. Comstock had followed them and was standing on the trail, where she could not have helped hearing everything Elnora had said. So to Ammon before her and the mother watching on the trail Elnora played the song of the Limberlost. To the man it was a revelation. He stood so stunned he forgot Mrs. Comstock. He tried to realize what a great city audience would say to that music from such a player with a like background, and he could not imagine.

He was wondering what he dared say, how much he might express, when the last note fell and the girl laid the violin in the case, closed the door, locked it and hid the key in the rotting wood at the end of a log. Then she came to him. Ammon stood looking at her curiously.

"I wonder," he said, "what people would say to that?"

"I did it in public once," said Elnora. "I think they liked it fairly well. I had a note yesterday offering me the leadership of the high school orchestra in Onashaba. I would gladly play for nothing just to be able to express myself."

"Give up the college idea," said Ammon. "Your mind does not need that sort of development. It is far past it."

"Do you really mean that you would give up all idea of going to college, if you were me?"

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"If you could only realize it, my girl, you are in college, and have been all work. You are in the school of experience, and it has taught you to think, and given you a heart. God knows I envy the idiot who wins it; I wouldn't even advise you to read too many books on four lines. You get your stuff first hand, and you know that you are right. What you should do is to begin early to practice self expression. Don't wait too long to tell us about the woods as you know them."

"Not until then did he remember that Mrs. Comstock was somewhere very near."

"Should we go out to the trail and see if your mother is coming?" he asked.

"Here she is now," said Elnora. "Gracious, it's a mercy I got that viola put away in time! I didn't expect her so soon," whispered the girl, as she turned and went toward her mother. Mrs. Comstock's face was a study as she looked at Elnora.

"Have you found anything yet?" she asked.

"Nothing that I can show you," said Elnora. "I am not sure but I have found an idea that will revolutionize the whole course of my work, thought and ambitions."

"Ambitions? My, what a hefty word!" laughed Mrs. Comstock. "I guess we better let ambition lie. I've always heard it was a great sleep. If you ever get a bonafide attack, it will be time to attend it. Let's hunt specimens. It is June. Philip and I are in the grades. What is the miracle of June? What one thing epitomizes the whole month?"

"The birth of these big night moths," said Elnora promptly.

Ammon clasped his hands. The tears started to Mrs. Comstock's eyes. She took Elnora in her arms and kissed her forehead.

"You'll do!" she said. "Find the distinctive feature of each month, the one thing which marks it a time apart. I can't name all of them offhand, but I think of one more right now. February belongs to our winter birds. You should hear those musicians of this swamp in February. Philip, on a mellow night. Oh, but they are in earnest! For twenty-one years I've listened by night to the great owls, and the smaller zets, the foxes, coons and every resident left in these woods, and by day to the hawks, yellowhammers, sawpuckers, titmice, crows and all our winter birds. It's about the best music we have. I just wonder if you couldn't copy that alone and make a strong, original piece out of it for your viola, Elnora?"

There was one tense breath, then—"I could try," said Elnora simply.

Ammon rushed to the rescue. "We must go to work," he said, and began examining a walnut branch for Luna moth eggs. Elnora joined him while Mrs. Comstock drew her embroidery from her pocket and sat on a log. She said she was tired; they could come for her when they were ready to go. She could hear their voices all around her, until she called them at supper time. When they came to her she stood waiting on the trail, the sewing in one hand, the viola in the other. Elnora became very white, but took the trail without a word. Ammon, unable to see a woman carry a heavier load than he, reached for the instrument. Mrs. Comstock shook her head. She carried the viola home, took it into her room and closed the door. Elnora turned to Ammon.

"If she destroys that I will die!" cried the girl.

"She won't!" said Ammon. "You misunderstand her. She wouldn't have said what she did about the owl if she had meant to. She is your mother. No one loves you as she does. Trust her! Myself—I think she's simply great!"

Mrs. Comstock returned with serene face, and all of them helped with the supper. When it was over Ammon and Elnora sorted and classified the afternoon's specimens and made a trip to the woods to paint and light several trees for moths. When they came back Mrs. Comstock sat in the arbor, and they joined her. She went into the cabin, but she returned almost instantly, laying the violin and bow across Elnora's lap. "I wish you would give us a little music," she said.

The viola played on until Elnora was so tired she scarcely could lift the

bow. Then Ammon went home. The women walked to the gate with him and stood watching him from night.

"That's what I call the finest young man!" said Mrs. Comstock. "To see him sit in with us, you'd think he'd been raised in a cabin, but it's likely he's always had the very cream of the pot."

"Yes, I think so," laughed Elnora. "but it hasn't hurt him. I've never seen anything I could criticize. He's teaching me so much unconsciously. You know he graduated from Harvard and has several degrees in law. He's spending in the morning."

Next morning Ammon came early, and he and Elnora went at once to the fields and woods. Mrs. Comstock had come to believe so implicitly in him that she now stayed at home to complete the work before she joined them. And when she did she often sat sewing, leaving them wandering hours at a time. It was noon before she finished, and then she packed a basket of lunch. She found Elnora and Philip near the violet patch, which was still in its prime. They lunched together. Then Mrs. Comstock carried the basket back to the cabin, and Ammon and Elnora sat on a log, resting for a few minutes.

"Do you remember your promise about these violets?" asked Ammon. "Tomorrow is Elnora's birthday, and if I'd put them special delivery on the morning train she'd get them in the late afternoon. They ought to keep well that long. She leaves for the north next day."

"Of course you can have them," said Elnora. "We will quit long enough before supper to gather a great bunch. They can be packed so they will carry all right. They should be perfectly fresh, especially if we gather them this evening and let them drink all night."

Then they went back to hunt Catacales. It was a long and a happy search. Ammon came to Elnora at dusk daintily holding one by the body. Its dark wings shoving and its long, slender legs trying to clasp his fingers and creep from his hold.

Elnora studied the black wings intently. "I surely believe that's a Sappho," she marveled. "The Bird Woman will be overjoyed."

"We must get the cyanide jar quickly," said Ammon. "I wouldn't lose her for \$100. Such a chouse as she'd get!"

Elnora got the jar and began gathering up paraphernalia.

"When you make a find like that," she said, "it's the right time to quit and feel glorious all the rest of that day. I tell you I'm proud. We will go now. We have barely time to carry out our plans before supper. Won't mother be pleased to see that we have a rare one?"

"I'd like to see anyone more pleased than I am!" said Philip Ammon. "I feel as if I'd earned my supper tonight. Let's go."

He took the greater part of the load and stepped aside for Elnora to precede him. She went down the path, broken by the grazing cattle, toward the cabin and nearest the violet patch she stopped, laid down her net, and the things she carried. Ammon passed her and hurried forward.

"Aren't you going to?" began Elnora.

"I'm going to get this moth home in a hurry," he said. "This cyanide has lost its strength, and it's not working well. We need some fresh in the jar."

He had forgotten the violets. Elnora stood looking after him, a curious expression on her face. One second so—then she picked up the net and followed. At the blue bordered pool she paused and half turned back, then she closed her lips firmly and went on. It was 8 o'clock when Ammon said goodby and started to town. His gay whistle floated to them from the farthest corner of the Limberlost. Elnora complained of being tired, so she went to her room and to bed. But sleep would not come. Thought was racing in her brain, and the longer she lay the wider awake she grew. At last she softly slipped from bed, lighted her lamp and began opening boxes. Then she went to work. Two hours later a beautiful birch bark basket, strongly and artistically made, stood on her table. She set a tiny alarm clock at 3, returned to bed and fell asleep instantly.

She was on the floor with the first tinkle of the alarm, and hastily dressing, she picked up the basket and a box to fit it, crept down the stairs and out to the violet patch. When the basket was filled to overflowing, she set it in the slight patch of hot, packed it solid with mosses, tied it firmly and slipped under the cover a note.

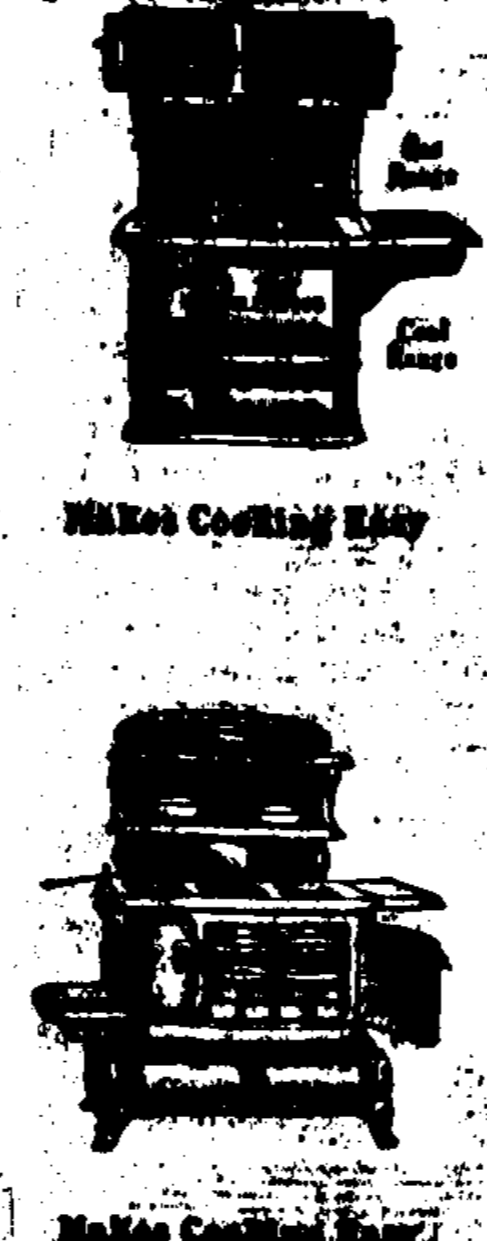
Then she took a short cut across the woods and walked swiftly to Onashaba. It was after 6 o'clock, but all of the city she wished to a bed were asleep. She had no trouble in finding a small boy out and she stood at a distance watching while he rang Dr. Ammon's bell and delivered the package for Philip to a maid, with the note which was to be given him at once.

On the way home through the woods passing some baited trees she collected the captive moths. She entered the kitchen with them so naturally that Mrs. Comstock made no comment. After breakfast Elnora went to her room, cleared away all traces of the night's work and was out in the arbor mounting moths when Ammon came down the road. "I am tired sitting," she said to her mother. "I think I will walk a few rods and meet him."

"Who's a trump?" called Ammon from afar.

"Well, not you!" retorted Elnora. "Completely," said Ammon. "But surely it would not have been found. I saw it fully last week to send Betty something appropriate and handsome today, with my card."

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JACK and Elnora told daddy that Dinah was a good deal upset. "She said the whippoorwill's widow was calling round here last night," said they. "Daddy, do you know the whippoorwill's widow?" "There," said daddy, "just listen. I think you can hear it calling now."

Over in the woods beyond the house could be heard a voice which seemed to say, "Whippoorwill! Whippoorwill!"

"What is it, daddy?" the children cried. "Why does it want whippoorwill?" "My dears, if you could see over among those trees you would very likely see a little bird no larger than a robin and with mottled, brown, black, buff, gray and white feathers—a little bird that is so nearly the same color as the branch or the stone on which he sits that you would scarcely notice him."

"Every now and then he opens his mouth and gives the cry which you have just heard."

"The whippoorwill flies about at night catching insects that would otherwise annoy us. The whippoorwill's widow and the whippoorwill are birds that look so much alike and make so nearly the same cry that one sometimes is mistakenly called by the other's name."

"When I was a boy I asked grandfather why the whippoorwill was so down on poor Will."

"Grandfather said: 'Once there was a bad boy named Will who stole the eggs out of the nests of birds, and one day he found two dull white eggs on the ground. They were marked with lilac and had gray spots on them. The boy picked them up and started home with them in his hat. He had not gone far when a bird caught up with him and cried so piteously that he could not help knowing the eggs were hers. He only hurried along faster. The father bird soon joined the mother, and both of them begged him to give them back the eggs. But he wouldn't.'

"All that night outside the house in which he lived voices were heard saying whippoorwill, till all the neighbors wondered what particularly naughty thing naughty Will had been doing."

"And next day at school Will did not know his lesson, and the schoolmaster whipped him, and that night his father whipped him and so on till he wished he had never seen the bird's eggs. The whippoorwill came so thick and fast that they did him good. He let the birds' nests alone after that."

"And grandfather said he was only sorry there wasn't a whippoorwill like that for every bad boy who robbed birds' nests."



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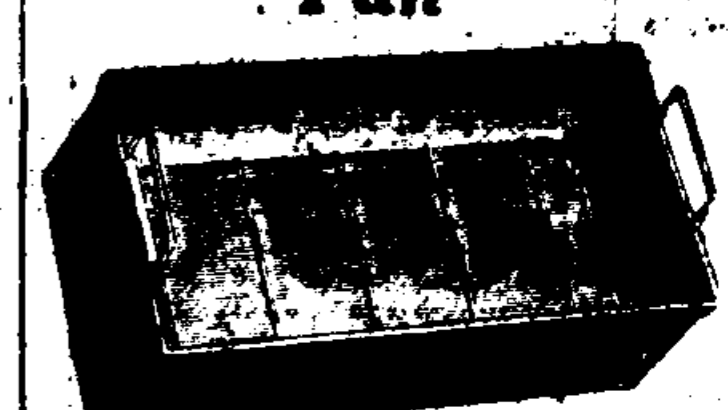
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